

Change in the power ministry

Too little too late

STATE Minister Iqbal Hassan Mahmood's exit from the power ministry doesn't quite come across as a bombshell given the Kansat and Shanir Akhra episodes. Those symbolised angry public sentiments all over the country on the phenomenal unprecedented electricity outages leading also acute water crisis. But the timing of it makes him a scapegoat and, to that extent, he might have gone the way of Altaf Hossain into the so-called ivy league of martyrdom.

Actually, he should have been eased out much earlier in view of public outcries if the government was determined enough to improve the electric supply. On the contrary, allowing only four and a half months to his successor ostensibly to effectuate a turnaround in the electricity sector from what has accumulated as four and a half years of mountainous mess, is to court a well-rounded disaster. In all that time, only 80 MW was added to the generation capacity starkly contrasting with the increase in demand at 400 MW annually.

But believe it or not, despite an expenditure of Tk 14,000 crore in the power sector in the last nearly half a decade we have almost drawn a blank in terms of new generation capacity.

Since it's a daunting task to alleviate the horrendous mismatch between electricity supply and demand in the remainder of the government's tenure, a pragmatist is only left to draw one conclusion: the move to transfer Iqbal Hassan Mahmood out of the power ministry is a ploy to repair the political cost entailed through public outcries over frequent load-shedding.

There is absolutely no doubt that the root causes of the power sector debacle are: corruption, (what's there in it for me? syndrome), irregularities, bureaucratic red-tape, lack of vision and indecisiveness at the top levels.

Hassan Mahmood was state minister for power. The power ministry is actually in the hands of the prime minister herself, so that the responsibility for the success or failure should also lie with her office. A little more than a year ago, the state minister for power was sidelined by the PMO in the formation of a high powered committee headed by the prime minister's principal secretary to assess the power situation, do the strategic planning and formulate the short and long term plans needed to overcome power supply crunches. So, in a very structural way was the Prime Minister's Office responsible for the goings-on in the sector at the very least in a very intense way for the last one year.

Moreover, finance, planning and energy ministries are supposed to have been cooperating with the power ministry to bring about a better generation, transmission and supply of electricity. If this has not happened, then it also amounts to failure of collective responsibility which is of the essence in a cabinet system.

Welcome submarine cable

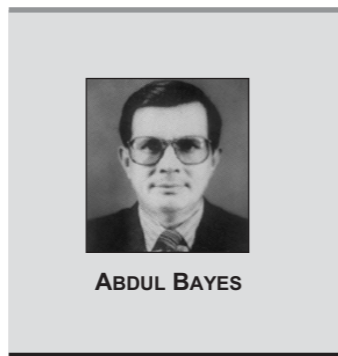
At last the vital link

WE wholeheartedly greet the news of the commissioning of submarine cable in the country's telecommunications and information technology sectors. Though belated, it has opened a new vista of opportunities including that for obtaining services at cheaper and affordable prices. We are going to benefit from this submarine cable by way of increase in high-speed data and voice transfers including increase in the international telecommunication circuits.

It is now up to us to reap the benefits. We have made some progress in the information and the telecommunication sectors, but in order to make the most of the recently installed facility, we need to further enhance our all-round capacity in the sector. We have to further develop technical and management expertise for an optional utilisation of the new opportunities. There are as many as 16 parties involved in the consortium of 14 countries straddling of three continents. We shall have to have constant proactive communication and coordination amongst the collaborating partners in order to ensure best benefits for the country, particularly in terms of equitable and just prices for the various services offered. Besides, in order to get the fullest benefit we shall have to increase and extend our telecom networks across the country through the highway capacity fiber optic and micro-wave links.

To our mind, being part of the submarine cable networking has been one of the best things to take place in the country for sometime which should not only bring about a host of benefits for the country but also make us known to the international world of communication highways. It is now up to us make to use of the enormous access. There is no reason why we should not be able to do that with will, commitment and vision.

