

Take the HC's sane counsel

CEC's unilateral action must stop

THE most important emphasis in the High Court's ruling on the writs over whether we should have a voter-list *de novo* as pressed for by the CEC or an update of the previous one, is certainly laid on the implied direction that the EC must work as a commission and not as an individual.

The HC directive to the effect that the 2000 voter list be not set aside but relied upon for necessary subtractions and additions to prepare a real-time voter list for the forthcoming national election 2006 instantly strikes a responsive chord in us.

Ever since the creation of the unnecessary controversy by the Chief Election Commissioner's unilateral decision to go for an entirely new voter list ignoring his two colleagues' opinion to the contrary we have been harping on three points: first, the sole job at hand was to have a comprehensive, all-inclusive and accurate electoral roll that did not even unwittingly leave any eligible voter disfranchised instead of entering into distracting semantics unmindful of the extremely limited time for preparation at the EC's disposal. Secondly, we advised the CEC to hold the long-pending internal meeting with his two commissioners to speedily end the conflict they were having as it risked not only any fair preparation of the electoral roll but also the credibility of the EC, which in turn, called into question the conduct of a free and fair election. Last but not least, we unequivocally asserted that the Election Commission was constitutionally mandated to act as a commission and not as one-man show as though it were a personal fiefdom.

We thought we duly reflected public and broad civil society discomfiture at the slogging matches within the commission that should have otherwise commanded full public respect as an operational necessity.

The CEC has now got, what we believe to be a trouble-shooting wise counsel, and he could only benefit from heeding such advice. What he has been doing is clearly out of sync with standard sense of propriety and basic pragmatism, let alone it being in dissonance with the widely felt public pulse. We implore him not to create any further controversy but to settle down to his historic task of gifting the nation a free and fair election in cooperation with all his colleagues.

It can't be lost on him, as a judge, that having a reference-point in the 2002 electoral roll has its advantage -- the scope for manipulation with the new list that way is minimised to begin with. But in any case, he will be making his tryst with history even more usefully if he should leave a computerised database to help reinforce the authenticity of not just the current voter list but the future ones, too.

Preserving heritage sites

A call to protect our culture

THE news that a temple of the Rakhine community in Patuakhali is in bad shape leaves us wondering about neglect that some of our heritage sites might have been subjected to, without our knowing it too well. The century-old statue of Lord Buddha, a prized possession of the temple, is said to be on the verge of ruin.

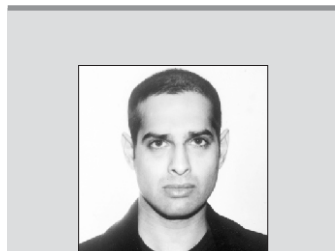
A temple like that is our link to an inter-communal past which has universal and contemporary appeal. Unicef has a worldwide programme aimed at preserving the heritage sites of mankind; we should be part of it, not only in theory but also in practice.

The neglect shown to the temple amounts to neglecting the community that it belongs to. Renovation of the temple is urgently necessary because the dilapidated structure can no longer be used by the devotees.

There is no dearth of rhetoric on the need for preserving our historical relics, but what we watch in practice is something very different. Obviously, we cannot present ourselves as a heritage-conscious nation to the outside world when such treasures are uncared for, virtually abandoned.

Successful local administrations have apparently failed to do their bits in stemming the tide of ruin. Now, the higher authorities will have to intervene to save the temple with some wherewithal given for the job. The department of archaeology must go into the matter and also look for other sites and places in the country which need urgent protective attention.

The Bangladeshi neo-cons



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THESE days it seems as though everyone all over the world is familiar with the term "neo-conservative." The neo-cons came to public attention in the aftermath of 9/11 when it became apparent that they were an influential constituency within the Bush administration and were instrumental in laying the intellectual and strategic groundwork (such as it was) for the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

There remains some confusion about what the label actually denotes and who precisely comes under its rubric.

