

High stake in the electoral process

Why lose the gains of the last three elections?

BAKINGLADESH has recently been host to two important visits -- that of a delegation from the EU and of US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca -- and we are heartened to see that both visitors have spoken more or less in unison and stressed the same points.

Both have made clear the absolute centrality of successful elections for the democratic future of Bangladesh. Hence both have stressed the credibility of the polls -- that they be above suspicion -- and to that end, both have emphasised the necessity for a level playing field and transparency and accountability in the election process.

These points should not be viewed solely as the opinion of foreigners. They echo the national sentiments as expressed by the media, civil society, and citizens' groups.

We can thus see that the outside world seems to be on the same wavelength as the country when it comes to the necessity for elections that are not only fair and legitimate, but accepted by all as such.

So if the outside world understands the need, and inside the country there is a broad consensus on it, why is it that the stake we have in the next general election is apparently being missed out on by the government and the EC given the lack of sensitivity they are showing to the issues involved?

We cannot tell if the government is merely blind to the fact that it too is a stakeholder in the process and that more than anyone it would benefit from legitimate elections, or if it has no interest in ensuring that the upcoming elections are seen to be credible.

Let us add here that we urge the opposition to reinforce its demands regarding acceptable elections by returning to parliament and pressing the demand there. This will benefit the cause immensely.

The sad thing is it seems that the relevant institutions are ill-prepared for the upcoming elections. The shenanigans at the EC so far have not filled anyone with confidence as to the process. Quite the opposite, in fact.

What is truly regrettable here is that the EC, which has held three good elections in the past, now seems to be going backwards. This regressive journey, in which the gains of the last 15 years are being reversed, is extremely worrisome.

Fuel crisis artificial

Minister's comment triggered it

THE government has not yet announced a fuel price increase, yet its price has already shot up in the northern region. The point to be noted here is that Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman observed in advance that a fuel price hike couldn't be averted and so had the Governor of the Bangladesh Bank hinted at it.

Whatever the compulsions and reasons, it lacked economic sense that none other than the Finance Minister himself would have spoken of a price hike before it actually came into effect. It appears that the announcement sparked off speculations and stockpiling of the highly sensitive commodity resulting in an artificial fuel crisis in certain parts of the country. Reports suggest that the northern region has run out of fuel reserve, a clear sign of hoarding by sellers.

Now, this is an issue that has a huge impact on the lives of people and can unsettle vital sectors like power generation, agriculture, industries and, of course, communications. But the Finance Minister has seen through a number of fuel price hikes in recent times, and he is in the best position to have handled the matter judiciously without affecting market behaviour.

The rationale behind making the announcement is really obscure. There is no reason why he could not have gauged the possible implications of it, particularly when the market is susceptible to manipulation and exploitation. A section of traders and businessmen actually pounce on any opportunity to make undue profits. Obviously, the report that six fuel carrying vessels were stuck at a place in Beraupazila does indicate that things were also going wrong as far as transportation of fuel was concerned. That's why the need was even greater for exercising discretion. There was every reason not to allow the market to turn volatile?

Why do politicians lie?

NO NONSENSE

Politicians lie because they often get away with lying. They have to lie because they have to raise funds to get elected. They lie because the public does not want to hear the truth about the economy, job prospects, budget deficits, energy prices, and so on. There is evidence to indicate that good liars win elections while their truth telling rivals mostly lose. Whether it is the instinct to reconcile the conflicts between expectations and reality or to justify the indefensible, all politicians in every country resort to deceptive statements -- it's the nature of their work.



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWANI

SINCE a politician never believes what he says," Charles de Gaulle once remarked, "he is quite surprised to be taken at his word." Although we expect politicians to lie, we still hold them accountable for the terminological inexactitudes, as Churchill called them, which are discovered.

Just the other day after a meeting with the defunct Bangladesh Muslim League, PM Khaleda Zia proclaimed whatever development took place since independence was the work of BNP as if to suggest obliquely that "My husband and I did it all" and thus invoked the familiar question: "Why do politicians overplay

accomplishments?"

When it comes to their leaders, the western columnists pose the question more bluntly: "Why do politicians lie?"