When the cat is out of the bag



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We think that the present EC has lost all its credibility to hold a free and fair election. Although EC is said to be autonomous, constitutional and free of government's interference, the fact remains that the team was selected by the present government and hence it will have to bear the burden of bad management in the EC. The EC and its new voter list have amply proved that a free and fair election in the country needs a new team imbued with the spirit of sailing us through the rough sea of democracy.

THE Election Commission of Bangladesh, now headed by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice MA Aziz, seems to have put the last nail on the coffin of a free and fair election expected to be held in 2007. As things have been rolling since Justice Aziz became the CEC, the suspicion on a free and fair election in the country continues to loom large. A free and fair election -- proxy for democracy -- remains deceptive by all counts. Evidences to this effect are in abundance, but we shall try to highlight a few of them.

By rejecting the historical norms of preparing an updated version of the voters' list for ensuing general election, Justice Aziz unilaterally opted for preparing a new list of voters. The erstwhile two members of the EC fought tooth and nail against the attempt but in vain. The reason for the departure from the past experiences has not also been clearly pointed out by the EC. Even a lay-man in the country knows

that a voter is always a voter until death took him/her away or mental disability pushed him/her out of track. The economics of vying for a new voters' list should not be overlooked either. It cost, as reported by various sources, few hundred crore of Taka to prepare the list. Only a half of it, if saved sincerely by updating the old one, could have eased the lives of millions managing to live hand to mouth. Allegedly, the precious pennies have gone to the persons loyal to the ruling party. Allegations of massive corruption and feeding ruling-party supporters through the process of preparing a new voter list are also on the air.

Second, although the decision of the EC should carry a consensus by incorporating the views of the EC members, sordidly this time such convention was "overruled" by the CEC who also happens to be an hon'ble Justice of the High Court. However, the matter now lies with the Supreme

Court for a judgment and hence we postpone our point for the moment. Suffice it to say, however, that, meantime, the draft voter list was published for public scrutiny where it had been shown that the total number of voters in the country stands at 90 million plus! A peep deep into the demographic dynamics over the last four years or so tends to reveal that the additional number of voters surpass the number of population -- by a wide margin -- who earned the eligibility to be voters by attaining the age of 18 over the bench mark period. The matrix of manipulation inside EC also shows that, if the estimates of the EC are taken into consideration, the growth rate of population would run far above the officially documented population growth rate of 1.5 per cent or so per annum during the last decade.

A private TV channel -- Channel-i -- at long last caught the cat out of the bag! In a particular area of the Dhaka city, nine hundred fake voters

are reported to have been enlisted by the instruction of the EC. As The Daily Star reports, under-age madrasa students turned voters by the grace of the EC. But one of the persons so instructed to carry out the order broke the earthen pot at the heart of the market! Newspaper reports ran galore over the exclusion of genuine voters and inclusion of fake voters around the capital city. Even the Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs, Mr Moudud Ahmed complained about four hundred fake voters in his own constituency. It is being argued that all that happened in the name of fake voters is just a tip of the iceberg and many more could have remained hidden by the mercy of the EC!

But despite the oddities opened by the media and growing complaints from the people who have been excluded from voters' list this time, the EC is finalising the disputed new voter list, seemingly unperturbed by the escalating num-

ber of revelations of gross irregularities in the preparation of it (The Daily Star, May 21, 2006). We observed that the calm, quiet and cool headed CEC broke his silence on 21 May 2006, after three months of avoiding media, by organising a very short press conference where he declined to delve into the deviations as revealed by the media.

What is the main objective of the EC in general and the CEC in particular? Besides the CEC himself, the EC is dominated by persons alleged to be loyal to the present ruling alliance. The erstwhile EC Secretary was made a member of the EC as a contribution on his commitment to the party in power. Again, as reported, a controversial retired judge managed a berth in EC as another member by dint of his devotion to the party in power. Can the nation expect neutral electoral judgment from such persons?