The term has been used, not quite accurately, as short-hand for those in the Bush administration with links to the expansionist Project for the New American Century, a Washington DC-based think tank that champions a hawkish and unilateral vision of US global leadership, that had long pushed for the ouster of Saddam Hussein as the first step in remaking the Middle East according to US strategic imperatives.

The confusion stems from the fact that there is considerable overlap between neo-con thinkers and members of PNAC. But the term "neo-con" was originally coined to describe (as the prefix "neo" would seem to indicate) conservatives who started out on the left of the political spectrum and for one reason or another

ended up on the right.

The political transformation of most of the original neo-cons in the 1950s and 60s can be attributed largely to what they saw as insufficiently hawkish foreign policy on the part of the American left, and the original neo-cons included people such as Irving Kristol, now a senior fellow at the AEI, who famously described a neo-con as "a liberal mugged by reality."

But it is interesting to note that the US is not the only country with

another stream of leftists who had been very active in the liberation war, but were more radical than the senior AL leadership, and immediately upon independence started a movement to establish a revolutionary leftist government.

The response of the AL government to these threats to its authority from the left was not its finest. Extreme measures were taken, and for many of those who were at the forefront of the left in the post-independence days, though significantly, not all, antipathy to the AL due to the

excesses of those days became the touchstone of their political existence.

It was this antipathy to the AL that permitted Zia-ur-Rahman to co-opt some of the leftist elements into his fledgling political party after he came to power in 1975. Paradoxically, the remnants of the left became an integral part of the new right-of-centre coalition that Zia cobbled together, that eventually became the BNP, the majority party in the country today.

If it seems odd that erstwhile leftists would make common cause with the rest of the political flosam and jetsam, most of whom inhabited the right of the political spectrum, that Zia populated his party with, it should be remembered that, just as what motivated the American neo-cons was their antipathy to the Democratic party, the principle motivation for the Bangladeshi neo-cons was their

antipathy to the AL.

The BNP is where most of the Bangladeshi neo-cons reside to this day, though some joined the JP in the 1980s and are still active in its leadership.

Thus, now in Bangladesh we have the rather interesting situation that these erstwhile leftists are sitting in the same government as religious fundamentalists, whom one would have thought would have been their ideological opposites. It is a fascinating turn of events, but as

one principle that they have in common with their fundamentalist allies as well as the more right-wing elements who originally made up the BNP.

The one principle they have retained from their days on the left is their pathological opposition to India and belief that there can be no rapprochement between Bangladesh and India.

It is the Bangladeshi neo-cons who have been the instrumental intellectual force behind the continuing friction between the two countries, and it is they who are the most vocal in their opposition to better relations between Bangladesh and India.

In this century, much of Bangladesh's future development and advancement depends on our ability to connect up to the outside world. This in turn is dependent on our ability to forge productive relations with the entire region, especially India, which surrounds us on three sides, and is the gateway to south-east Asia, China, and beyond, and this is where the negative thinking of the Bangladeshi neo-cons is holding us back.

So there you have it. America is not the only country in the world with its neo-conservative elements, and, as in the US, the ascendance of the Bangladeshi neo-cons has not come without its costs to the common good. The parallels between the two movements are striking and not at all comforting.

The time has come to recognize that the Bangladeshi neo-cons and the increasingly negative regional foreign policy that they are championing is only serving to isolate us and is thus detrimental to our national interest. It is not the Iraq war, but in the long run, in terms of our relations with the outside world, this school of thought can have just as pernicious an impact on our polity as the neo-cons have had in the US.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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its neo-conservative coterie that has succeeded in insinuating itself into the corridors of power and advancing its foreign policy agenda.

Remarkably enough, perhaps, Bangladeshi politics also has its fair share of politicians and intellectuals who started out on the left of the political spectrum, but are today to be found on the extreme right, and have, in the course of their own peregrinations, succeeded in moving the country's foreign policy to the right as well.

