

Bush's electoral prospects

USA

By Najmuddin A. Shaikh

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PRESIDENT Bush and the Republican Party are now preparing for the Republican convention to be held in New York beginning August 30 to confirm that President Bush will be the party's candidate for reelection in the November elections. It is the party's hope that unlike Democrat rival John Kerry, Mr Bush will be able to boost his standing with the electorate as a result of the publicity that a convention traditionally generates, or at the very least that the ongoing erosion in his approval ratings will be stemmed.

Currently, Mr Bush has the advantage of being able to spend a lot of the money he has raised to buy airtime on television for ads at a time when the Democratic candidate is barred legally from using any such funds. American election law, after the recent reforms, provides that once a candidate has accepted his party's nomination, and has as a result received government funding to the tune of \$75 million, the only money he can spend from that date until the time of the election is this government funding. This restriction will also apply to Mr Bush but only after the Republican convention. In the four weeks or so that remain he can deploy the huge war chest at his disposal only to air officially sanctioned ads to boost his candidacy.

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whose auspices the documentary was produced, to prevent its distribution. But given its success at the Cannes film festival and the interest it had already generated the abortive effort only gave it greater box office appeal.

Building upon the success of this documentary is going to be relatively simple. Material is available in large quantities. From the question of WMDs in Iraq to the "Mission Accomplished" statements about Iraq, or the more recent "Bring 'em on" to the continuing failure to attract international assistance in dealing with the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmires, there is a rich lode to be tapped. The donations that Mr Kerry has been able to attract in the last two months would suggest that the anti-Bush camp in this deeply polarized country will make both the talent and the money available to do it right.

It would, under these circumstances, be reasonable to expect private groups working against George Bush to outspend Republican supporters through the rest of

streets of Najaf and the carnage there may help to break the back of Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi army but it will make the Shia leader a formidable political force.

Ayatollah Sistani's departure from Najaf for London, ostensibly because of health problems, adds to the complications. It is probable that he left because he did not wish to contend with the problem of a large scale American operation which while aimed at Sadr's militia would cause hundreds of civilian casualties. The capture of an Iranian diplomat, presumably by a Sunni organization will add a new and possibly dangerous twist to the sectarian problem in Iraq.

In the meanwhile, the interim government's every act, overseen by the Americans, reveals only its impotence. The amnesty offer as finally issued offers a pardon only to select insurgents and was apparently modified after the Americans insisted that the amnesty must not extend to those guilty of serious offences against the Americans or the interim government.

Prime Minister Allawi's visit to Najaf and his call to the insurgents to lay down their arms can only be termed as a dismal failure.

There is no reason, therefore, to believe that even in the absence of a coherent Kerry policy on Iraq — he has only talked about achieving a substantial reduction in the number of American troops deployed in Iraq within the first year of his administration without explaining how — the country cannot be a selling point for Bush.

On the terror issue it is conventional wisdom that any visible increase in the terrorist threat will redound

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least a factor in the new importance this year, is another provision or lacunae in the law which permits private groups to place political ads to support the candidate of one party, and to denigrate the candidate of the other — without the imposition of financial limits so long as it is clear that the private group is not acting under instructions from the candidate or the candidate's party.

The importance of such ads has been highlighted by a recently launched and privately financed ad campaign that calls into question Mr Kerry's military credentials and the stories of his valour. The ads have been condemned in the media and by a prominent Republican senator, John McCain. The White House has disassociated itself from the ad campaign but has carefully refrained from calling for its withdrawal.

Such Republican ads are, therefore, likely to continue and, despite what seems to be an agreement between the two parties to avoid personal attacks in official campaigning, a degree of viciousness can be expected from the privately funded ad campaigns.

In the past, it would have been fair to suggest that any such campaigns would work to the advantage of the Republican candidate since this party has traditionally been able to raise more money and has had more dedicated groups working for it.

