

The agony and the ecstasy of politics

Shobhan Bantwal | March 13, 2008 | 15:09 IST

After watching American politicians getting raked over the coals again and again, it makes one wonder what it is that spawns so many political hopefuls and why they choose to place themselves in the harsh spotlight. With the primaries in full swing at the moment and the media becoming ever more watchful, the question becomes even more relevant. The number of desi politicians, too, is increasing every year. What motivates them to run for office in highly competitive, cut-throat races?

The Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky debacle was one of the most powerful examples of a politician's life coming apart before the entire world -- one single offensive aspect of an individual's character canceling out in the blink of an eye the charisma, the intelligence, the vision and decades of dedicated work and good deeds.

No President in history has probably faced more ridicule than George W Bush. Not too long ago, my fellow New Jerseyans and I watched with both shock and pain the rueful admission of ex-governor James McGreevey that he was homosexual and had traded prominent political jobs for sexual favours. A man with a marvellous intellect and personality who could have otherwise made his mark in the political arena ended up in political ruin.

Every minute of every day, the person running for political office comes under public scrutiny. Even a routine medical check-up turns into a circus, with the media wanting to know what medical procedures were conducted, what medications were prescribed and whether the person in question is healthy enough to aspire to the office. Does the world really need to know what a politician's blood pressure is or their cholesterol level or their blood type or even what type of junk food they prefer?

Then there are the spouses, children, siblings and parents of politicians who may or may not appreciate the peripheral limelight they are forced to endure. Hillary and Chelsea Clinton suffered untold misery for months. Yet Hillary successfully brushed off the sordid residue of scandal and went on to pursue her own political ambitions, consequently facing her own demons. What was amazing was her smiling confidence in the face of so much negative publicity and her will to overcome the darker aspects of being the First Lady. Now, she wants to subject herself to even greater scrutiny by running for the presidential office.

Suburban towns like the one I live in do not pay their mayors and councilmen grand salaries and they are often painted in the worst light. Even the good ones have to face difficult and unforeseen situations. Despite all that, they run for office again and again. Losing an election after years of fund-raising, meeting and greeting, neglecting the family, travelling and learning has to bring the darkest moments of despair and disappointment. And yet, it does not seem to deter the bold and the daring. They continue to march onward.

Is it really strong convictions that spur all these politician-wannabes or is it only the glory, the power and the attention? After all, there is the grandeur of winning, the back-slapping, the hugs, the joyful tears and the photo opportunities. Naturally, politics brings with it a considerable measure of power, the ability to touch more lives than would ever be possible for an average individual and the capacity to do immense public good. A single piece of legislation initiated by a Congressman or Senator can make a profound difference to so many millions of lives.

Therein lies the power of political office -- the facility to serve the people, to bring about changes that can mean the difference between hunger and plenty, joblessness and occupation, disease and good health, homelessness and a roof over the head. Perhaps it is this deep desire to do good that stirs many of our politicians. But what about those who are not compelled by such selfless motives? What prods them into putting their feet to the proverbial fire?

Politics is not much different in India than it is in the US, except in one area: morality. Indians in India accept considerably lower moral standards in their politicians while condemning them in the common man. Americans, however, are almost puritanical when it comes to their elected officials. They want these individuals to be happily married (preferably with a few wholesome children), morally sound and solid citizens with lofty standards of behaviour. And yet, ordinary Americans who do not dabble in politics happily go about their lives with relative independence and lack of censure. Couples live together without being married, men and women date multiple partners, criminals re-establish themselves in mainstream society after serving their sentences and illegitimate children do not carry the stigma of illegitimacy.

Despite the impossibly high moral expectations, there is no dearth of men and women proudly adding their names to the American election ballots year after year. I admire these brave men and women. It must take supreme fortitude and courage to face the anguish that comes along with the thrill of public life. ♦

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