

How far is the election?



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

The present government is due to hand over power to the head of the caretaker government in October this year. Already the opposition has announced that it will not join the elections under the present Election Commission. With the addition of such head of the caretaker government, it would be simply astonishing if the opposition joins the elections.

inary controversy as fake voters were galore, stranded Pakistanis were registered against their wishes, and in many cases minorities were left out. From the voters list it was evident that the CEC had either mala fide intentions or wanted to cause confusion of the worst kind. While preparing the fresh voters' list the CEC had gone to the court asking them to pronounce on the question of the fresh voters' list or updating the earlier list. The court simply upheld its earlier judgment of 4 January. In other words the CEC's labour of fresh voter list was wasted. The moot point arises, if the CEC should not refund the crores of taka that he has wasted by his obstinacy?

The CEC, after a long wait has accepted the judgment of the Supreme Court but only partially. For he wants that voters should visit the offices of the Election Commission and enroll themselves. In Bangladesh this procedure is unheard of. This is bound to generate fresh controversy. The entire opposition has ranged against the CEC and his two colleagues, who are accused of blatant partiality, and are demanding their resignation. The office of the Chief Election Commissioner is supposed to be manned by fair and neutral personalities. But this is far from the case and, therefore, the opposition is demanding their resignation. So far the CEC enjoys complete support from the government. Yet the pressure against the CEC and his two colleagues is relentlessly mounting and a situation of stalemate has been created. This has put the whole exercise of Election-2007 under a cloud.

The present four-party alliance government has stacked the deck by preparing former Chief Justice K.M.Hasan as the next head of the caretaker government. The concept of the caretaker chief has been that he should be totally neutral. In order to place Justice Hasan at the head of the caretaker government, the Constitution has been amended and the tenure of the judges has been extended by two years. Justice Hasan has been Ambassador of former ruler of Bangladesh Gen. Ziaur Rahman in Baghdad as well as a member of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). That his neutrality and objectivity would come under question goes without saying.

The present government is due to hand over power to the head of the caretaker government in October this year. Already the opposition has announced that it will not join the elections under the present Election Commission. With the addition of such head of the caretaker government, it would be simply astonishing if the opposition joins the elections.

The question naturally arises whether the ruling BNP has so stacked the decks that they virtually spoil the elections or create such chaos and confusion that it happens to be a recipe for others to spoil it. Bangladesh has managed so far to hold three elections, which though not a model of fair elections has been accepted by the people. Let us hope that the ruling party does not stretch public credulity beyond endurance.

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

The budget and the hard-pressed people

GM QUADER

FINANCE Minister M Saifur Rahman placed the proposed budget for the financial year 2006-07 at the Jatiya Sangsad on the 8th June. There was great curiosity in the minds of the people about this budget. It is the twelfth time for Mr. Saifur Rahman to place the national budget at the Jatiya Sangsad, a feat unparalleled in the history of the country. Moreover, this time the budget is the last of the present coalition government which will have to be implemented by three consecutive governments, the present government during the remainder of their tenure, the caretaker government for the interim period and the next government which will be formed after the next general election. Besides, Mr. Saifur Rahman expressed a few days ago his willingness to retire after placement of this budget.

It was the expectation of the nation that an experienced finance minister and political person would try to offer the nation an ideal pro-people budget with distinct and bold characteristics as the final work of his long and colourful career. This is expected as a person generally desires to be remembered with respect long after his departure. Naturally, it is a disappointment when it is seen that the new proposed budget is nothing but a typical incremental budget which lacks any courageous and creative initiative. In addition, one of the aims of the proposed budget seems to be to create an opportunity to buy votes for the coalition candidates in the coming general election. Considering these and some other factors, the budget in its entirety appears not at all pro-people.

The total layout of the proposed budget is Taka 69,740 crore. It is about 9% higher than the total figure of the current year's budget of Taka 64,383 crore and 13% higher than the revised budget. Almost all the items of the current budget are included in the proposed budget and a more or less similar incre-

There is a widely accepted belief in our country that politicians say something, mean something else and do what suits them best. This has generated a lack of confidence of the people not only in politicians but also in the existing political process as a whole. Consequences have already led the people to become indifferent to political activities and to direct their choices out of usual politics and politicians.

mental trend is maintained. The expected total revenue earning is estimated as Taka 52,542 cr. for the proposed budget as against current year's budget figure of Taka 45,722 cr. Current year's figure needed to be revised down to 44,868 due to non-fulfilment of targeted revenue earning. It may be noted that though a lower targeted amount could not be achieved in the current financial year, a new target is set at 17% higher compared to the revised figure.