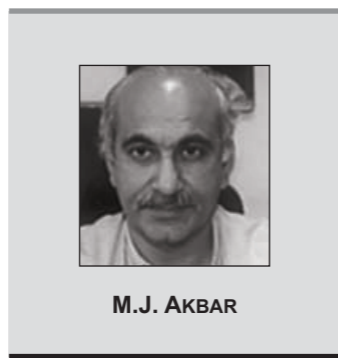
The prerequisite for a free and fair election calls for an immediate resignation of the three persons so named as experts of election engineering. It seems that by virtue of their posts being constitutional and hence not removable by the government, they are pushing the country towards a constitutional crisis by their stay. After all, the opposition is not going to participate in a farcical election like that of February 1996 and perhaps also the government is not going to swallow the sour pill it did

before. Therefore, for the sake of democracy, constitutional continuity and political stability in the country, the three hon'ble persons could do well by retiring from the positions they hold now. That would possibly give them more honor and dignity. Otherwise, as the cat is coming out of the bag, EC stalwarts might have to face the people's court on the heel of their alleged attempts to subdue the democratic journey that the nation is in for many years bearing the brunt of oddities.

The government, on the other hand, should advise the EC stalwarts to step down voluntarily. We think that the present EC has lost all its credibility to hold a free and fair election. Although EC is said to be autonomous, constitutional and free of government's interference, the fact remains that the team was selected by the present government and hence it will have to bear the burden of bad management in the EC. We can only hope that something might have been lost meantime but all is not lost for the future. The EC and its new voter list have amply proved that a free and fair election in the country needs a new team imbued with the spirit of sailing us through the rough sea of democracy. When democracy works well, it works better for all parties landing them in a win-win situation.

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Redress code



M.J. AKBAR

BYLINE

The film apparently achieves what the book adroitly avoided: it ends in titters rather than jitters. But the most interesting reaction to the film was surely from those Muslim imams who joined many Christian priests in demanding a ban in India. The imams were following their ethics, for Jesus does not belong to Christians alone. If you demand a ban on a book that slanders Muhammad then it is equally logical that you should demand a ban on a film that slanders Jesus.

ADa Vinci week should be a good one for rumination. One of the most exquisite passages in the New Testament is the eighth chapter of St. Mark. A crowd of some 4,000 astonishingly large, and soon to be astonished had been following Jesus (Peace be upon him) for three days, without having eaten. The compassionate Prophet wanted to feed them. His disciples had only seven loaves and two fishes. Jesus offered thanks to God, and there was enough food for everyone. Jesus' miracles were never ostentatious. When he cured a blind man at Bethesda by rubbing over the victim's eyes, Jesus told the fortunate man: "Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town". At Caesara Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Whom do men say I am?" Some compared him to John the Baptist, others to Elias; all agreed he was a Prophet.

Jesus turned the question around to his disciples: "But whom say ye that I am?" Peter answered: "Thou art the Christ."

Jesus "charged them that they should tell no man of him, for 'the

Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.'" Then followed some of the most moving words in the literature of any faith: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

There is a key phrase: "Son of man". Jesus repeats the phrase in the last verse of the chapter: "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels".

One of the fundamental differences between the brother-faiths, Islam and Christianity, is that while the Church believes that Jesus was the son of God, Islam insists that Jesus was human.

The Quran venerates Jesus, places him on the highest of pedestals and calls him Christ 11

times. Verse 45 of Al-Imran (The family of Imran) says: "O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ (Maseeha) Jesus. The son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah". He is not only a servant of God, and a messenger of God, and a Prophet: in the chapter on Mary (Maryam) Jesus is thus described: "I am indeed a servant of Allah; He hath given me revelation and made me a Prophet." More remarkably, seven times in the Quran Jesus is said to possess the ruh, or spirit, of Allah: "We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit..." Incidentally, it is perhaps revealing that while the New Testament mentions Mary 19 times, the Quran mentions her 34 times. According to certain interpretations, it is Jesus who will descend to earth a second time, before the hour of judgement. Maulana Yusuf Ali translates verse 61 of Surah 43 as "And (Jesus) shall be a sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of judgement)".

