

# Civil society's concern for credible election

## Proposition and reality



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ONE piece of heartening news in an otherwise bleak atmosphere enveloping the Bangladesh polity is the reported civil society initiatives to ensure a fair, credible and clean election for the country, with particular reference to the nationwide general election slated in early 2007. Behind such well-intentioned move lies an admission that we have not been successful in entrusting this responsibility to the politicians. However, that really does not come as a surprise because already in the preceding decade this nation has made constitutional arrangements for appointing a non-partisan caretaker government to oversee the affairs relating to the conduct of general election, as against the same being done by a skeleton political government as is the practice in democracies including our immediate neighbourhood.

The question that should bother us is that after taking away the functions of overseeing the general election from the politicians through constitutional amendments why the civil society has to assume core political and electoral responsibilities like campaigning and assisting to choose honest and upright candidates? What can really be achieved by this extended mistrust?

### The pre-eminence of citizens

Many in Bangladesh are of the considered view that the time has come when citizens must wrest the initiative from professional politicians and from political parties and insist upon men and women of knowledge, vision and character being chosen as candidates for parliamentary election. It is believed that by voting ignorant professional politicians to power, we have kept a singularly gifted and enterprising nation in the ranks of the poorest on earth. We have unfortunately reached this stage

because our politicians have a vested interest in illiteracy. Their survival as public figures depends upon the continuation of the forces of ignorance. It appears cynical that for hefty politicians, goodly in girth, poverty is good business. They talk continually about poverty without having the will, the expertise or the imagination to eradicate it. The noble processes of our constitution have been trivialised by the power-holders, the power-seekers and the power-brokers in our capital city. Elections have been reduced to a

### for honest election

The political party system in a democracy takes grievous toll of a member's independence, individual judgment and freedom of action. But the system does bring about coherence and unity of purpose in the actual working of democracy. One may, however, say that the duty of the citizen is not merely to vote but to vote wisely. He must be guided by reason alone and irrespective of the party label. The right man in the wrong party shall be preferable to the wrong

and competent candidate remain competent? So what is the objective of the apparently unilateral and isolated movement to field competent candidates without clear stance on the systemic deficiencies and hindrances?

There is, however, no denying that elections held under the existing politico-administrative realities will be fraught with grave dangers and that a change entailing a clean election process is necessary to wriggle out of the

regard to preparation of voters list, the manning of election commission, the de-politicisation of civil bureaucracy, stoppage of partisan recruitments and promotion/postings in our concerted efforts to create the right election atmosphere. If situation remains unaltered then competent candidates can still be fielded as proposed but the victors at the polls would be the mafias and the godfathers. In such an eventuality, it would only be proper for the civil society to help facilitate the creation of an honest election environment prior to fielding competent candidates.

If we want to take a long hard look beyond the immediate problems besetting the polity then we must appreciate that a meaningful democracy -- the objective of honest election -- is almost impossible if politicians can continue to have a vested interest in illiteracy and public ignorance. When a republic comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions and later it is the institutions which produce the leaders. Hope lies in education by which right conduct, fear of God and love will be developed among the citizens from the childhood.

There is no doubt that our history will apportion the blame and responsibility among a wide spectrum of the elected representatives who have betrayed their trust. However, at this moment when we are standing on the escalator of mismanagement and corruption, right-minded citizens cannot afford to stand frozen in disgust and dismay. We cannot merely look upon the political development in sorrow and upon our politicians in anger. Honest and knowledgeable persons must devote themselves to the task of educating public opinion and the younger among them should stand for election in large numbers. Somerset Maugham said "It is a funny thing about life that if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you often get it". This is equally true of democracy. If people refuse to accept any but the best citizens as candidates, it would usher in the golden age of our republic. Democracy gives, as life gives what we ask of it.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a Former Secretary and IGP

### STRAIGHT LINE

Somerset Maugham said "It is a funny thing about life that if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you often get it". This is equally true of democracy. If people refuse to accept any but the best citizens as candidates, it would usher in the golden age of our republic. Democracy gives, as life gives what we ask of it.

horse race by the contesting politicians. Indeed our country has been reduced to a cesspool of degradation by professional politicians.