A total of Taka 28,463 cr. has been earmarked for development expenditure for the financial year 2006-07 of which Taka 26,000 cr. has been kept against annual development budget. Annual development budget for the current fiscal year (2005-06) was Taka 24,500 cr. which had to be revised down to Taka 21,500 cr. due to failure of implementation capability. How could a development budget be proposed with an enhanced figure of Taka 4,500 cr. (over and above the revised amount) that too in an unstable political situation with so many changes of government within a short time, is not clear. It is more or less certain that it may not be possible to have complete implementation of the proposed budget.

As per our finance minister there cannot be anything wrong in having ambitious development programmes which might be implemented partially. But, in reality the inclusion of too many projects allows the government to choose only those for implementation which serve partisan political interests disregarding economic and social benefit for the country.

In the proposed budget a big amount has been earmarked under head 'block fund' which allows the

same to be used as and when needed by the government. There is apprehension that the government in power would try to utilise most of the unspecified fund during their final days for reaping partisan benefit in the next general election. Most of the economists of the country expressed this anxiety during their post budget reactions. The renowned economist Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, executive director of Centre for Policy Dialogue maintained in June 10 copy of "The Daily Star" that the block allocation of Tk 6,100 crore which is around nine percent of the budget might have a questionable motive behind it.

The proposed budget is surely not pro-people, considered in its entirety. Collection of taxes by National Board of Revenue as per the revised budget figure of the current financial year is Taka 34,456 cr. In the proposed budget the tax burden has been increased further by Taka 6,599 cr. Most of the earnings would be through indirect taxes like import or domestic duties and VAT etc. Those are paid equally by all sections of the people, rich or poor, whenever they purchase any product or service. But, traditionally this tax money benefits the rich more than the poor sections of the society.

A big chunk of this tax money is used by government itself to maintain the ever increasing expenses in the running of the administration. Other major portion is for procurement and development works. Since development and procurement works of the government do not have transparency, business is awarded mostly on manipulated tendering. This provides scope to inflate the price and degrade the quality of work. Tax money col-

lected from people is thus plundered by a section of rich ruling party men and the general public receive low quality facilities at an exorbitant cost.

The people of Bangladesh are hard pressed because of the continuous rise in prices of essential commodities. The causes are: high rate of domestic taxes, rise of price of imported items, syndication of business community to control prices in their favour, illegal toll collection at different points by ruling party people and even law enforcing agencies. It was expected that the government would address this issue in the proposed budget. Reduced rates of tax were proposed for some essential items. But, the finance minister himself admitted during his budget speech, that due to corruption and failure to provide good governance this effort failed to produce any favourable effect on price. It appears that the traders are the only people benefited by the tax reduction, and not the public. The traders are to pay less tax during procurement but can still sell at a high rate.

The most irritating problem the people are facing now is an acute shortage of electric power supply. It was naturally wished by everybody that the budget would provide enough money to reduce this crisis. Interestingly the proposed budget has a total allocation of Taka 4,283 cr. compared to current year's allocation of Taka 4,293 cr. This shows that when there was a need to make a considerable enhancement of funding in the power sector the proposed budget has actually reduced the funding.

In respect of the power sector, the finance minister in his budget speech said, "An investment to the

tune of about Tk 22,000 crore will be needed to build an appropriate power infrastructure." (Budget Speech, page 31). In the same speech he also said, "To improve power generation, transmission and distribution, an allocation of Tk 3586 crore has been earmarked for 52 projects including 2 new projects in the ADP during FY 2006-07." (page 30).

It is a well known fact that the greatest challenge for Bangladesh today is an improvement in governance and reduction of corruption. The proposed budget did not provide any direction in this respect. There is no doubt that stopping black money from being converted to white might contribute towards lessening of corruption. The finance minister himself mentioned more than once before the declaration of the budget that he would under no circumstances extend the facility to legalise black money. But, it is surprising that the finance minister in the proposed budget included provisions to whiten black money if it is invested in non-productive sectors like buying of houses, cars etc. by paying additional tax.

There is a widely accepted belief in our country that politicians say something, mean something else and do what suits them best. This has generated a lack of confidence of the people not only in politicians but also in the existing political process as a whole. Consequences have already led the people to become indifferent to political activities and to direct their choices out of usual politics and politicians. It should not be forgotten that this is the way constitutional governments go out of power and are also forced to hand it over to extra-constitutional authorities.