If you asked them about their political and philosophical inclinations and affiliations, they would probably still profess to be leftists at heart. Despite their fancy official vehicles, and their multi-million dollar Gulshan residences, and their sons and daughters studying or living in the US, they might still have pictures of Che Guevara on their walls, and their libraries almost definitely still

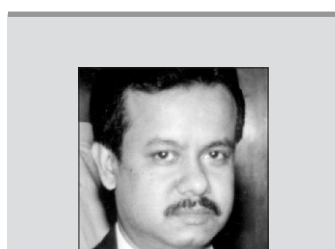
Many of the pro-Peking leftists were skeptical of the liberation struggle due to the fact that their affiliation was to the Chinese, who were allies of the Pakistan government, and believed that the liberation struggle would ultimately serve only to advance Indian regional interests and to create an Indian client state.

In any event, they had always despised the Awami League, who were spear-heading the liberation struggle, and whom they thought of as bourgeois and in the thrall of the Indians and the Russians.

Some of the left section of the Bangladeshi neo-cons sat out the liberation war, some opposed it, and others supported it but distanced themselves from the AL. As a result, they found themselves marginalized and side-lined upon independence. For them, it has been a long hard road back from the political wilderness.

They were soon to be joined by

New Year's resolution



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WE are six days into the New Year, another round of beginning and end, another slice of eternity to count our days all over again. In the purely time-keeping sense, it will repeat the old and nothing will change. It will be the same number of hours in the day, same seven days in the week, same thirty or thirty-one days in a month and then the same twelve months in the year. We shall call the same name of the days, the same name of the months, repeating our daily chores, body functions, habits and mannerisms. We shall still get hurt, get overjoyed, smile and weep, fight, cheer, scream, shout and draw each other's blood. A new year is just another year, putting the eternity in motion like frames of photographic images are spliced to produce a movie.

Still the advent of a new year brings excitement. It's like turning the page of a spellbinding book, pulling the reader to find out about the characters, the plot, the turns and twists which throw the mind into surmises and surprises. We look forward to the New Year because of our fascination for the new, the new which brings change, and the change which brings hope.

Is that all there is to the New Year's Day? Valentine's Day celebrates romance; Twenty-First

February celebrates language; Twenty-Sixth March independence; and Sixteenth December victory. Then we have religious days like Budha Purnima, Pujas, Christmas, Shabe-e-Barat, Shab-e-Qadar, Eid-e-Miladunnabi, and the two Eids. What exactly do we celebrate on the New Year's Day? What do we signify with fireworks, champagne, singing and dancing? Is the New Year just another excuse for getting drunk?

On average each American takes 1.8 New Year's resolutions. I don't know about the average number of

gives a second chance like amnesty offers clean slate.

We have welcomed the New Year already, despite the bomb threats, despite tight security, despite political confrontation, terrorism, economic and financial hardships hanging over us like mushroom clouds. Nothing stopped us from the celebration of one night, from wishing each other a Happy New Year, our mobile phones bleating with SMS to exchange goodwill.

We all know it lasts for one day

also for his family, but the larger interests don't count. People don't think of the country, their community, neighbours or friends. Perhaps it's a time for reflection, but that reflection is confined to parochial interests, each for his own, and none for all.

It is this selfishness, which made it possible to welcome the New Year in the midst of so many tragedies. Our nation was still quivering in the impact of suicide bombs like the body of a slain beast in its last spasms. Thousands of pilgrims were stranded in the airport, wait-

payers to keep some people in their drunken stupor!

Six days later it's life as usual. If you look at it, the New Year celebration was nothing more than a drinking binge. It was abidingly empty, a resounding ululation of a nation where the rich and famous were desperate to collectively rejoice one day what they enjoyed every day privately. At the philosophical level, nothing was wrong with it. Nothing was wrong with having an extra day of party. We need to have more fun to sublimate the pain and anxiety that are wast-

prattle. When men and women are inebriated, their minds fermented with inordinate ecstasy, it shows nothing more than their own hollowness. Glasses clink, people drink and minds sink. It goes through the night, left and right, dark and light, dim and bright, idle talks and drunken walks. Then the countdown at midnight comes as if we can't wait to drop the old and pick up the new.

