

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY NOVEMBER 9, 2020, KARTIK 24, 1427 BS

Biden’s historic win

Hard road ahead

PERHAPS the most tortuous election in recent US history has been concluded. Although the counting is not over yet in all the states as of writing this editorial, almost all the major channels and election watchdogs have declared Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States. Donald Trump is only a few of one-term US Presidents and the third since the end of WWII. Although Trump has refused to concede and, as predicted, threatened legal recourse, the results are so conclusive that they are unlikely to be overturned. We congratulate President elect Joe Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris for a historic election victory.

The 2020 US election is unique and has several firsts to its credit. It was held when the country is reeling under the most debilitating pandemic in which nearly a quarter of a million Americans have lost their lives and ten million have lost their jobs as America faces a severe economic downturn. Joe Biden, in certain ways, has defied tradition and created history by selecting a black woman, a second generation US citizen of Jamaican-Indian descent, to be his Vice President. This is the first time that not only a woman but a woman of colour will be the second most powerful person in the US. This election has also set a record of voter turnout, as well as votes by mail.

Many have ascribed the puerile handling of the pandemic as the factor that led to Trump’s downfall. We would like to believe that there were other equally more compelling reasons for his defeat. We think that it was also a vote for social order and against chaos and divisive and exclusivist politics; it was for civility, truthfulness, honesty and transparency. It was a mandate against a person driven by the compulsion for perpetuating power, and with a pathological disregard for science and logic.

But the election result tells us more than just the winners and losers. It lays bare the deep divide in US society, exacerbated even further by Donald Trump’s race and religious baiting comments and actions. The figures reveal a disquieting American reality. Biden has tallied more than 74 million votes, more votes than ever before in US history, but more people also wanted Trump to continue as president. Not even the nearly quarter million Covid-19 deaths mattered to them.

Thus Biden and Harris have a tall order to fulfil. At home, they have to put together what Trump has so recklessly destroyed, starting with social cohesion. Biden has made his intentions clear. In his victory speech, he promised to work for all and remove the Blue and Red divide when it came to the interests of the American people, bringing integrity and transparency in actions.

People in America want change and Biden and Harris have been given the formidable responsibility to bring that change by 75 million people of America. As Biden said in his victory speech, it was a battle for the soul of America. We wish them both the very best of luck in their onerous tasks ahead.

Why are minority communities not being protected?

Govt must take legal action against communal attacks

IT is most unfortunate that religious and ethnic minorities across the country have been coming under regular attacks when the party in power always takes pride in upholding the rights of people, irrespective of their religious and ethnic identities. The increasing incidents of communal attacks on the minority communities during the lockdown and the recent arson attack on Hindu houses in Muradnagar of Cumilla expose the incapacity of the government to protect minority communities and uphold the fundamental principles of the 1972 constitution. In May, 16 noted citizens demanded legal action against the perpetrators involved in the torture, harassment and human rights deprivation of the country’s minority communities. And now leaders of the Bangladesh Hindu, Bouddha, Christian Oikya Parishad have demanded intervention of the prime minister to stop such heinous attacks.

According to media reports, at least 30 incidents of violence against people of minority communities took place in April and May in the country. On May 15, houses of 10 Hindu families were vandalised and a Hindu youth was arrested on allegations of demeaning religion in Bhola’s Monpura. Two days after the incident, miscreants torched the homestead of Baul Ronesh Thakur, a prominent disciple of Baul Shah Abdul Karim in Sunamganj’s Dera. The atrocities against the minorities did not stop in torture and attacks, a shocking number of people have also been murdered during the last few months. According to the Hindu, Bouddha, Christian Oikya Parishad, at least 17 people have been killed between March and September as communal attacks continued amid the pandemic.

Needless to say, such incidents are on the rise because the perpetrators of previous crimes have hardly faced any justice. It is most unfortunate that four years after the violent attacks on the Hindu communities of Brahmanbaria’s Nasirnagar upazila, police are yet to find the perpetrators. As unbelievable as this might seem, police have not completed the investigation yet in the case. This culture of impunity enjoyed by the attackers only emboldens them and others to carry out further attacks.