(Figures used above if not mentioned otherwise are taken from 'Budgetary Sangkhiphasar' meaning budget in short, published by finance department, ministry of finance, government of Bangladesh)

GM Quader is an MP

EC's move may make next polls uncertain

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should immediately change its decision and adopt the procedure prescribed by law.

If the decision cannot be implemented, the much-awaited revised electoral roll will not be finally published in time and holding of the 9th parliamentary election in time will also become uncertain, Munsef Ali observed. His full observations are given below:

"Decision of the Election Commission taken in its meeting on June 12, 2006 has given rise to yet another controversy. The commission has reportedly decided that its authorised persons will not visit dwelling houses to collect information in the form of statement in form-2 for revising the electoral roll. The commission will ask the eligible voters to come to its upazila and district election offices and supply necessary information. The decision is not in conformity with the provision of law. Rather it is contrary to such provision. At the same time, it is impracticable and unlikely to be implemented. If the decision cannot be implemented, the much-awaited revised electoral roll will not be finally published in time to replace the existing one. In such a case holding of 9th parliamentary election in time will become uncertain.

Law of the country has cast a duty on the Election Commission to revise electoral rolls before each election to an elective body. Rules 4 and 6 of the Electoral Rolls Rules 1982 prescribe the procedures of collecting, verifying and correcting and second verification of the information collected in the form of Statement in form-2. Rule 4 is reproduced below: "4. Information to be supplied by occupants of dwelling houses (1) For the purpose of preparing the Register of voters and the electoral roll for an electoral area, the Registration Officer shall cause to be obtained Statement form-2 in form-2 from each eligible voter who fulfills conditions laid down in clauses (a) to (d) of section 7(1). (2) Every statement under sub-rule (1) shall be signed by, or bear the thumb impression of, the eligible voters referred to in that sub-rule. (3) Each statement shall contain a certificate from the authorized person in form-2 to the effect that the statement made under sub-rule (1) has been obtained after a personal visit to the house and also a certificate by the supervisor to the effect that the entries therein have been verified or

corrected after a house-to-house visit."

The requirement of sub-rule (3) is that the authorized person shall personally visit each and every dwelling house and obtain statement in form-2 from each eligible voter and shall endorse a certificate to that effect in each form-2. The supervisor is required to verify and correct those entries after a house-to-house visit and also to endorse a certificate to that effect. Sub-rule (2) of rule 6 provides that the draft electoral roll shall be prepared on the basis of statements obtained under rule 4 and no such roll shall be published until the entries therein have been verified to the extent of at least ten percent by a house to house visit by a person other than the persons obtaining and verifying the statements. Thus the entries obtained by the authorised persons in form-2 and verified and corrected by the supervisors are required to be verified again to the extent of at least ten percent by a house-to-house visit by yet another person. Sub-rule (1) of rule 4 requires that the Registration Officer shall cause to be obtained statement in form-2 from each eligible voter.

It appears from the above provisions of law that the duty and responsibility of obtaining or causing to be obtained statements in form-2 from each eligible voter by personally going to each dwelling house, causing verification and correction of those entries by a house to house visit and a second verification of at least ten percent entries by a house to house visit - are of the Election Commission. The persons performing those functions or duties are appointed by or under the authority of the Election Commission. The Registration Officer appointed by the Commission is required to cause the statements to be obtained and to publish draft electoral roll and also to finally publish the electoral roll. In short, these are the procedure prescribed by law. The Election Commission has no option but to follow these procedures.

However, there is an exception. Sub-rule(3) of rule 6 provides "Notwithstanding anything contained in rule 4, where, in the opinion of the commission, it is not possible to follow the procedure laid down in that rule for the preparation of electoral roll for any electoral area, the commission may direct that the electoral roll for such electoral area shall be prepared in such manner as it thinks is best suited for the pur-

pose." This provision may be applicable in a very limited number of electoral areas where abnormal circumstances do not permit following normal procedure. This provision is not applicable as a general rule of procedure to all the electoral areas of the country. Exception is exception. It has no general application. So, the commission has no authority to deviate from the normal procedure. Decision of the commission is wrong and contrary to the provision of law as the commission has not passed opinion to the effect that it is not possible to follow the normal procedure.

