

THE COURSE OF U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

-An Update

Prelude:

With the U.S. Presidential elections just around the corner (6th Nov), the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two contenders have already been mapped out in the wake of final stages of the campaign. The issues in the electoral arena have already been sharp focused while reconfirming that the candidates are undoubtedly responsive to domestic constraints more than the foreign ones. In addition, the candidates' treatment of almost every issue is in stark contrast. In essence, the contest relates to the choices which the U.S. electorate will make, but it evokes an immense interest on a wider canvas because of its global ramifications.

Posturing and images

When President Obama was perceptively intimidated by Romney's aggressive posture in the first Presidential debate held on 3rd Oct in Denver Colorado, polls had then suggested a downturn in his popularity. However, he seems to have turned the tables in the second debate held on 16th Oct in New York, by giving off a more fierce posture on the theme of the debate (domestic and foreign policy in town hall style). Similarly, Obama was also declared to be a 'show stopper' in the third debate held on 22nd Oct in Florida (swing state) focusing entirely on foreign policy.

On the other hand, both the candidates were quite mute on the most pressing issues like Afghanistan roll back and relations with Pakistan in the course of their campaign in the first debate. However, in the latter debates Romney became more vocal on these issues while Obama just responded to the queries. Nevertheless, the fact remains that these elections are just as important for Pakistan as they are for the Americans themselves.

Treatment of Issues:

The second Presidential debate was dominated by the issues of Tax, Energy, Immigration, Women rights and Libya whereas, the third and last debate (usually the most watched one), was based on issues pertaining to Middle East, hunt for Al-Qaeda, intervention in Syria, and military spending. The way both the candidates handled the issues was again subject to variance. It is itemized below:

The **second debate**, carried by the town hall format, envisaged a question answer session amongst the audience and the candidates. The issue specific treatment of the most important queries raised are enlisted below:

- a) **Tax:** Obama taunted Romney over the vagueness of his plans for tax cuts and deficit reduction by ceasing funds to various government programs. He plans to deal with tax cuts by cutting down 'corporate welfare'.
- b) **Energy:** Obama supports investment in clean energy i.e. wind turbines and advanced car batteries; whereas, Romney plans to ease regulations hindering coal-burning power plants, oil exploration and nuclear power plant construction.
- c) **Immigration:** prompted yet another clash, Romney suggested that Obama had failed to pursue the comprehensive legislation he promised at the dawn of his administration, and Obama claimed that Romney's stubbornness made a deal impossible.
- d) **Women rights:** Obama supports abortion rights for women, whereas, Romney was not in the favor of abortion rights which he supported while running for Governor Massachusetts in 2002.
- e) **Libya:** The subject of the recent death of the U.S. ambassador to Libya in a terrorist attack at an American post in Benghazi increased tension amongst the candidates. Romney said it took Obama a long time to admit the episode had been a terrorist attack, but Obama said he had said so the day after in an appearance in the Rose Garden outside the White House.

The **Third debate** tested the ability of the candidates in dealing with the foreign policy issues of the U.S. The issue specific treatment of both the candidates in this regard is as following:

- a) **Middle East and Syria:** Obama plans to reduce heavy military presence in Middle East and not go for an option of military intervention in Syria, whereas, Romney is quite aggressive in his policy regarding both the arena's.
- b) **Hunt for Al-Qaeda and Military Spending:** Romney suggested that America cannot kill its way out of the mess created by Al-Qaeda. Hence, he plans to spend heavily on military hardware and invest in missile defence, adding approx \$100bn to Pentagon's budget while reducing the civilian defence bureaucracy. Concurrently, Obama proudly claimed that he has killed much of Al-Qaeda's leadership including Osama Bin Laden. However, he intended a \$ 487m reduction in defence spending over the coming years.
- c) **Iran:** Obama showed his determination in preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, however he opposed a near-term military strike by US or Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities and emphasized on the need for a diplomatic solution. On the other hand, Romney declared that it is unacceptable for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon and was quite vocal on using a military solution in the case Iran manages to make a nuclear bomb.

Afghanistan in focus:

Afghanistan drawdown remains one the most pressing foreign policy issue for the U.S. In Obama's presentations, he highlighted the initial increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan and his objective for draw-down of US troops with the combat mission to end by 2014. Concurrently, Romney suggested that his goal in this regard would be "a successful transition to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014" but pledged to review withdrawal plans and base them "on conditions on the ground as assessed by military commanders".

Treatment of Pakistan:

As the U.S. presidential election draws nearer, U.S.-Pakistan relations remain contentious. President Obama has sought to repair the relationship with Pakistan, especially for the sake of trade routes and assistance in hunting terrorists. However, Romney's opinion on the relationship remains vague and undefined. He does admit that the relationship needs to be improved, particularly if the United States and its allies are to succeed in Afghanistan, but not yet offering specifics on how he would go about that if elected.

In addition, both the candidates agreed on continuing with the policy of using UAV's (drones) in Pakistan's territory, if they make it to the office. Thus, for Pakistan whatever the results of the U.S. Presidential elections are, the status-quo seems to be retained.

Where can a difference emerge?

Seemingly, Obama regained the edge over his rival by the third Presidential debate. The Gallup poll on the third debate suggests that the viewers who watched the third presidential debate say that Obama did a better job than Mitt Romney, by 56% to 33%. This shows that the incumbent is prepared to deal with the foreign policy issues more effectively, whereas his opponent seems to be comfortable in dealing with the domestic ones more

The opinion polls with regard to various swing states suggest a close race between both the candidates, with Obama leading in some national surveys and Romney in others. Despite the Republican's clear gains in surveys in recent days, Obama led in several polls of Wisconsin and Ohio, two key Midwestern battlegrounds where Romney and running mate Paul Ryan are campaigning heavily.

Barring a last-minute shift in the campaign, Obama is on course to win states and the District of Columbia that account for 237 of the 270 electoral votes needed for victory. The same is true for Romney in states with 191 electoral votes. The remaining

110 electoral votes are divided among the hotly contested battleground states of Florida (29), North Carolina (15), Virginia (13) New Hampshire (4), Iowa (6), Colorado (9), Nevada (6), Ohio (18) and Wisconsin (10).

U.S. voters name President Obama's speaking skills and concern for people as his greatest strengths, followed by his personality and levelheadedness. Mitt Romney's top strengths are his business experience and economic policies.

Findings:

In a nutshell, with the campaign reaching its climax in the backdrop of domestic concerns and foreign pressures, Obama seems to have a slight electoral 'map advantage' due to his slim lead in Ohio. On the other hand, Romney has also steadily closed the gap in some other battleground states. Hence, uptill now campaign of both the candidates has reached a 'political equilibrium'. In the end, swing states seem to determine the future of the candidates. Notwithstanding the above, the fallout of 'Cyclone Sandy' if any, on the electoral mood cannot be forecasted with certainty at this stage.