The apathy of citizens is dangerous in a democracy because a bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. Therefore, to ensure cleaner politics and bright economic future, our citizens have to be willing to give of themselves. For that to happen, there has to be a deep-felt need for an intelligent and adequate organisation of voters. So, the civil society's thoughts on some outfit like a citizen's council in every constituency, consisting of impartial, non-party individuals who would appraise the candidates and recommend the right candidates to the voters and after the elections ensure that the candidate does not disgrace himself and his constituents, appear conceptually salutary. The voter's consciousness to be roused to unmistakably insist upon the right type of candidates, instead of allowing the political parties to palm off ignorant on them is the crucial factor. If this succeeds partially, then our young republic would have a new lease of life because well-equipped minds with the ability to have a bright career outside politics may then take to public life as a matter of national service.

### The party system, institutions and the quest

man in the right party, according to this thinking.

Is our civil society trying to initiate a non-party organisation which will restore the sense of values and the love of basic human freedoms which inspired the framing of our lofty constitution? There is perhaps a feeling that the voice of a small minority is presently mistaken to be the voice of majority, simply because it is loud and vociferous while the gentle voice of reason is not heard. The apprehension is that as long as thinking men and women will not take the trouble to give public expression to their views, the nation should be ungrudgingly ready to live at the mercy of brats and fools.

The question is, how do we clean the political environment and educate our masters, that is, the people who are the deciding factor in a democracy based on adult suffrage? Our civil society, presumably, aims at disseminating correct facts and right ideas among the public at large. This is essential because the accumulated dirt of our politics and election process cannot be wiped out in one single stroke. The reality is that the politicians themselves have allowed corruption to flourish and encouraged the use and misuse of civil and military administration for serving individual and party interests. There is, therefore, no guarantee that we will succeed to achieve a desirable government by first fielding fit candidates without first cleaning the system including the election process. More specifically, within the present dispensation, how will the honest

quagmire and in this background there is a need for competent candidates. But the big question is that electioneering is a constitutional and political process. Would it be possible to venture out of this process altogether and still retain the hope to clean it? Stated otherwise, would it be feasible and practical?

The civil society would perhaps have done well to dwell on those immediately imperative corrective measures regarding the election process and how much is achievable before the next general election. They could have done some self-criticism and soul-searching by pointed mention of the silence, inactivity and evasive postures of the intelligentsia in so far as it relates to the remedial steps for cleaning the process of electioneering. Extra cautiousness and silence coupled with fence-sitting by thinking persons have pampered politicians and emboldened them to be indecently indiscreet. We may do well to remember that state institutions were used by men in uniform to create political party and shadowing political opposition. Politics and politicians were vilified by state propaganda. There was a time when intellectuals leading the civil society did not protest the adulteration and the decay of institutions in the desired manner. In fact, the present situation is a legacy of the abnormalities and incongruities witnessed on the political scene in late 70s and 80s.

We need to emphasise on the corrective actions to be taken with

### A TRIBUTE

# Khondker Abdus Sami

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

**K**HONDKER Abdus Sami, Joint Secretary, Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance was popularly known as Sami in his circle of friends, colleagues, and well-wishers. At a time when bureaucracy is sliding into decay, inefficiency, corruption, and politicisation -- Sami was among the few civil servants who stand out for their professionalism and integrity, efficiency and commitment. Hence, when on March 26, 2006 Sami passed away so unexpectedly and pre-maturely, most of us have been at a loss as to how to come into terms with such an unforeseen tragedy. It is impossible to believe that the smiling face and courteous demeanor that became an integral part of our lives is no longer there anymore.

I came to know Sami in the last three years in course of work on policy reform and corporatisation in the power sector. Sami was then working as a Deputy Secretary in the Power Division, Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources. He impressed me in the very first encounter through his intelligence, spontaneity, charisma, and a deep commitment to the country he chose to serve through the civil service. A person of courage and conviction, he never hesitated to speak out what he considered to be right and fair even if at times went against the superiors he had been working under. Whenever I felt I need someone to rely on to take a stand against all the odds, particularly when questions of principles had been involved -- I knew that Sami would always be a safe bet. It was such a refreshing change in the midst of a culture where sycophancy and political allegiance have become the overriding factor for most of the bureaucrats aspiring to move up the ladder.

