

# Another inauguration, fondly remembered

"Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift. But it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power - with our participation, and the choices we make. Whether or not we stand up for our freedoms. Whether or not we respect and enforce the rule of law. America is no fragile thing. But the gains of our long journey to freedom are not assured."

- Former US President Barack Obama, in his farewell speech in Chicago, January 10

## Resolving the Rohingya crisis

Does the OIC call go far enough?

THE OIC in its 10-point communique at the end of the extraordinary session of its Council of Foreign Ministers in Kuala Lumpur on the Rohingya crisis on Thursday has called upon the government of Myanmar to, among other things, stop its repression on the Rohingyas and restore their citizenship that is being denied to them by bringing in changes to its reprehensible citizenship law of 1982.

These are, we are afraid, in most parts repetition of the calls made by various countries from time to time since the renewal of violence against the Rohingyas in the Rakhine State about three months ago. Regrettably, nothing has been able to compel the government in Naypyidaw to stop its repression on the Muslim minority group. Not even the UN Human Rights envoy to that country has been allowed to visit the affected areas.

We feel that the OIC call is not enough. It must formulate plans for substantive actions, should the government of Myanmar chose not to heed the call. The rest of the world should be involved and certainly the UN cannot remain aloof as it has with little more than sporadic comments on the issue.

The Special OIC envoy to Myanmar has called on the UN to intervene before a Rwanda is repeated there. The world should take heed of the portents that such statements depict. It has stood aloof for too long from the miseries of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, who virtually has been made stateless in its own country, and may well cease to exist should the international community continue to display the abject apathy towards them that it has shown so far.

## Change of guard in Washington

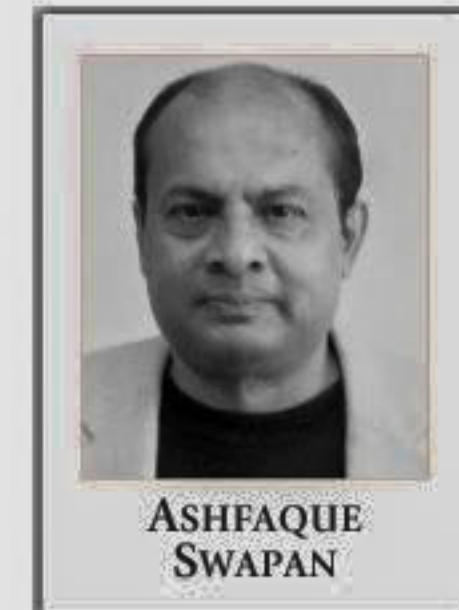
Trump must rise above his prejudices

DONALD John Trump was sworn in yesterday as the 45th president of the United States of America. His victory was as surprising as unexpected. And we hope the next four years under his watch would be less so. His post-election articulations had given rise to questions aplenty around the world. Will he govern the way he campaigned? Will he present himself as an inclusive leader, as he promised on election night, or will he continue to play into the hands of xenophobes and be driven by extremely parochial views? Will it put the current world order at stake?

President Trump needs to articulate a detailed foreign policy vision beyond the vague slogan "America First" in order to address the immediate and complex challenges the world faces today: North Korea, the Middle East and Israel's hostile policies toward Palestine, among others, and how his administration would manage relations with allies in Asia and Europe and NATO members. On the campaign trail, he promised to recognise Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel - a move that would upend decades of US policy of a two state solution.

On the bilateral plane we would like to see the friendly relationship between Bangladesh and the US become stronger to the benefits of the people of the two countries. We sincerely hope that President Trump does not follow through with his campaign promise of imposing a border tax between 35 to 45 percent on imported goods, something that could have a far-reaching effect on our garment sector, not to speak of the burden on the American consumers. We would welcome restoring the GSP facilities to Bangladesh.

As the head of the most powerful country, President Trump would have to rise above his prejudices and be equal to the dignity, poise and esteem that his office commands.



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

US President Donald J. Trump ascends the US presidency with a dubious record. Several US polls show he enters the presidency with the lowest approval since polls studied this issue. Welcome to governance by mean-spirited tweet.

Let us instead dwell on more pleasant matters.

On a chilly day on January 20, 2009, I was in the mall in Washington, D.C. I used to live in California at that time. I had flown especially to be witness America's first African American president to

stations close to the mall had closed. They just couldn't handle the crowds.