Now, if the old is gone, what is new? What is new that we have resolved before walking into the dense cloud where our minds plunged into false pretense? What have we got to celebrate in the throes of sufferings when it's no longer safe to leave your home, when the farmers are worried, the pilgrims are harried, and the teachers are parried? What have we got to celebrate when the parliament doesn't protect, the government doesn't rule, and the people don't have power? What have we got to celebrate when the faithful are ferocious and the devout are deluded? What have we got to celebrate when education doesn't give knowledge, wisdom doesn't give foresight, and character doesn't give courage?

Janis Joplin sang in Me and Bobby McGee that: "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." If we celebrated anything, that is what we did. We celebrated our freedom to lose nothing because we have nothing left to lose. In the drunken spree between the last night of one year and the first morning of another, did we get to think of it? Probably yes? Probably no? Let us have this one resolution for next time. When we wake up in the morning, we shall at least remember if we thought of it.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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resolutions taken by people in other countries. But people take resolutions all over the world, which should add up to hundreds of millions. Many people take vows to quit smoking or drinking in the New Year. Others resolve to plan their lives better, to avoid the mistakes of the past and look forward to healing their wounds in time.

In essence, the New Year's Day is the time for optimism, hope against hope in mankind's fierce struggle against the futility of fate. It's a symbol of renewal, revival and revision, a celebration of the fresh start to correct past mistakes and capture future opportunities. We toast, we boast, our minds rejuvenated, our hopes revived, we indulge in the expectation that life

only, our resolutions mostly forgotten by the time we get done with our hangover, by the time the sun goes down on the first day of the New Year. By that time the flower shops, mobile phone companies, liquor stores, hotels and restaurants have done brisk business. Some people buy new dress, new shoes and then cook rich food. Many people are superstitious. They believe that how they live on the first day will determine how they also live for the rest of the year. There are those who don't incur any spending, because they believe they would squander throughout the year unless they start saving from day one.

In a way, the New Year's resolution is a selfish business. Everyone wishes what is best for him, may be

ing for their flights to the holy place. We welcomed the New Year while hundreds of thousands of farmers were waiting to get the supply of fertilizers for their winter crops. We welcomed the New Year while primary school teachers were freezing in the cold, fasting to death in the hope that the government was going to pay attention to their pitiful plight.

Yet we danced and sang in drunken frenzy, flesh pressing flesh, limbs going up and down, bodies twisted in the senseless reflex of primal instincts. The liquor brewed storms in our head, our blood boiling in the heat of ecstasy, our minds howling like raging beasts. There was unprecedented security in the capital. God knows how much it cost the tax-

ing away the vitality of our nation.

The question is whether we have resolved anything. Have we had the time to think of the common good as we got incrementally drunk, and the music got louder with our hysterical bodies? Did we take the time to talk about our woebegone country and its fraying future? Or did we behave like the village idiot who saved off the same branch of a tree on which he was sitting astride? If we occurred on the New Year's Day, did it occur to us that we were immersed in the sea of sorrow, our past depleted, our present diminished, our future threatened?

What faith is to ritual resolution is to the New Year. No relief without belief. A conversation without a concept is nothing but an empty

Reckless politicisation: Some reflections

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THINKERS say -- and rightly so -- nothing demoralises good public servants and destroys effectiveness more than favouritism and patronage in recruitment and promotion. To keep a system working and flourishing, one can't afford to be relaxed in respect of rational thoughts and practices. Something based upon irrational and capricious principles might stay temporarily but very unlikely to sustain. On top of that, an important element in the motivation and morale of bureaucrats is the opportunity for promotion to higher levels. Career management involves, among others, assigning the right people to the right jobs and making full use of their skills. However, our political leaderships tend to forget about the plain truths stated above.