In 2004, Sami was selected by

the USAID for a training programme and workshop in Washington and I still recall his enthusiasm in making the most out of this opportunity. He kept on asking me for relevant papers and information so that he can effectively prepare himself for the programme. Again, it is a pleasure to come across bureaucrats who are determined to explore such opportunities to the advantage of their professional development and growth as opposed to just another foreign trip for travel, tour, and shopping. While in US, he went beyond the training programme and met different stakeholders in

prevalent political culture discourages them to be civil to the people who they are supposed to serve and encourages them only to be unquestioned servants of their political bosses. The system adequately rewards the compliants with rapid promotions, continued extensions, and in most of the cases resulting in overachievements for the underperformers. It is indeed an exception that during these difficult times, Sami meant what he said and he said what he meant and that is what made even his adversaries (not uncommon for such a person to have in our society) respect him even though they may not have liked or agreed to what Sami had to say.

It is so disheartening to see such a promising bureaucrat fade away at a time when he had just started to ascend to the full power of bureaucracy. Those of us who know Sami, have no doubt that he would have done full justice to whatever power and authority would have been bestowed on him and he would have served the country with the same commitment and integrity as he had done always. When he was posted in ERD, many of us used to say that one day he would make a perfect ERD Secretary as he had all it takes -- competency, smartness, intelligence, communication skills, and most importantly the ability and willingness to take a stand for the country, no matter how big and powerful the donor community is.

Sami shall continue to live in our memory through the positive impact he made and everlasting impression he created through his acts and deeds. Although his work remains unfinished in this world, May Almighty grant him eternal peace in the endless journey that he has embarked upon so silently and unexpectedly.

Syed Munir Khasru is a Faculty at the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka.



the power industry of US to encourage them to take a more active interest in the power sector of Bangladesh. On return home, I could see his excitement in sharing all the value added work he did for the country which was not part of the programme he went for. There is where Sami made the difference -- doing without being asked and doing without any personal motive and doing only for serving the country's interest.

We live in times, where saying one thing and meaning the opposite has become more of a norm than exception. Particularly in modern day bureaucracy, two plus two is longer four but what the boss wants to hear. We can't fully blame the bureaucrats either as the

# Bangladesh-India relations enters constructive phase



MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

**G**E O - P O L I T I C A L compulsion dictates that laying foundation of friendly relations with neighboring countries in the first place should be the cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Therefore, it should logically be dictated to focus primarily on its giant and closest neighbour India, surrounding from three sides. Bangladesh and India share 4,000 kilometers of border and 54 rivers as well. India, with roughly eight times its population and more than twelve times its GDP should be the major attention of Bangladesh.

Mistrust and suspicion between Bangladesh and India have constantly been hampering the process of developing friendly relations. Disputes over sharing of waters from the Ganges and other common rivers, demarcation of land and maritime boundaries, exchange of enclaves coupled with accusation and counter accusation of harbouring insurgents have persistently been the major conflicts. India has been constructing barbed wire fences along the border to stop illegal immigration from Bangladesh and cross border smuggling as well. Bangladesh considers this as an unfriendly act.

The coalition government of Bangladesh in fact so far ignored the perception of building up friendly relations with its closest neighbour, India, which is now considered an emerging global power.

Having become the Prime Minister following the general elections in 2001, Khaleda Zia has opted to visit China with whom

India did not have best of relations. That visit was not well received in New Delhi. Of course, the relations between India and China have considerably been improved since then. The visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister to China at that time was seen from New Delhi as an insult, which might have caused an irritation in bilateral relations.

Last year Prime Minister decided to pay a visit to Pakistan, which is an arch rival of India. Bangladesh's support for withdrawal of ban on Pakistan by the Commonwealth went against the stand of India. One can think about the implication of such visit to the countries inimical to India's interest. This is not to suggest that she should not visit China or Pakistan. It is equally important to have a balance of relations being a small country with per capita income lowest in the region.

Needless to say basic determinants should be identified for the formulation of foreign policy and of course, national interests should take precedence over other determinants.

During the visit two agreements, such as revised trade agreement, which stipulates that both countries would make mutually beneficial arrangements for the use of waterways, roadways and railways for the passage of goods, and joint efforts to check the trafficking of narcotic drug and psychotropic substance were signed. Bangladesh government gave concession to Indian side by allowing Bangladesh territory for transportation of Indian goods to India's North-Eastern states.