Small wonder. There were 1.8 million of us, an all-time record for a US president's inauguration. We never got near the actual podium, and watched the ceremony on large screens. It made not the slightest difference. After the inauguration, the massive crowds almost led to a stampede. Yet there were no scuffles, harsh words. We all left with a smile on our faces, a soaring sense of satisfaction and empowerment.

For millions of Americans, former US President Barack Obama's election reaffirmed America's progress towards a future of an inclusive, plural nation that was a responsible, rational player in the international arena.

Obama has not been without flaws, but he leaves the

outrageous, demonstrable untruths (Obama is Muslim, born abroad, Marxist) who seemed lazy, unintelligent, thuggish, filled with dark rage.

Obama stayed above it all. In all of eight years, not a single ugly word passed his lips. He was always measured, considerate, gracious gentleman in a political world that resembled a zoo.

Obama's place in US history is secure. He is the most consequential president since Reagan. Not since Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s has a Democrat had such a profound impact on domestic and foreign policy in America.

Obama came to power when the US, and the world, was at the brink of economic catastrophe. He successfully steered the country out of the brink of an abyss. His tenure marks sustained economic growth with millions of new jobs. He achieved what Democratic presidents have wanted to do but failed since the days of Harry Truman in the 1940s - he passed a health law that brought health coverage to 20 million more Americans. He made a historic climate deal with China with a profound, positive impact. He stood up to Israel and signed a multilateral accord with Iran. He ended over five decades of a boycott with Cuba. And he did this despite an opposition Republican Party that fought him tooth and nail.

However, the election of Trump means the Republicans, Obama's bitter enemies, are in power in the White House, the Senate and the House. But Republicans are discovering that undoing Obama's work is easier said than done. They are already struggling with getting rid of Obamacare.

To be sure, there have been failures, too. Activist and intellectual Cornel West rightly takes Obama to task for two failures: The unconscionable drone killings of innocents abroad and the failure to bring to book Wall Street's architects of the economic meltdown at home.

All the same, Obama's achievements remain formidable.

Obama once told *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick, in an email, that he loved African-American singer Ray Charles' rendition of an iconic patriotic song "America the Beautiful."

"It captures the fullness of the American experience, the view from the bottom as well as the top, the good and the bad, and the possibility of synthesis, reconciliation, transcendence," Obama wrote.

This prompted *New York Times* critic Wesley Morris to write: "It's entirely possible to read that quote and catch a chill because Mr. Obama could easily have been writing about himself."

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States. He has been writing for US-based South Asian media for over 25 years.



Barack Obama is sworn in as the 44th US President in Washington on January 20, 2009. PHOTO: AFP

be sworn in.

We knew parking would be impossible, so our band of intrepid Bangladeshi expats took the metro.

The packed metro comprised of almost wholly African-Americans. I realised that for them, this was not just a joyous ride to celebrate a partisan victory.

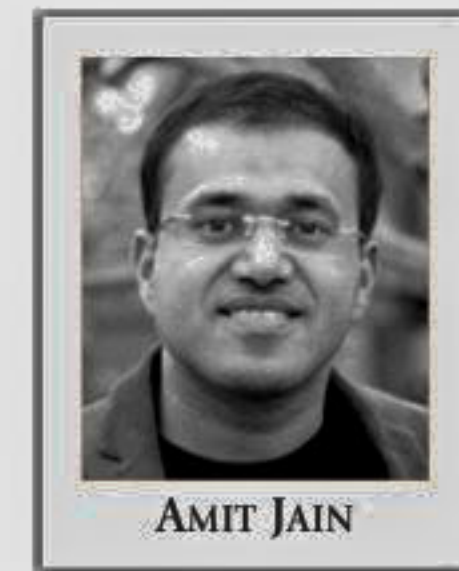
For African-Americans, it was a pilgrimage. Everybody was dressed as if going to church, the mood was solemn, with a touch of quiet pride. They were going to be witness to a vindication of their centuries-long struggle for equality.

We had to get off the metro early, because several

nation's highest office as an iconic figure.