While inaugurating a meeting of Jubo Dal on January 18, BNP Secretary General AM Bhuiyan made the following allegations, among others (my responses in parenthesis):

- The main objective of AL is to foil the elections, therefore, they are making various excuses. (Untrue)
- On reforms of the Election Commission (EC), the opposition does not know what they want. (Untrue)
- Price hike of essentials is always a temporary phenomenon. The price depends on many factors for which the government does not have much to do. (Partly true)
- If Zillur or Tofael were made the chief of the caretaker government, the opposition would still not accept it. (True, because AL wants reforms)
- AL wants reforms in the EC, but they do not want to sit for any discussion. (Untrue)

The next day Bhuiyan extended an olive branch to discuss the voter list issue inside or outside the

parliament. Being afraid that AL might actually take the bait, he wasted no time to reiterate his allegation that AL wants to foil the elections since it has no chance of victory. On January 22, Khaleda virtually echoed the same barrage of misinformation as if Bhuiyan handed over his script which she simply read with more snappish tones.

All these comments are clearly defensive, notoriously deceptive, and deliberately distorting. However, two ministers, Nizami and Moudud often talk more rubbish, possibly because of who they are and where they come from. Nizami (and also the PM on January 22) implicated the AL as being linked with terrorism since AL suggested that terrorism will recede if the government resigns, Jamaat is ousted, and reforms in election commission, and car taker government are made. Moudud commented that AL's rejection of the dialogue deepened the public suspicion over the party's hand in the recent string of bombings.

I read newspaper stories that Nizami lives on his salary supplemented by his wife's school teaching paycheck. He misuses official

vehicles much less than all of his counterparts. But the question is, who funds his election expenses? To me, Nizami's activities are hypocritical, who pretends honesty on trivial matters but serves and parties with colleagues who are openly disrespectful to Islamic values and thoroughly dishonest. Most of all, they all resort to deception, including Nizami, who at every opportunity implicates AL and the print media with falsehoods.

After any political party or organization met the PM for terrorism dialogue, the same outcome emerged every time. She would let loose her anger and frustrations to falsely implicate the opposition for inciting extremist violence simply because AL would not fall prey to her traps. Much to the ridicule of most citizens, she forbade all dialogue participants from condemning Jamaat and its leader Nizami. She scared off the BNP faction who criticized the Jamaat by sacrificing an elected MP from the party.

In a democracy, it is an irreparable disservice to the voters when the government functionaries and opposition politicians resort to deceptive statements. The situation gets worse when the state uses TV and other media to sway public opinion by spreading misinformation. That is why in the western democracies there are no state run broadcast or print media for spreading ruling party propaganda. During my last month's trip to Bangladesh I noticed that one BNP functionary gets more BTV coverage than all the opposition leaders combined just because that office bearer is the PM's son. This is an unashamedly naked misuse of public property by the ruling party.

Most people I talked to realize that BTV is Khaleda's propaganda machinery as it was for Hasina during the last government.

People in Dhaka city have become so used to numerous arduous distractions that they have become hapless and docile. For example, most people find the government and opposition parties insensitive to their discomforts and inconveniences. People are crying out to ask when the primitive tactics of hartals, lock-outs, and street agitations to score political gains would end. Most people would love to see:

- BTV privatized or shut down or renamed PTV (propaganda TV) to truly reflect its current role. Better yet, name it KTV or HTV depending on whether Khaleda or Hasina is in power.
- All government-run radio stations in the country shut down or sold to private ownership. Providing unbiased news and views is a prerequisite to a well functioning democracy.
- Political gatherings in Paltan Maidan legally banned. Such gatherings cause endless hardships for businesses, urban and city dwellers, traffic; city roads and footpaths become spattered with filth and repulsive.
- All Bangladesh dailies should start running a column to be captioned "Lying Caught on Tape." This will act as a great deterrent against distortions of facts.

Politicians lie because they often get away with lying. They have to lie because they have to raise funds to get elected. They lie because the public does not want to hear the truth about the econ-

omy, job prospects, budget deficits, energy prices, and so on. There is evidence to indicate that good liars win elections while their truth telling rivals mostly lose. Whether it is the instinct to reconcile the conflicts between expectations and reality or to justify the indefensible, all politicians in every country resort to deceptive statements -- it's the nature of their work.