This year, however, this is no longer a foregone conclusion. One pointer was the fact that in the last couple of months Mr Kerry was able to raise more money for his official campaign than Mr Bush. For another, the speeches and the general discussions at the Democratic Convention highlighted how aggrieved the general run of Democrats, both the radicals and moderates, were about the manner in which the last election had been "stolen" and their determination to oust Mr Bush.

The general feeling was that they did not have a candidate to elect but they had a candidate to defeat. The fury of the ABB (Anyone But Bush) crowd will, it appears translate into greater privately funded campaigning against the current incumbent.

A head start has been provided by the phenomenal success at the box office of Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*. A more brutal focus on the weaknesses of Bush as a leader, particularly as a wartime leader, and his dubious connections with oil interests inside and outside the country would be hard to visualize. There were efforts by Disney studios, under

the period up to the election in November and to do it with material far more lethal than the record of a vacillating and "flip-flop" John Kerry that the Republicans will seek to highlight. It is a campaign that also stands a great chance of success because of the current economic situation and the continuing concerns about Iraq.

Last week, a Washington Post /ABC News poll showed 25 per cent of voters as listing the economy as the most important issue, with 23 per cent saying Iraq and 20 per cent terrorism. The latest employment figures released a few days ago showed that in July a mere 32,000 new jobs were added to the economy last month. That was way below forecasts, which had envisaged at least a quarter of a million new jobs. Since Mr Bush came to office, some 1.1 million jobs were reduced and for the American public the measure of economic recovery was the number of jobs created.

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On Iraq, which many had considered to be Mr Bush's trump card, this poll showed that 46 per cent believed he was the right person to deal with the Middle Eastern country while 48 per cent chose Mr Kerry. This figure is not likely to improve in the days to come as the situation in Iraq shows no discernible improvement and, more importantly, no other nation offers to step in to assist in the process.

The UN secretary-general has made it clear that he now expects the US forces to provide security for the UN team led by Ambassador Qazi when it moves into Iraq and that not one nation has reacted positively to the UN's request for troops for a UN protection force.

The arrest warrants now issued for the Pentagon's favourite Iraqi, Ahmad Chalabi and his nephew, Salem Chalabi, underline how badly the administration had chosen its tools in Iraq. The continuing battle on the

to Bush's advantage. He, after all, is the incumbent president. Yet I am not at all certain that that is how the latest enhancing of the "alert" level will play with the electorate. First, it seems more or less certain that all the information gathered from the interrogation of Naeem Khan in Pakistan, the examination of his computer records and even the contact he was forced to maintain with collaborators in the UK and perhaps the US, proved only that Al-Qaeda had surveyed financial institutions in the US before September '01, and not that anything else had been done since then to plan an attack.

There was widespread criticism of the decision to release the name of Naeem Khan to the media since reports from both Pakistan and the UK suggested that doing so had jeopardized ongoing anti-terrorist operations. With this sort of backdrop, many Americans seemed to accept the contention of the admittedly disgruntled former anti-terrorism chief in the White House that the security alerts put out by the Bush administration were now being treated as jokes by officials in the field.

More importantly, given the WMD fiasco the Bush administration now enjoys little credibility. Such little credibility as exists on the terrorism issue has been undermined by the charge that it is crying wolf too often. No Democrat can dare to make an issue of this for fear of what the consequences would be if a terrorist attack did occur. But even without a sustained effort by the Democrats, this may become another albatross around the president's neck.

It is probable that the tradition of a presidential debate will be maintained this year. Mr Kerry is not a charismatic figure, but according to some American friends, even he cannot but outshine President Bush. In the vice-presidential debate, it is just as certain that the eloquent and charismatic Edwards, armed with his forensic skills, will run rings around the dour-sounding and dour-looking Dick Cheney.

While it is always foolhardy to try and call an American election so early in the election year this writer will hazard the view that the Bush campaign, barring some dramatic development, will not be able to overcome the odds and January '05 will find a Democrat ensconced in the White House.

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