But the Quran categorically rejects the divinity of Jesus, or that he died on the cross and was resurrected; the crucifixion was a "counterfeit": "But they killed him (Jesus, son of Mary) not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them..." Commentators like Sayyid Ahmad Khan have explained that Christ did not die on the cross, since the piercing of palms and feet is not necessarily fatal, and that Jesus' body was taken down after three or four hours by his disciples and concealed till he recovered. In Sufi tradition, Jesus is the greatest model of the wandering preacher, particularly during his life after his punishment on the cross. There is even a belief, not substantiated, that Kashmir was the last resting place of Jesus.

But what about the miracle of his birth? The Quran is as insistent as the Bible on the virginity of Mary. But that, says the Quran, does not make Jesus divine. Adam had neither mother nor father, but we do not consider Adam divine. It is up to God, who created us all, to choose the means of His creation.

And of course, the Quran is categorical that Muhammad (Peace be upon him) is the last Prophet of Allah, the "seal" of the Prophets. A traditional saying of Muslims puts it neatly: "Our Lord Abraham is the beloved of God. Our Lord Moses is the voice of God. Our Lord Jesus (Issa) is the spirit of God. But our Lord Muhammad is the Prophet of God."

These are the great issues of faith that divide billions of people who, otherwise, have so much in common. Jews, Christians and Muslims are "people of the Book", owing allegiance to the same God, but differing on the messenger. Islam predates its last Prophet, but naturally, and Muhammad restored the monotheism of Abraham and Moses from which the faithful had so often deviated. There is a lovely hadith, or saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "My brother Moses had only one eye, it was the eye of the law. My brother Jesus had only one eye, it was eye of compassion. God has given me two eyes, both the law and compassion." In other words, society is best ruled through a combination of law and compassion.

What is interesting, in the context of the furor over the bogus Leonardo da Vinci code, is the strong, if often suppressed tradition of what might be called the "human Jesus" within the various strands of Christian belief. Dan Brown is only a terrible writer with a terrific sense of pace who has won an unbelievable lottery. We should not take him more seriously than that. But if he has

hit a nerve in these godless times, it is only because the Christian world or should be we say "post-Christian" communities are trying to turn religion upside down. Instead of faith lifting man towards salvation in the after-world, they are pulling down the supernatural into the straitjacket of explicable behaviour. Jesus needs to do explicable things like getting married and having children: how else can he be claimed by a middle class that finds religion to be such a bore? Dan Brown is a graceless, if inevitable, child of Darwin.

The film apparently achieves what the book adroitly avoided: it ends in titters rather than jitters. But the most interesting reaction to the film was surely from those Muslim imams who joined many Christian priests in demanding a ban in India. The imams were following their ethics, for Jesus does not belong to Christians alone. If you demand a ban on a book that slanders Muhammad then it is equally logical that you should demand a ban on a film that slanders Jesus.

Hollywood is the ivory tower of globalisation. Satellite television, freer trade and increasingly bipolar tastes may be turning the world into a single marketplace. But it is not yet a market without exit routes.

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KICAC and ACC: A comparison of performance

MD ABDUL ALIM

ON 17th February 2004, the Parliament of Bangladesh passed a bill called Anti-corruption Commission Act 2004 in order to make way for an independent institution to fight corruption in the country. The act provides legal framework for setting up a commission to help establish good governance and ensure transparency in public administration. In November 2004, the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) was formed. 17 months have passed since the ACC has been formed. So it is very important to evaluate what the commission has done in the last 17 months.

Before evaluating our ACC, I want to give the readers a brief description of the first-year activities of Korea Independent Commission Against Corruption (KICAC).

The KICAC was founded on 25th January 2002 following the enactment of the Anti-corruption Commission Act 2001. The KICAC carried out a number of activities in its first year of enactment in 2002.