The procedures discussed above are applicable to the first preparation of an electoral roll. No separate procedure has been prescribed for revision of electoral rolls. Rule 21 of the Electoral Rolls, Rules, 1982 provides that the electoral rolls for the time being in force shall, with such additions, deletions and modifications as may be necessary, be published as draft electoral roll in the manner provided in rule 6 and the provisions of rules 7 to 18 shall apply to every such roll as they apply to the first preparation of an electoral roll for an electoral area. It is thus clear that the same procedure are to be followed in collecting statements in form-2, in verifying and correcting entries therein and also in verifying for the second time for additions, deletions and modifications of the existing electoral roll before publishing it as draft electoral roll. Collecting statements in form-2, by personally visiting each and every dwelling house, its verification and correction by visiting house to house and second verification of at least ten percent entries by persons other than those who obtained statements in form-2 and who verified and corrected those entries are mandatory in case of revision of electoral rolls also.

Now coming to the practical side, the picture appears to be very discouraging. Law of the country has not cast any duty upon the voters to come to the election office for making statement in form-2. So, they cannot be compelled. It is optional for them to respond to the call of the Election Commission. But for practical reasons vast majority of the eligible voters will not respond. As a result, fake persons will fill the gap. There will remain no scope whatsoever for verification, correction and second verification of the entries in prescribed forms as these will be made sitting in the

election offices. It will not be possible to ascertain whether a particular voter resides in the address shown in the statement. It is not possible to check if on person makes dozens of statements giving different addresses and fake descriptions. As a result possibility of enrolling fake voters will remain.

Vast majority of eligible voters reside in rural areas. Most people are poor and illiterate. They are not supposed to understand the importance of being enrolled as a voter. Upazila election office or district election office are situated at a distance of up to several kilometres. Journey to and from these places involve expenditure. The poor man cannot afford this expenditure. The day laborers cannot afford to come to election offices leaving his days income.

Female voters in rural areas generally do not appear publicly. There may be social prohibitions against their movement to upazila offices. Female members of rural Bangladesh do not generally move alone. Generally they go out with other members of the family, in most cases, accompanied by male members. In this case male members may not take their female members to upazila headquarters. Therefore, it can be anticipated that vast majority of the eligible rural female members will not respond to the call of the Election Commission. The gap will be very big. This gap may be filled by fake persons. This will create a very serious problems and the validity of the electoral rolls will remain questionable. This must be avoided.

A free-from error electoral roll is the cry of the day. About 65 lakh voters in the existing electoral roll is said to be fake. The best and the only way to eliminate fake voters is to visit each and every dwelling house and collect information in prescribed form. It is not possible to identify the address in which a fake voter is enrolled unless each and every dwelling house is visited with the existing list.

It is clear from the above discussion that the procedure adopted by the Election Commission is illegal, erroneous, impracticable and impossible to implement. For the greater interest of the nation, the commission should immediately change its decision and adopt the procedure prescribed by law as described above."

Bangladesh-US relations Declining aid, growing trade

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in August, 1972 between Bangladesh and the United States, bilateral relations have been growing, both in depth and dimension, in spite of occasional twists and turns. The United States recognised Bangladesh on 4 April, 1972 following the withdrawal of Indian troops from its soil. Immediately after the opening of mission, the United States signed the first bilateral agreement offering \$ 90 million for the reconstruction of war ravaged Bangladesh. This was the turning point for the development of relations.

Aid to Bangladesh
The United States has been great help to Bangladesh in terms of financial assistance, which develops infrastructures in health, education, energy sectors. The United States, at the beginning, was the largest single donor country to Bangladesh, but it has gradually been reducing its assistance. Presently the United States is contributing to the tune of eighty million dollars annually as grants. Only twenty million goes to the government exchequer and the rest to non-government organisations. That means aid from America is dwindling. This is because the number of aid recipients has increased since the dismantling of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and also because of the huge expenditure incurred by the United States in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Aid to Bangladesh includes food security, tropical forest and building up good democratic process as fields of utilisation.

Millennium challenge corporation is the new programme of the Bush administration. This is conducted in accordance with Section 608(d) of the Millennium Challenge Act of 2003. A Board of Directors determines the eligibility for MCA assistance. The countries are selected on the basis of the policies and programmes that help them achieve lasting poverty reduction and economic growth, their demonstration of just and democratic governance, economic freedom and investment in people and elimination of corruption. Bangladesh was disqualified from receiving a share of the cake from this millennium challenge corporation's earmarked \$ 2.3 billion because of high rate of corruption in the country.

Armenia, Mali, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Benin, Bolivia, Ghana, Morocco, Georgia, Honduras, Lesotho, Madagascar

Although Bangladesh has been receiving word of concern from Bush administration on the deterioration of law and order, she at the same time has been receiving praises for participation in peacekeeping forces in different troubled countries under the aegis of the United Nations. Bangladesh became the largest contributor to UN peace-keeping operations. The visits of high officials, ministers, senators from America to Bangladesh and vice versa demonstrates the good bilateral relations that exist between the two countries.