Under the agreed arrangement, Bangladesh trucks or boats would transport Indian goods from one to another border point. There is another area where Bangladesh can take pride of as India has assured of increasing investment in Bangladesh to narrow the widening gap in bilateral trade, which is heavily in favour of India. Another positive development is operational train link between Joydebpur in Bangladesh and Sealdah in West Bengal, which would provide people to people contact between the two countries.

These arrangements along with combined operation to face terrorism would facilitate improving bilateral relations. Having said that the relations would improve, but given the time frame it is really hard to implement the decisions. The coalition government in Bangladesh could have achieved more success had the administration initiated such action with India on assumption of power in 2001.

The Prime Minister's first visit in five years is seen from upcoming elections perspective in Bangladesh, which will be held in January, 2007. Only seven months are left to the formation of caretaker government. In seven months time no tangible results could be expected from the agreement. From publicity point of view, such visit could provide dividend in the coming elections. However, a base for improving relations has been laid out which the future government could work on for further strengthening.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat resides in Virginia.

# The squeezeing middle class cry for relief



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

**T**HE economy of the country is in a state of recession. In consequence of the closure of a number of industries like jute mills, textile mills, steel mills, sugar mills and other factories producing essential items, joblessness has surged up. An ominous addition is that hard hit by the structural reforms undertaken in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and other Middle East countries thousands of workers are returning back. This also indicates hard time for a good number of families who were enjoying prosperity and comfort on the remittances from these earning members. Other than the garments factories that employ about 30 lakh youth, both male and female with the females outnumbering the male workers, the employment situation in the country is hardly anything assuring. There is no mistaking the fact that buildings and other superstructures that are sprawling in the cities and big towns and even in the remotest villages do not actually show the economic boom oft preached. Evidently a stray picture of general prosperity is not bringing as much of the good life as the rosy numbers indicate. Although the wealthy are doing somewhat better, but most middle class Bangladeshis feel squeezed.

In the face of such a grim picture of the economy, when our home currency depreciates against dollar every day, our Finance Minister while in Delhi with the PM during her three day-visit to the Indian capital, told a media person that the economic situation in Bangladesh was much better in certain respects than in India and that it was better managed. No doubt, our embattled finance Minister is thinking bold and people in the country wish that our Finance Minister's claim were true! For an economy to be better managed presupposes the fact that the country is going up the ladder of growth.

But the irony is that during the four years the alliance has been in power, the GDP growth has marked an average 5.3 percent. Hard hit by power shortages industries and business houses, big or small, remain inoperative during the vital hours of the day. Irrigation fields in this Boro season totally dependent on power driven deep or shallow tube wells have been running dry. The dual crisis of fertiliser and irrigation facilities have brought the farmers on the rampage in all parts of the country. The Boro crop which is critically fertilizer-dependent now faces the prospect of withering away due to

Government policies toward poverty alleviation are sometimes good on paper but its implementation remains highly flawed. Economic boom or the spate of development, if there has been any, as the ruling alliance leaders have been preaching these days, has not distributed its benefits evenly. In the past decade, as we see, the rich have gotten richer, the poor have gotten poorer and those in the middle have gotten squeezed. This is a very sorry state and an unmistakable signal that the nation is plunging into disenchantment, disillusionment, chaos and disorder paving the path for rather an anarchic

section of fortune seekers masquerading as either party adherents or politicians or bureaucrats has brought the country to the brink of disaster and consequently the fortunes of different groups diverged not in the favourable directions and that divergence still continues.

Undeniably true, with most of its members falling prey to poverty, the middle class is getting extinct. For many families it takes two jobs to get by. What is most alarming, the schooling for the children puts the middle class to an ever increasing strain almost unheard of in those good old

advanced countries by levying proportionate taxes on the richer section.

Most worrisome, the trend toward inequality is rife with the potential for social conflict not just between classes but within the middle class itself. The differing prospects for its university educated members and those who go no further than high school is one potential source of antagonism. Another is the growing cleavage between young and old -- while younger couples wonder if they can ever buy a house, some people of their parents' generation are sighted as virtually sitting on a gold mine. Many of them bought a 10-katha piece of land, now under the metropolis, with just Tk 80,000.00 thirty years ago which is now worth several hundred times of that. No wonder this growing inequality could even threaten those who benefit from it, by putting an end to the economic expansion that the nation envisions so much.

