

The new year: Equations and expectations

ANU MUHAMMAD

We have entered 2006 with the burdens as well as promises of the old year 2005 still hanging over us. In Bangladesh and elsewhere people have tried to feel a new possibility and changes in the new year. When we wish anybody a happy new year, we utter that with sincere optimism. Nevertheless, no new year is absolutely new, the last sunset of a year and a first sunrise of the next cannot be separated, and these are not discontinued. Therefore, we feel, smell and suffer the old when accept the new.

The whole world has tried to take a fresh breath on the first morning of the New Year 2006 but eventually found smell of blood and fire, bombs and drugs, pollution and destruction. We cannot forget last year's human tragedy and inhuman barbarity of many power lords including super mighty US lords in many parts of the world including Iraq; plunder, genocide, deprivation, deception all haunt the world in the New Year.

The year 2005 ended with Hong Kong ministerial of WTO that again showed global hegemony in a vulgar scale. Bangladesh, despite its least developed status, pay duties on their export to the US 15 times more than developed country like France. The OECD countries pay 5 times more in subsidizing their big agro farms than what they offer for the whole 'third' world as so-called foreign

aid, about 1 billion US dollar a day.

WTO does not talk about armaments but that is where most of the resources go. Every year about 900 billion US dollar is spent for armaments and war in the world. It is worth noting that more than 50 percent of this spending on destruction comes from the USA, where people die from Hurricane, lack of health care and also more than a 1000 are being killed in a year from firearms shooting.

growing resources.

In Bangladesh, a peripheral country in global capitalist setting, a dazzling skyline along with ugly rampant poverty has developed side by side. Development projects endorsed by the succeeding governments along with hypocrite elite and sponsored by the global lords, e.g., the World Bank and IMF turned the economy from mills to malls, created affluence of the few and poverty of many, polluted air

Bangladesh showed that their mission of profit not only goes against the optimal utilization of energy resources, rather it turned the natural gas resources as liability for the people and country. The Economist (December 24 2005-January 6, 2006) showed that similar things had happened in many weak countries around the world. Big blowouts in Magurchara and Tengritla in Bangladesh also showed corporate greed as well as

this is insignificant because they are used to see and accept millions of people dying prematurely from hunger and hunger related diseases, curable diseases and problems caused by lack of shelter, not to say about violence.

So many people are being killed in countries like Bangladesh for faulty design of vehicles or garment factory building and non-monitoring of the authority year after year. The year 2005 witnessed

compilation of policies and strategies that had created sustainable poverty instead of sustainable development in the country. In that consideration, PRSP does not seem to be actually a paper of poverty reduction. The hue and cry of MDG is nothing but to keep people restrained from dreaming of far better possibility. In fact, the MDG goals stand far behind than the objectives attained by even resource poor and 'aid' free Cuba. The possibility and potential of the world is much bigger than the MDG tries to show us.

People around the world are gathering against all these after finding the destruction behind mask of 'development', genocide behind 'liberty', poverty creation behind poverty reduction, disempowerment behind empowerment; they are gathering to create another world free from corporate hegemony. There lies the possibility of having a new year, a better year.

The year 2006 may become really new if we would be able to see beyond the line set by global and local lords, breaking down corporate spectacles, and to strengthen struggles at different levels to have a development vision where people, not profit, stand in the centre.

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Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans of the USA showed that taking care of people's lives and security do not primarily depend on resource but on the priority and nature of the State and institutions.

According to the UNDP estimate, only 1 percent of expenditure on armaments is needed to ensure safe water for everybody in the world. What a cruel world we are living, hundred times of the amount necessary to make a world much safer go for destruction. That happens because that is a trillion dollar business, business of arms, business of water. It is not therefore surprising to see increase of people in poverty and deprivation along with

and water, evicted people from land, caused havoc to natural resources, gave birth to 'black' economy and non-stop violence. Security measures offered by the USA, secret agreements with the USA and many multilateral agencies in fact increased insecurity of people and vulnerability of the economy. Killing people in 'crossfire' in 'anti-terrorism' drive continued with terrorism and bomb blast. Religious, racial intolerance increased in every way. While Bush justifies genocide in the name of divine order, establishment of divine law becomes a tool of regimentation in Bangladesh too.

International oil companies in

inability on the one hand, and government's role as nothing more than extension of greedy foreign companies on the other. There are other similar and worse offers in the pipeline, if those can take place, we will find the 2006 much more vulnerable.