This demeanour becomes a way of politicking in the absence of transparency and media access to vital information.

There is even scientific evidence correlating deceptive behaviour with leadership qualities. A 1993 study by Colgate University psychologists Caroline Keating found that the best liars among pre-school children emerge as leaders during play periods. With adults she found that "leaders are the best misleaders." A succession of philosophers, from Plato to Machiavelli to Disraeli, has observed that lying is a legitimate element of governing. Sissela Bok, a Harvard philosopher who has written extensively on the subject, said that politicians often claim an ethical basis for deliberately misleading the public.

Now some tips: when politicians start talking and utter the following phrases: "to tell you the truth" or "honestly speaking" or "as a matter of fact" or "as a matter of principle" and so on, journalists must start zooming in their video cameras to record the lies that are sure to follow.

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Can we say no to Uncle Sam?

PLAIN WORDS

What Pakistan gets by becoming an ally or more accurately remaining America's satellite, is some crumbs from the American table. This gain on the swings will scarcely compensate for the losses on the roundabouts in Pakistani cities. That will be a horrible political cost. In the ultimate analysis, that role will make more difficult for Pakistan to become democratic, peaceful, and united. It is important that we find ways of saying "no" -- as courteously and respectfully as anyone may like -- but still "no."



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PAKISTAN Prime Minister is in Washington and met with the American President last week. What exactly transpired in the meeting we may never know. But the fact is that both sides are in the process of reviewing and enlarging their mutual relations against the backdrop of news items purporting to show Pakistan being assigned greater responsibilities in Afghanistan from April onward.

This would be a repeat of the 1970s when American CIA and the Pakistani officials colluded for action in Afghanistan that finally resulted in Russian invasion of that country in December 1979 after which Pakistan played a supposedly heroic role in defeating the Soviets. All Pakistanis know what the outcome of that war was. True, there are many generals in

Pakistan who take pride in having done what they did in the 1980s, despite the fallout of the Afghan events on Pakistan society, politics, and economy.

We are again in the same alley, talking things over with Uncle Sam that, apart from policing Afghanistan and safeguarding the interests of America and its friends, may include Pakistan doing this or that vis-a-vis any possible American or Israeli action against Iran. The Iranian stances are likely to come up in more than one context, not excluding the question of gas pipeline from that country to India via Pakistan and Iran's alleged nuclear transgressions being referred to the UN Security Council.

Insofar as the Pakistan administration is concerned, what it is interested in is market access in America to start with. Pakistan wants more opportunities for trading with the US on an equal, if not preferential, footing. It certainly wants more FDI and other investments from American corporations as well as Pakistani expatriates. Then, Mr. Shaukat Aziz would also discuss the recent Damadola incident in which at least 13 Pakistani men, women and children were killed. Some remonstrations by him would be

in order that by doing such things the US gravely embarrasses General Musharraf's administration. And such actions ultimately promote terrorism and do not eliminate it.

Probably he must also have repeated the demand of being treated on an equal footing with India in the matter of civilian nuclear reactors; Pakistan surely wants to import some nuclear reactors too as its recently announced ambitious programme requires. Actually Islamabad dislikes being excluded from the kind of nuclear cooperation that US envisages with India under last July's Indo-American agreement but knows that here the US cannot possibly oblige. It may also have made the age-old demand for more military equipment, including F-16s. However, the political content of the bilateral talks, whether or not that finds mention in the joint statement, is centred on political matters like American plans for India, Iran, and of course, Afghanistan.

What has not been announced by either Washington or Islamabad is the precise subjects of discussion in Washington by the PM, or for that matter what Nicholas Burns will negotiate in Islamabad. One has already mentioned the subject of the growth of cooperation over

Afghanistan. American behaviour in Damadola bombing should also be mentioned. But the indications are that the Americans must have repeated what they have been saying in public: "Pakistan has to realize that America is at war and that its generals and policy makers cannot be dissuaded from continuing the hot pursuit of their enemy. If that happens to be in Pakistan territory it can't be helped."