The government must take stern legal action against the perpetrators of such crimes because it is their constitutional duty to protect minority communities across the country. It should form a commission to investigate all the attacks since 2012, as demanded by the Oikya Parishad leaders. Such crimes can only be stopped if those responsible face justice.

Can Biden restore America’s lost soul?

THE 2020 US Presidential election has been perhaps the most closely contested election that came down to the wire. It was not without its share of controversy, threats of lawsuits and, surprisingly for a democracy like America, marked by sporadic violence, attempted voter suppression—the intent resembling a trait in many countries of this region but carried out through subtler means—and accusations of likely vote rigging by, of all the people, the President himself. More people have voted in this election for the 46th President of the United States than ever before—around 68 percent of the voting-age population. And more people have turned out for Biden—more than 74 million (50.5 percent of voters), the highest turnout for any candidate surpassing Jefferson. It was a unique race too, conducted under the shadow of a pandemic that Trump handled so pathetically.

Donald Trump seemed to be inflicted as a vengeance on the people of America in 2016 (although not by the majority of the voters), and indeed on the rest of the world, for putting a Black man in the White House for eight years. That “aberration” has been corrected but not without considerable damage at home to the American society, and abroad to its credibility. However, having for the first time not only a woman but an immigrant with Jamaican and Indian parentage as the Vice President of the US, come January 20, 2021, is definitely a balm to this damage.

While the result has given a new President to the US, it has revealed something very ominous and disconcerting about America. One should see more than the visible outcome of the elections. The result shows a divided nation, thanks to Donald Trump’s untiring effort to enlarge the schism over the last four years. It is not surprising that Joe Biden won but that Donald Trump fought so close a battle. The outcome was never a foregone conclusion. And neither was it an outright rejection of Donald Trump, as the statistics show. What is remarkable is that if there are more people now than 2016 who do not want Trump as president, there are more people, more than 70 million (47.7 percent of voters) who want him to be. That means more people than in the past have articulated their preference for what Trump advocates—racism, religious bigotry and social inequality—and more people have come to conform to his values, principles and policies. And that is what is alarming, for Americans as well as for the rest of the world.

His core voter base is now wider than the 30 percent we have been so used to hearing of. And that has wider implications considering that in the

As the Democrat Presidential candidate Joe Biden wins the US election, expectations are mounting on several fronts. Action on climate change is one such important area where the USA

has consistently weakened its position during the Trump administration. The President-elect Joe Biden had laid out his plan to deal with climate change and create new green jobs during his electoral campaign. Biden also promised that his administration would rejoin the Paris climate agreement. This is a timely and much appreciated pledge.

Indeed, the decision to pull out of the Paris climate agreement by the USA has been a blow to the global commitment to save the world from the negative impacts of climate change. On November 4, 2020 the USA officially withdrew from the Paris climate agreement. Earlier in June 2017, President Trump announced this withdrawal on the ground that it was economically harmful for the USA and would take away jobs. However, this claim is not well founded since the other polluting countries are making large investments in green energy and not feeling such negative impacts.

Back in December 2015, during the 21st Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris, the climate agreement was adopted by the leaders of 195 countries. Under this accord, countries committed to limit global average warming to “well below” 2 degrees Celsius (above pre-industrial levels) and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degree Celsius.

The significance of the Paris agreement

last four years, the Republican Party of yesteryears, the GOP, has mutated into the Republican Party of Trump. What will the party be without Trump? Will the GOP be able to revive its real character, which was so badly mutilated by Trump imposing his own convoluted and distorted persona onto it? The meekness and indeed the lack of ethics and the corrupted morality that was displayed by some of the leading Republican members of the Congress surpass even the most depraved and meanest of some of the politicians of our region.

Second term elections in the US, we are told, is a referendum for the incumbent. According to poll pundits, there has been only one single deciding issue that has determined the results of US second term presidential elections in the last 50 years.

The one that people deemed fitter of the two candidates to address that single issue had won, except on two occasions. The only issue this year was Covid-19 and who could handle the pandemic and its aftermath. The preference was for Biden, not surprisingly, given the ham-handed handling of the pandemic by Trump. That trend has continued in this election too. A botched handling has cost nearly 250,000 American lives lost to Covid-19, so far, and the election being lost to Biden. But one is not sure if the coronavirus has been the only consideration. It was a vote against chaos and divisive policies, for civility and truthfulness and against a person driven by megalomania.