The year 2005 ended in Bangladesh with the news of killing of a garment worker by beating by officials from factory management and three poor brown sugar manufacturers by the police. In a country like Bangladesh, premature death and killing of various nature draw little attention, the State or elite civil society give a damn to these insignificant incidences. For them

hundreds of people drown and die in the river (February) and again hundreds of garment workers killed for building collapse (April). Former chief economist of the World Bank and the secretary of US treasury Lawrence Summers once estimated that value of lives of people depends on their earnings. This type of outrageous worldview helps ruling elite and global agencies like the World Bank or IMF to shut eyes to these premature deaths, in fact killing, of the poor.

Bangladesh has now PRSP, so-called poverty reduction strategy paper to attain MDG or millennium development goal. Actually, the PRSP is nothing but

Prospect for fair election in Bangladesh

ANM NURUL HAQUE

A free and fair election is what millions in Bangladesh are now craving for, with the next general election only a year away and with so many instances of rigged election in the recent past. An election which is free and fair provides the voters with the opportunity to choose persons to fill offices in the legislature. There is a broad consensus as to what kind of elections can be considered free and fair. Jeane Kirkpatrick, scholar and former United States ambassador to the United Nations, has offered this definition: "Democratic elections are not merely symbolic. They are competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive elections in which the chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticize government, to publish their criticism, and to present alternatives."

Democracy Watch (International) defines fair elections as: "Elections in which great care is taken to prevent any explicit or hidden structural bias towards any one candidate, aside from those beneficial biases that naturally result from an electorate that is equally well informed about the various assets and liabilities of each candidate." This has been more formally stated by Chief Justice Murray Gleeson of the Australian High Court as follows: "The democratic and lawful means of securing change, if change be necessary, is an expression of the will of an informed electorate."

The crucial factor in conducting a free and fair election in Bangladesh is the credibility of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) who is entrusted with this sacred task. But the CEC's credibility has already been undermined in a series of events. The decision of engaging the Gram Sarkar for preparation of fresh voter list has however, been rescinded under severe public criticism. But reacting to a news item published in the press on the appointment of 150 JCD activists and relatives of the BNP leaders as Upazila Election Officers, the CEC said that the whole process of appointment has been done following the rules and regulations. The moral support of the CEC to such an outrageous partisan move, has contributed to lowering of public confidence in him. The CEC is oath bound to be neutral for holding free and fair election and the EC is one such institution that has the onerous responsibility of conducting a credible election. But gradual politicization of the EC has created suspicion and misgiving in the public minds about its ability to hold free and fair national elections.

Justice MA Aziz, immediately after his taking over as the CEC took a controversial initiative to hold a series of dialogues on the voter list with as many as 99 political parties and alliance. The main opposition Awami League rejected the invitation of the CEC to participate in the dialogue and also questioned the sincerity of the CEC's initiative. But the initiative of the CEC produced no result, leaving serious disagreement between the EC and the political parties over the voter list. Before her departure for Saudi Arabia on January 4, Sheikh

Hasina accused the CEC and his Secretary of hatching a conspiracy to drop Awami League supporters and minority people from the voter list being prepared by the cadres of BNP and Shibir. She alleged that Tk 164 crore would be misappropriated in the name of preparing a fresh voter roll. Awami League leader Abdur

A general election has a greater significance in our parliamentary form of democracy, where political affiliation pervades all spheres of life. In the prevailing political culture, it is next to impossible for somebody to secure any business contract or similar such facilities without being a part of the ruling coterie. The cohesion of easy got

them, 80 are activists of Dhaka University unit of JCD and others are of Chittagong, Rajshahi, Islamic, and Shahjalal University.

The EC has been passing through a virtual deadlock for more than five months due to a war of nerves between the CEC and the two other commissioners on the issue of voter list prepara-

parties. The mainstream opposition parties are now contemplating to boycott the election, as according to them, the government is set to engineer election results.

In fact, the BNP-led ruling alliance and the main opposition Awami League and its allies are poles apart on the issue of

reforming the caretaker government system and electoral laws. Judging the arena of politics in the country since the last general election held in October 2001, I could not but suggest that the government should make enough room for political manoeuvre and not be handicapped in facing the main opposition.

Because the political stalemate that has been prevailing in the country for some years, now may explode into violent collision with the next general election drawing nearer, which will inevitably impact on the democracy. The nation would not like to face another volatile situation similar to the one it faced on February 15, 1996.

ANM Nurul Haque is a banker

Bangladesh, a country already plunged into enormous economic, militancy and political problems, is now likely to face the challenge of holding next parliamentary election, free and fair with participation of all political parties. The mainstream opposition parties are now contemplating to boycott the election, as according to them, the government is set to engineer election results. Judging the arena of politics in the country since the last general election held in October 2001, I could not but suggest that the government should make enough room for political manoeuvre and not be handicapped in facing the main opposition.