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Bangladesh signed food aid agreement with US in 1973. Since then she has been receiving food aid under PL 480, but recent trend indicate that a major component of food aid goes to non-government organisations.

Investments from US
The investments from the United States are not negligible either. As of now \$ 1.4 billion were invested by the United States in Bangladesh since the establishment of diplomatic relations. America's investment mainly concentrates on the banking, energy and insurance sectors. The American oil giant Unocal ultimately agreed to develop the Bibiyana gas field for local market, signalling an apparent end to gas export issue, which caused heated debate in national politics. It may be noted that Chevron Texaco bought Unocal in August last year (2005), which would facilitate Chevron to have access to Unocal's oil and gas assets in Asia. According to latest statistics, America tops the list of foreign investors in Bangladesh. A number of agreements have been signed between the two countries, which include protection of investment, scientific cooperation and avoidance of double taxation.

Trade relations
Another agreement is in the process under the nomenclature of 'trade and investment framework'. This agreement, if signed, would facilitate both the countries to talk about the problem of trade and investment. It could help bring more direct investment from America. Trade relations have been expanding gradually between the two countries. The balance of trade, however, is in favour of Bangladesh. Bangladesh exported to the United States goods worth about \$ 2.4 billion up to June, 2004 whereas Bangladesh imported goods from the United States to the tune of \$ 350 million. The volume of trade from Bangladesh stood at \$ 2.5 billion last year and is expected to reach \$ 2.9 billion this year. The

imposition of quotas on the import of Chinese readymade garments helped Bangladesh to export more garments to the United States. Apart from garments, Bangladesh's exports include fish and vegetables. Machinery, cotton and wheat are the import items from the United States. The United States is thus the largest export destination of Bangladesh products.

Bangladesh's exports would face difficulties in future if the bill in the Senate (191) sponsored by Senator Gordon Smith (R), Senator Rick Santorum (R) and Senator Dianne (D) and Senator Max Baucus (D) on January 26, 2005 and the bill in the House of Representatives sponsored by Jim Kolbe (R) and Joseph Crowley (D) on February 17, 2005, which proposes to accord duty free access of textiles and other exports from the Least Developed Countries of Asia and the Pacific region, do not get through the Congress.

Of late, contacts between political leaders, academicians and journalists of the two countries are on the increase. There has been, noticeably, a new attitude in America's diplomacy towards Bangladesh, which has been dubbed as moderate Muslim country. The Bangladesh embassy in Washington, DC has been receiving Americans, who shows interest in Bangladesh. Recently, two hundred trainees from naval academy were in the embassy to be briefed about Bangladesh. Another group of one hundred staffers of the Senate had been to the embassy in March last year to know about the administrative, legislative and judicial system of Bangladesh. This is a positive development indeed.

The increase in the number of members in Bangladesh-America caucus in the House of Representatives is a significant development. The present strength stands at twenty six. It was established during the regime of Awami League in 2001. Congressman Joseph Crowley is the co-chair of this Caucus, who represents Democratic Party while Peter King,

Congressman from Republican Party is another co-chair. It is a bipartisan caucus in the House of Representatives. In the second week of February last year the Senate was presented with a new idea floated by Dr. Mohammad Yunus about tsunami scholars programme by Senator Durbin, who met Dr. Yunus in Dhaka. Dr. Yunus is known in the United States for his innovative low-interest loan to landless people in Bangladesh through Grameen Bank project. Grameen Bank project of Bangladesh was also replicated by Arkansas State of America.

Bangladesh has been a partner in combating terrorism in all its form with the United States since its declared policy following terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

In the private sector there have been exchanges of business personalities between the two countries that also help promote relations in commercial area. A significant development took place in information technology when an agreement was signed on December 05, 2005 by Microsoft Bangladesh, a joint venture project of Microsoft Corporation of Bill Gates with the Ministry of Education to train ten thousand teachers and twenty thousand students over three years time. The participation by the embassy of the United States in the export exhibition every year has gone a long way in introducing American products in Bangladesh.

The visit of Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States twice on the eve of general elections in Bangladesh in 2001 was indeed memorable. This contributed toward improvement of democratic process in Bangladesh although none of the leaders in the government or in the opposition honoured their pledges. President Bill Clinton's visit to Bangladesh was the highest level visit from US in 2000.

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