One of his lasting achievements was presenting the most enduring rebuttal possible to egregious racist stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy, unintelligent, thuggish, filled with dark rage. Even his critics will be hard-pressed to dispute that he had a fine mind. His razor-sharp intellect, an astonishingly thorough grasp of the issues, reasoned and cerebral diction, and a rare gift of the gentle but well-directed barb debunked that stereotype with satisfying finality. In a delicious irony, it was his critics, who seemed to froth in the mouth with

# Carpooling to help beat Dhaka's world beating traffic jams



AMIT JAIN

GRIDLOCKED roads, unending traffic snarls and ever increasing pollution: it's an all too familiar sight in fast growing cities across South Asia. Dhaka is no exception. In fact, by some reckonings, it's the 'traffic capital of the world.'

The nonstop jams are attracting the wrong kind of international attention to the country and dragging on economic growth. According to one study, the cost of traffic congestion on only one city route--from the airport to Postogola--is estimated to be over Tk 272 billion.

Dhaka stands alongside other cities at the intersection of a global trend towards urbanisation. From only 13 percent in 1900, the percentage of the world's population that lives in the cities is expected to rise to 70 percent by 2050.

Getting them moving again won't be easy, and will need investment in public transit systems. But a big part



ILLUSTRATION: UBER

great thing is, enabling carpooling won't cost the government any extra money and can make an immediate impact. The potential rewards in the form of less traffic and more liveable cities can be very significant.

To give an example, Uber enables carpooling in more than 30 cities around the world through uberPOOL. The service connects multiple riders travelling in a similar direction at the same time. In San Francisco, 40 percent of all trips are pooled. The service is also spreading fast in India and elsewhere in Asia, where traffic congestion is a major and growing problem.

Of course, carpooling is not a new idea. People in Bangladesh and elsewhere have been doing it for decades. The difference now is that ridesharing services can instantly match passengers headed in the same direction at the same time. Powered by technology, it's a model that works and can create impact at scale.

If you look around the world today, outdated rules hold carpooling back in many countries by distinguishing between commercial drivers (good) and private drivers (bad). These rules make it difficult -- if not impossible -- for ordinary people to share rides and help facilitate carpooling on a wide scale. By making sharing hard, governments end up forcing citizens to own personal vehicles--at a huge public cost.

The good news is that there's increasing momentum for reform, with more and more cities introducing progressive regulations. In just over three years, nearly 70 states and cities in the US have made the leap, and several states in Mexico and Australia have followed suit.

At the heart of these new rules is the belief that one citizen should be free to give another citizen a ride across town--so long as there are regulations to ensure that important safety and consumer protection standards are met.

We now have the technology to make our cities more liveable and less congested. But reducing our dependence on cars needs a cultural shift as much as a technological one. For decades, cars have been seen as a status symbol. But attitudes are starting to change as people around the world realise it's easier to press a button on their phones to get a ride rather than go through the hassle and expense of owning a private car.

As Bangladesh considers ways to cut congestion, it should investigate laws that would encourage ride-sharing. We don't have to wait five or 10 years to create the cities of the future. With progressive regulations and the technology already in our pockets, we can build mobility alternatives for smart cities of today.

The writer is President, Uber South Asia.

*We now have the technology to make our cities more liveable and less congested. But reducing our dependence on cars needs a cultural shift as much as a technological one.*

of solving the problem can be found in the technology and the cars that already exist on the street.

That may sound strange, but it's not. Ride-hailing services make it easy for people to share their underutilised vehicles, ultimately getting more people into fewer cars at the same time. The

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Unfair treatment of women in public buses

I was recently travelling by an over-crowded bus in Shantinagar. Despite the nine seats reserved for women, children, and disabled people, the three or four women onboard were unable to take those seats as they were all taken up by men. These men were oblivious to the conductor's repeated requests to allow the women to take their seats. This is a common sight all over Dhaka.

The government should implement a law requiring every local bus to have reserved seat for women. That is the only way to prevent such unjust behaviour.

Torikul Islam  
 University of Dhaka

### Lift accidents and remedies

Lift accidents are becoming more frequent by the day in Dhaka city. Often they are caused by low-quality machines which cause the elevators wires to snap and other such mechanical troubles. Spares are seldom available when such emergencies occur. Strict inspections of such products during import should be ensured. Everyone from the industry ministry down to the factory inspectors should pay more attention to these issues.

Shafkat Rahman  
 Eskaton