Razzak also said on January 5 that neutral election is not possible under this CEC.

The European Union (EU) envoys in Dhaka have already termed the next parliamentary election crucial for Bangladesh's democracy. The government declined to permit the Tuesday Group, a group of foreign diplomats in Bangladesh, to arrange a conference on International Electoral Best Practices, saying that such move would amount to interference in the internal affairs of the country. Disappointed by the government's "no" to their plan for holding an international conference, the Tuesday Group postponed its conference that was scheduled to be held in November. The group comprising the ambassadors and high commissioners stationed in Bangladesh from Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the European Commission, and the resident coordinator of the United Nations, has long been hoping to hold the international conference in Dhaka. But the government said it did not recognize any group called the Tuesday Group and warned the foreign diplomats not to proceed with their plan.

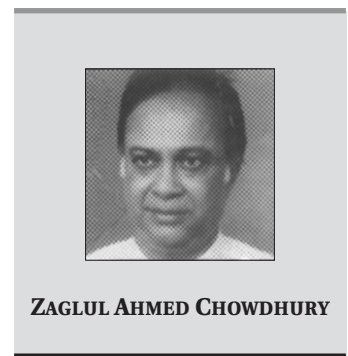
money with political power has contributed to rigging of elections which happened so often in the past. Unfortunately, the rigging of elections in Bangladesh is still pervasive. It is only the indomitable spirit of the people that has prevented the avalanche of rigged elections from engulfing the democracy.

When the major political parties including the ruling BNP and the main opposition Awami League started fuelling their election machineries to become sure to win the next national election scheduled for early 2007, the ill-motivated action of the government appointing 150 JCD activists and relatives of the BNP leaders has created a crisis for holding a free and fair election with participation of all political parties. The Awami League President Sheikh Hasina already said that the BNP-led alliance government has taken all out preparation for election engineering: "The government by appointing the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) leaders and activists as Upazila Election Officers has finalized the blueprint to capture the results of the next general election." The alleged appointment of JCD activists to about 150 posts of Upazila Election Officers (UEOs) out of 300, has raised the question of gross violation of recruitment process in the Public Service Commission (PSC). Of

CEC's unilateral move to prepare a fresh voter list from January 1 has already been met with a High Court order. The High Court bench of the Supreme Court on January 4 ordered the EC to update the existing voter list with necessary additions and omission. The court disposed of two writ petitions challenging the CEC's unilateral decision to prepare a fresh voter list. According to media reports, the EC Secretariat has enthusiastically been continuing their works, ignoring High Court directives to revise the existing roll. Besides, the CEC did not consult the other two election commissioners on the developments following the High Court directives. In fact, the CEC has messed up every thing once again after coming up with a ray of hope following the High Court verdict. The controversial role of the CEC and the obvious absence of openness in the workings of the EC have raised some grave questions in the public mind about its sincerity. The EC holding the constitutional responsibility, has also failed in demonstrating enough guts and respect to democratic norms for holding a free and fair election.

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Bhutan and Maldives moving towards representative rule



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

OF late, there has been a good news from the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, where King Jigme Wangchuk has announced that he would abdicate in favour of his son and, more importantly, will hold elections for parliament in the year 2008. Indeed, this has been a very refreshing message from the small but picturesque country in the last month of the last year. The King has been showing encouraging signs of loosening his absolute control over the governance of the nation for sometime past and now he has come out with a more comprehensive and broader vision of involving people in the running of the country. This is all the more admirable because this has come from his own initiative rather than under pressures he has buckled.

True, people in every nation are likely to see their involvement in the affairs of their country, which is the essence of democratic rule. The people of Bhutan too are understandably keen to watch such a development, but here is a popular monarch who, so far, as such, has not been the subject of ire of his people. The King has already brought some minor reforms and has gone for devolution of power at lower level. Now he has gone for much bigger step in the right direction. If his scheme of things are implemented within the time frame with all seriousness and sincerity, which one can hope will be done, then democratic rule in south Asia will move a step further even though it is unfortunate that in some countries of the region such governance has suffered setbacks.

Developments in line to introduce representative government in another small nation in the south Asian region is also quite positive. This Indian Ocean island state of Maldives is also

coming closer to slowly replacing the one-party governance. President Mamun Abdul Gayoom, who has been at the helm for long, has made it clear that his nation is moving towards democratic reforms. However, he has to succumb to the wishes of the pro-democratic movement in the country demanding functioning of political parties. The parliament has approved existence of political parties for the first time in this Indian Ocean archipelago in a move that would help end long autocratic

returned to the country after self-exile for 18-months, said they would not relent until Maldives introduces multi-party democracy. At least three parties have applied for registration including the MDP and president Gayoom's Maldivian People's Party after the parliament opened ways for multi-party political system.