(a) It developed a Basic Anti-corruption Policy (BAP) which contains the nature and extent of corruption in Korea with the ultimate goal of becoming "transparent, fair, and clean nation." The BAP targeted some sectors such as administrative sector, judicial sector, political sector, corporate sector to abolish corruption-friendly practices and mindset, improve transparency in administrative procedure and reform the system and environment that may reduce corruption, ultimately to establish an advanced social system that will thoroughly eradicate corruption. The BAP planned to increase transparency in government contracts and procurement by

introducing "Civil Application Online System", the "Electronic Bidding System" and "Oath of Integrity System". For citizen's participation in administrative procedures, the KICAC planned to introduce "Expanded Administrative Information Disclosure", "Citizen Inspector System" and "Public-Private Joint Inspection Team on Corruption".

(b) The KICAC prepared a set of comprehensive measures to eradicate political corruption. It identified some areas of political corruption and proposed to the government for institutionalising low-cost campaigning, expanding public election management system, ensuring greater transparency for political fund by requiring a single bank account, tight control on the spending of national subsidies, establishing low-cost political structure, expanding the scope of legitimate political fund raising,

enhancing transparency in political fund management, strengthening punishment for political fund-related crimes, among other things.

(c) The Korea Commission prepared a draft Code of Conduct for public officials to be established and enforced by the administration, national assembly, national election commission and constitutional court. With some recommendations the draft Code of Conduct was accepted and published in the official gazette on 26th November 2002.

(d) The KICAC set up a Corruption Report Centre (CRC) which represents the commission and serves as a gateway for the people to meet with the commission. The CRC is open to the public on a 24-hour year-round basis with its top priorities being receiving reports, providing kind and expert counseling and guaranteeing confidentiality of the informant or whistleblower. In

2002 the CRC had seven staff to deal with this issue. In this year it received 2,572 reports on corruption by visit, telephone and internet.

(e) The KICAC in its first stage in 2002 targeted to make a "transparent, fair and clean nation" and the objective of this stage was to regain the confidence of the people and complete the anti-corruption infrastructure by introducing new system. In the second stage -- between 2003-2005 -- the commission planned to increase transparency in Korea with a view to improving the situation in TI's Corruption Perception Index (CPI). In 2002 Korea was ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in CPI. But its position in this index has been increasing since 2003 with 50th in 2003, 47th in 2004 and 40th in 2005. It has targeted to improve this position to 10th by 2010.

(f) The KICAC introduced a

significant whistleblowing system under which a current or former member of an organisation can report or raise issues of illegal acts or wrongdoings of that organisation to outside agencies including audit and inspection institutions, media or public corporations in order to protect safety, rights and interests of the society and to protect the people's right to know. In 2002 the Commission categorised 38 cases as whistleblowing. Out of these 38 cases, 34 have been completed. As a result, 27 were referred to relevant authorities and the remaining 7 were concluded without referral. The KICAC also introduced a "Manual on Whistleblower Protection and Reward" in October 2002.

(g) In the first year of enactment, the Korean commission conducted an assessment of the integrity of public agencies in order to further the transparency and fairness of state administra-

tion through a scientific and systematic approach. The study covered most of the services provided by 71 public organisations. Based on the findings of this study, the KICAC introduced an "Integrity Index". They also carried out the first round of perception of corruption survey among the general public, experts, civil servants and foreigners, aimed to objectively study and analyse the general perception of, and attitude toward, corruption-related matters.

(h) The Korean commission also took a number of anti-corruption measures such as recommendations for institutional reform, new bidding system, promoting anti-corruption education, international cooperation etc. among others.

Some daily newspapers on 18th December last informed the readers that the ACC had filed its first corruption case after its

inception in last November 2004. On 6th April 2006, The Daily Star published a report saying that the ACC was itself facing 78 writ petitions against its actions. The commission has not yet finalised its organisational structure as required by the law. I think it would not be wise to describe more on the list of failure of our Anti-corruption Commission. People of Bangladesh know all its activities through the vibrant media. I just want to say one thing for the chairman and commissioners of the ACC. Please think about yourself and identify the issues which cause barrier to working independently, try to solve them and if you fail, inform them also the citizens who are paying taxes for running this organisation.

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