Doubtless, Pakistanis would anyhow like to explore the limits, if any, of the Indo-American cooperation, especially in the field of atomic reactors and other related matters. One cannot ignore the permanent Pakistani wish that was sure to have found expression regarding ever more economic and military aid and some forcing of India to negotiate over Kashmir.

The basic fact must be remembered: The Americans are not the most popular foreigners in Pakistan. There has been a grudging acceptance in Pakistan that, after 9/11, a U turn in Pakistan's policies vis-a-vis Afghanistan was unavoidable. But that has created much bitterness and a sort of impotent rage against Uncle Sam. But that finds no clear expression in Pakistani state actions. Nobody has demanded a review of Pakistan's American policy. But, also, only a few are prepared to concede that the original policy of colluding with the Americans over Afghanistan or promoting Taliban was wrong. Some do argue that if it was not wrong in the 1970s and 1980s how can it be wrong today?

And yet there are far too many inconsistent anti-Americans here, led by yester year's collaborators, the Islamic (extremist) parties, though most liberals also rail against American imperialism. Let's keep in view what the US is

asking now. One has already mentioned the US desire to have its Afghan burdens lightened by Pakistani soldiers on a perhaps longer-term basis so that the GIS, now grounded in Afghanistan, can be freed for action elsewhere. One has also mentioned the possibilities of American and Israeli military action against Iran. It is impossible that Pakistan should not be asked to do this or that in this context. The Americans would perhaps in time agree with Pakistan on the question of civilian nuclear reactors; the US has too many obsolescent reactors. It can do good business selling them to Pakistan and obliging it. But what would Pakistan be asked to do as political quid pro quo for this generosity should also be examined.

Pakistan must also have asked for US help to not only continue the Composite Dialogue with India but to make it more meaningful. That must have been music to American ears. The point is there is little chance of a deal with America on overall military cooperation; it goes against the grain of Indo-American honeymoon. The same and longer-term interest of Pakistan demands that it does not entangle itself in Afghanistan further. Nor do anything to alienate Iran or the Shanghai Six. In short, can Pakistanis say no to American wishes?

One recognizes the difficulties involved; most Pakistani political class, including the generals and bureaucrats, cannot conceive of life without American aid and some support. American aid and support includes some handouts and aid from its friends as well as IFIs like World Bank, IMF and their subsidiaries. Government believes Pakistan cannot do without these crutches.

But the case for saying "no" is unassailable if Pakistan wants to have a respectable, indeed any independent, future. Despite Iraq and Afghanistan setbacks, the US remains embarked on an imperial course that can only benefit America while forcing Pakistan to accept the role of a bag carrier. Many so-called realists persuasively argue that the US is no longer able to carry through the full programme that was involved in the neo-con ideas embodied in US official documents like Annual Strategy Papers or the Project for New American Century. One argues that there is bipartisan agreement over broad strategic objectives that the US would follow. There are scarcely any coherent alternative strategic purposes being articulated by George Bush's challengers. Willy nilly the next US President will remain committed to the same broad goals, only slightly amended and, of course, much rewarded. The US wants only to benefit some more by preserving the bipolar world and all that it involves.

What Pakistan gets by becoming an ally or more accurately remaining America's satellite, is some crumbs from the American table. This gain on the swings will scarcely compensate for the losses on the roundabouts in Pakistani cities. That will be a horrible political cost. In the ultimate analysis, that role will make more difficult for Pakistan to become democratic, peaceful, and united. It is important that we find ways of saying "no" -- as courteously and respectfully as anyone may like -- but still "no."

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

IMF and revenue administration

Since the liberation of Bangladesh, the role of the IMF in our development efforts cannot be ignored. Recently, the IMF has undertaken proper measures for Reforms In Revenue Administration (RIRA) in Bangladesh. But it is a matter of great regret that the government officials are not cooperating with the IMF in this respect. This stands as a great hindrance to bumper collection of revenue of the state and goes against the interests of both the IMF and the Republic.