Politicisation has turned out to be a very popular and indispensable weapon for the governments in Bangladesh. What is of particular note is that it is being reflected and flourished in newer dimensions. Not only in Bangladesh -- as Rehman Sobhan observes -- in whole of South Asia, politicization abuses the recruitment process and encourages sort of political opportunism among the bureaucrats thereby protecting incompetence and corruption while undermining efficacy, integrity and, of course, quality.

Having seen previous observations, what has been happening in the administrative arena of Bangladesh as regards recruitment and promotion is just mind-boggling. No real purpose seems to be in place. There may be a momentary gratification but this reckless politicisation -- I dare say won't serve anybody's purpose. The techniques that are being

In our country, it is a distinct culture of the 'incumbent' government to declare all the activities of the previous government 'destructive' for the country and at the same time build upon and consolidate the previous government's mistakes and bad policies. One finds it baffling to imagine what is in store for the nation if things continue the way it is, especially as regards reckless politicisation.

employed in inducing men of choice in the key positions are turning the recruits' moral standpoint shaky. They will always have the guilt-feeling. The perceived feeling of worthlessness may also creep in them. As they will be haunted by this spectre, diffidence is to be reflected in their performance in all the jobs they are assigned to. Not that all of them are devoid of quality but the cursed mechanisms -- for example, alleged leakage of question papers as well as alleged appointments on recommendations of party wings -- are apt enough to strip off whatever confidence they

possessed. This is, however, not to mean that politicised recruitment and promotion didn't take place during the tenure of previous regimes. Whenever and however it took place must have brought miseries and created problems to adversely affect the administrative discipline and functioning. It is, in fact, a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh. The degree is, however, the matter at issue. Anyway, the vacuum and bankruptcy that are being created and inflicted upon the administration by the indiscriminate politicisation might well become burdensome even for the

ones that mastermind and relish in these evil practices.

To be candid, no governments in Bangladesh have been sincere enough to provide for motivational incentives to the government employees, rather resorted to favouritism and patronage to strengthen either their political stranglehold or merely to pile up money out of unholy links with the senior civil servants. Successive governments' treatment of recruitment and promotion policies and practices make it quite clear that they are more interested in aggrandising their narrow interest and that in this affair they are showing

real panache as the criterion of 'political consideration'. This is increasingly gaining strength with every new political leadership in state power.

The bureaucrats are, however, not idle partners in this game of politics. A segment -- not all -- of them have also devised and assimilated various guiles to exploit the political leaders. Nowadays, they are more than quick to express allegiance to the newly installed party in state power. They don't stop here rather take every opportunity to poison the political bosses against the bureaucrats they want to make suffer out of sheer spite

and jealousy.

Many of them are by now very adept in eulogising new government and equally cunning in vilifying the government that has just gone out of power. This sort of 'sycophancy' is definitely effacing the vestiges of 'good sense' in the administration thereby destroying the total peace in the service. On reflection and on balance, it won't be an exaggeration to comment that erosion of morality among politicians and civil servants is now unabated and morale of the service is severely brutalised.

The myopic state machinery working under the umbrella of democracy and legitimised by 'public support' seem to have forgotten about the fact that it has been elected and sent to power by the people. What is of enormous pain is that it seems to be pretending or rather enjoying to be acting as 'isolated', at least its handling of the crucial sectors of the country

imply that. Time is running out. It is well overdue to come back to senses and comprehend that it is to work for each and every individual of the land. Partisan thinking and, of course, steps are suicidal and turn 'ridiculous' the very legitimacy enjoys.

In our country, it is a distinct culture of the 'incumbent' government to declare all the activities of the previous government 'destructive' for the country and at the same time build upon and consolidate the previous government's mistakes and bad policies. One finds it baffling to imagine what is in store for the nation if things continue the way it is, especially as regards reckless politicisation.

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