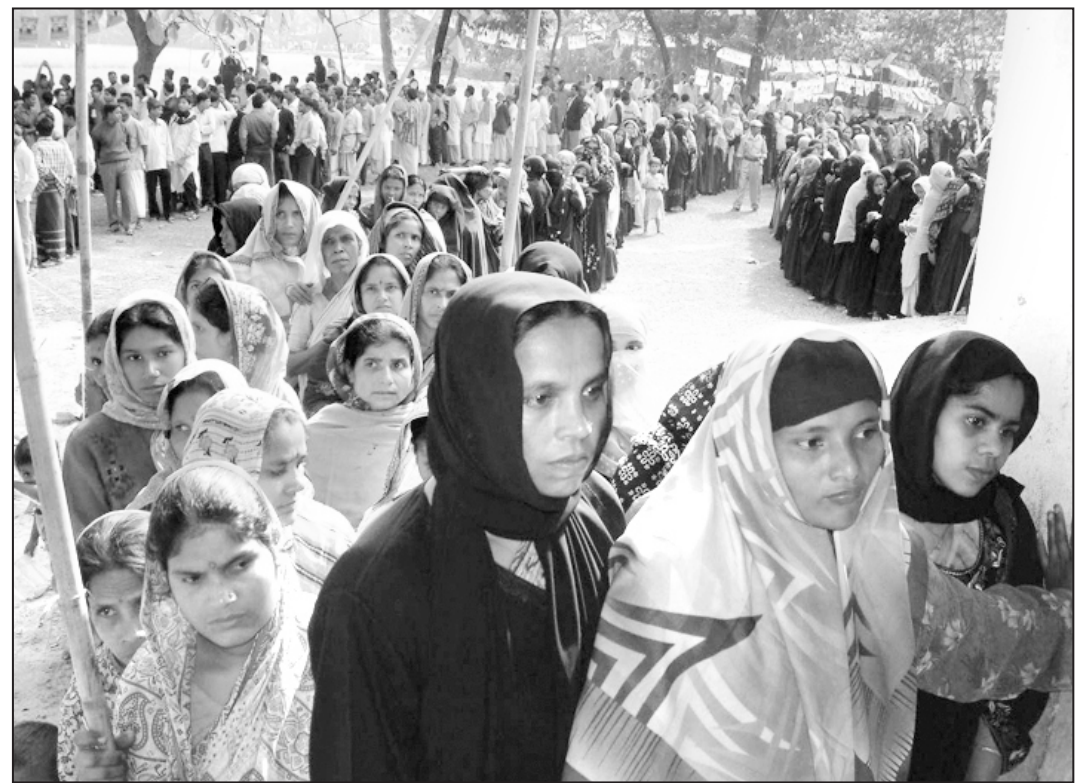
Civil societies in the South Asian region did not turn a blind eye to the developments in one of its smallest nations because the issue

played an active role in the growth and development of the seven-nation South Asian Association (SAARC) which has earned for him admiration in the region. He is the only head of state in the SAARC who has attended all the summits being a founder-leader of the regional forum. The King of Bhutan is the other such leader who is still at the helm since the SAARC was launched in 1985, but he has not taken part in all the SAARC heads of government conferences. While Gayoom is active in the regional and international arena, the Bhutanese King is somewhat reclusive. However, he is generally praised in and outside his country as a pro-people monarch.

South Asia is largely a democratic region as most of the countries here are practicing representative government for a long time. The case of Pakistan is little different since it is yet to witness return of full democracy after an elected government was overthrown by the military in 1999. A kind of democratic rule is there following parliamentary elections and an elected prime minister is the head of government, but the real power is rested with the president, who remains in active service of the army as its head. Pakistan was stripped of its membership of the Commonwealth following the removal of the elected government, but it was restored as the process of return of democracy highlighted by the parliamentary elections was taken into account. This development notwithstanding, the country is yet to revert to full representative authority.

Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka are practicing democracy while Nepal has unfortunately slipped back to effective monarchy when elected prime minister was dismissed last February and the King seized all powers. An unrelenting movement is continuing there for restoration of representative rule as the politicians are keeping the pot boiling. The encouraging signs that are being received from Bhutan and Maldives about democracy are a message to the King of Nepal on the need for restoring democracy without taking much time.

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Exercising adult franchise