As the situation is not conducive for bumper collection and the budget has been enhanced, it would be wise for the government to hand over the Dhaka Taxes Zone-2 to the IMF to convert it into a fully-fledged project of it, defying the exclusive interests of the civil servants. It is certain that the pro-

ject of the IMF would be able to exceed the target within the remaining 5 (five) months of the current fiscal year. Sarkar MA Quader Kakrail, Dhaka

A good example

Your reporter's news item and photograph (Jan 25) are something unique and wonderful as examples of managing and motivating people by any industrial enterprise. Hats off to Youngone Group the largest foreign investor in CEPZ for their humane services. I wonder if any organisation in Bangladesh and that includes foreign companies and multinationals do even ten percent of what Youngone Group is doing for its employees! It is indeed a new dimension of "humanitarian facilities", that one can only dream of. Its motivation at its best! I hope that this example even in

a modest scale is followed by our large local corporate employers. This wonderful example set by Youngone Group should be taken up by our audio visual and print media to spread the good words and deeds all over the country. S.A. Mansoor Gulshan, Dhaka

Voter list

I fully agree with M. Shiblee of Mohammadpur (letter published in your column on 26th January, 06). In fact, I don't understand why the AL has made it an issue. What's the problem in having a new voter list? In the last four years so many changes have taken place on earth. I think it should be a routine practice for all democratic countries to have a new voter list before any election is held. Why is the AL so bent upon

against a new voter list? Does not it arouse the suspicion 'Dal mey kuch kala tha'? After all, the previous list was prepared during their regime. N.Z. Khan Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Stampede tragedy at Mecca

My heart ached at what happened at Mina and I offer my heart-felt sympathy to those bereaved families who have lost their near and dear ones. I do however feel offended by the manner in which the government of Saudi Arabia has washed their hands off and has tried to put the entire blame on the hapless pilgrims. My personal experiences have shown that the security arrangement as provided by the Saudi authorities is not adequate enough

to provide any succour or protection at the time of the need of the pilgrims.

Incidentally, persons to whom any language other than Arabic is Greek man the entire security. I am therefore inclined to suggest that the members of the security team take an elementary course on English, an international language so that they can communicate with the pilgrims in a polished manner, without being unnecessarily rude to them, as and when they are approached for any kind of help or assistance.

As for the comments on the issue asked for by the Probashi Bangladeshi in his letter to you, I would like to suggest the holding of a countrywide, if not worldwide, convention of Islamic scholars to examine if the practice of stoning Satan can be dropped from the list of rituals, to be strictly observed for

performing Hajj. Rezaul Karim Dhaka

Bangla Bhai

It has been a good eye opener for me after reading two very appropriate letters published in DS regarding calling someone "Bangla Bhai." I am quite sure no one in Bangladesh would accept the so called "Bangla Bhai" as his or her brother. Therefore, I would urge upon the media to use his family name which will gradually demonise him politically and people will know him by his real name and not by political name. A Probashi Bangladeshi On-e-mail

Election Commission

Whatever activities regarding elections take place in the EC that

should not only be fair but also transparent so that people can be sure that the Commission is discharging its duties with total objectivity. The EC is not an organisation meant for carrying out secret government functions. Its only function is to hold elections in a fair and credible manner. So that nobody can accuse it of partisanship or malpractice.

But unfortunately, what do we see in the recent activities of the Commission as reported in the media is nothing short of farce. Since the Commission is still under the administrative control of the Prime Minister's Office, the latter cannot evade its responsibility in this regard.

We fail to understand why the government is playing the role of a silent spectator so far. The more secretive the Commission becomes the more

suspicious the people will grow about its real intentions! Abul Mohsin Siddheswari Circular Road, Dhaka

Weekly holiday

Once again I fully endorse the letter (January 28, 2006) of A Husain from Dhaka regarding one and a half days weekly holiday for Bangladesh. I wish the BNP led government has the guts to act before it is too late. The govt. Should not be afraid because the change they will do is for the betterment of the country as a whole. I understand the problem the govt. is facing is because Gen. Ershad is out on the streets begging for votes and Friday was declared weekly holiday during his regime of nine years. Taher, J. Sharjah U.A.E.