This signals a great depression that the nation can't head off even with the best of rhetoric, astute and pragmatic planning done within the four walls of the cozy govt. buildings. Think of the inequality of rent for a house built in the Uttara residential area and the other built in either Baridhara or Gulshan area of the Dhaka metropolis with almost the same amenities and almost the same expenses. Economists must say how this growing inequality can be addressed. The danger is that growing disparities in wealth and living standards will undermine the sense of community and optimism that have kept the country from being riven by class resentments.

The saddest part of the truth is that life is simply getting harder for middle class citizenry now. Not that this middle class ever lived very well but most could afford the basics. Today the soaring prices and the diminishing value of currency have eroded even the minimum standard of life. Without a shadow of doubt, the middle class spans the whole country. They are working in government offices, business firms, technical installations, factories and industrial plants as the brain behind the machine. Given proper incentives, ideal conditions of employment and last of all, better housing and schooling facilities for children, they can provide a steady support to the demand for national development and economic growth of the country.

Md Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

**Not that the middle class ever lived very well but most could afford the basics. Today the soaring prices and the diminishing value of currency have eroded even the minimum standard of life. Given proper incentives, ideal conditions of employment and better housing and schooling facilities for children, they can provide a steady support to the demand for national development and economic growth of the country.**

absence of vital input. The unmitigated crisis will have ramifications such as bringing about shortfall in Boro production, a situation that will force the country to import food grains in a larger quantity in the coming days.

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh has been a country mostly dependent on agriculture gradually supported by technology. But because of our failure to give proper thrust in this sector, the rural landscape unveils a shocking litany of poverty, joblessness and deprivation that continues to drag the country down. The oft-preached growth has hardly made any dent on poverty.

To be precise, agriculture together with manufacturing, forms the backbone of the economy and its performance is crucial in the battle against poverty. It is worth mentioning that during the 1980s China's agriculture clocked an average growth rate of over 6 percent per annum and the sustained rise in rural incomes played a crucial role in China achieving a steep fall in poverty.

situation which no government can perhaps control.

The poor would not have resented, may felt least concerned, if the rich were indeed getting richer but the poor would have stopped getting poorer. But this has not come to pass. Evidently, while the gains made by the rich have been spectacular, incomes of the middle class have been barely sufficient, and those of the poor not at all even that to get them back where they were 10 to 15 years ago. The yawning gap between the rich and the poor is growing wider by all indications available. This trend is no doubt very alarming. We don't know how it will influence the forthcoming parliamentary election, but the stark reality is that it has already shattered the "dream" we have cherished so long.

Let us spell out what this "dream" really means for us. It is just a comfortable house in a tree-shaded neighbourhood with just sufficient food and clothing, hazard free roads and meaningful school-cum-college education for the children.

But what concerns us most is that the "dream" does not seem to be coming true. Regardless of the size of its majority in the parliament the alliance government ran out of steam to govern the country simply because of lack of moral force and commitment to the cause of the people. Almost 54 months into office, bullied by allies, stunned by corruption expose, hurt by conspiracies and dubious roles by those close to the party hierarchy, and plagued by unrest that was their own making, the alliance government seems out of sorts. Conspicuously the wanton greed of a

days. Savings required to send even one child to either school or college and give him/her the type of education that can fetch the incumbent an employment or avenues for further studies in a university or abroad puts millions of middle class parents on an ever increasing treadmill. Expenses of studies in a private university is almost 40 percent of a median family's total income. Many families have more than one children in college or university at the same time. How can they make both ends meet in such a desperate situation?

But many parents feel they have no choice. A college or university diploma, once the passport to upward mobility is becoming a necessity just to avoid falling out of the middle class. Precisely told, the dream of the middle class was being strangled by spiraling prices, lack of job opportunity for the educated members of the family and absence of adequate incentives for the small savings they have managed through hard

toils and extreme economic measures. Ironically, during the last one decade wages or incomes rose less than the prices of essentials rose putting the tax payers into higher brackets forcing them to pay higher bills on gas, electricity, water and municipal taxes. The double dilemma of higher prices and higher taxes in an ever increasing form cut the purchasing power of the middle class down. What the government could do, and should do right now, to bring about equality in social structure and stability in the society is to offer social security net to the unemployed youths in line with the