For a country that claims to be the leader of the free world, the world can

any compunction. He has diluted the separation of power between the executive and the other branches, particularly the judiciary, making the Attorney-General his personal layer rather than the US’.

Trump was a divider of people and he has left the US more divided than ever before along social and racial fault lines, evermore vividly exposed. He bared his misogynist tendencies and a megalomaniac disposition for power overriding the interests of his people, often unable to hide his racist inclinations by his race and religion-baiting utterances. To him, lying was first nature, an instinctive reaction. Trump felt more comfortable in the company of autocrats; he sacrificed science to his political interests, discarded global warming as a hoax, and to him,

implies that the USA will continue to emit more CO2 while other countries cut down on their emissions to fulfil the commitment to reducing global temperatures. This will hamper global efforts towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Currently, the USA’s share in global greenhouse gas emission is about 13.8 percent while China, the EU and India’s shares are about 29.3 percent, 9.6 percent and 6.6 percent, respectively. So other countries are not in a position to take more responsibility in sharing the burden of reducing CO2 further to meet the Paris targets.

Another important agenda of COP21 was to increase the contribution to the Green Climate Fund (GFC), which was set up in 2010 during COP16. The GFC has a goal to raise USD 100 billion a year by 2020. The Paris agreement spelt out that the developed countries should take the lead in supplying finance, and “climate finance should represent a progression beyond previous efforts”. In other words, the Fund should grow over time.

Unfortunately, contributions to the GFC have been very slow till now. As of July 2020, only a total of USD10.3 billion has been pledged, of which USD 8.24 billion has been confirmed. The former US President Barack Obama had committed that the USA would contribute USD 3 billion to the GFC. With the withdrawal of the USA from the climate deal, the prospect of meeting the green fund targets have been made more difficult. This will also affect the availability of funds for the poor countries that are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These include the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and African countries. Bangladesh is a case in point. We are a victim of CO2 emissions by developed countries and need their support to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

The withdrawal will not only have implications for the world but also for the

USA leaving the Paris climate deal

only pity America for having been given a person like Donald Trump to lead it over the last four years. The Americans were inflicted the pains of an administration that was “defined by dishonesty” and the world saw an unpredictable, unstable leader.

In an article nearly four years ago, after Trump was sworn in as President, we had predicted that in the world stage, he would be like a bull in a China shop, breaking asunder the existing world order. It has been proved right. He has withdrawn from international agreements and global organisations such as the Paris Climate Accord and WHO, and weakened regional groupings. Biden has expressed his intention of rescinding those decisions. At home, Trump has wrecked the institutions of the government without

have welcomed his victory, even before the election has been officially called. The EU leaders have termed Biden’s victory as a great day for Europe and America while the NATO Commanders’ comments convey a hope for a revitalised organisation.

It was one of the most important elections in the last several decades, which Biden and many others termed as the battle for America’s soul. The common refrain now is, what would a Trump-free US and world be like? And I cannot resist quoting a lady who in answer to that very question on Facebook replied, “Just as a Covid-free US and world would be.” Seldom have so few words conveyed so much.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

the figure of a quarter million dead Americans, all due to Covid-19, was only a statistic. He was a President who thrived on fear mongering and xenophobia.

Joe Biden’s message is clear. He has promised change, but he will have much to do to revive the soul of America, putting together a fractured society that has lost its moral compass, and healing the wounds that Donald Trump in his reckless act of dividing the nation has caused. What the world would like to see, in the country that claims to be the leader of the world, is that dignity and civility of the office of the US President is restored, and that sanity of thoughts and actions prevails. The instant reactions of world leaders congratulating Biden on his victory is demonstrative of the relief of the international community. It is extraordinary that so many world leaders

President elect Joe Biden on November 4, 2020, in Wilmington, USA.

PHOTO: PAUL SANCYA/AP

USA’s climate commitment in the Biden era

MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of her organisation.