again, on how the country happens to be at the crossroads of time

today. But, sure, we will remind ourselves of the pains we suffer

DHAKA WEDNESDAY JUNE 21, 2006

Stop this slide into vulgarity, immediately

Speaker's role most unbecoming

NPARLIAMENTARY is a very mild depiction of what spewed from the mouth of a BNP lawmaker, Pintu, in the floor of the parliament. It causes one's head to sink in shame to hear such lewd and coarse remarks uttered by those that are supposed to epitomise dignity and good behaviour. One wonders whether there is nothing more worthwhile for the parliamentarians than embarking upon character assassination and vilification of another member of the parliament. He has our fullest contempt for what he has done to the reputation of the parliament, to politics and politicians.

It is a sad commentary on how our politics has regressed over the years. First we witnessed the unholy nexus between the criminals and the politicians that contributed to the criminalisation of our politics. And now we are witnessing with great anguish the vulgarisation of politics in the sanctum of our democracy, the Jatiyo Sangshad. It has no doubt reduced the parliament to the status of the market square and undermined its image in the public mind.

And the person who is entrusted to ensure the decorum in the parliament has failed in his job. Now take the Speaker's role. Did he play his part to ensure that the sanctity of the House was not defiled? We think not. In fact, he afforded additional time to the aberrant legislator that he used not to speak on the budget, for which he was given the floor in the first place, but to continue with his vulgar and filthy remarks. And while it was within the Speaker's power to expunge then and there the remarks, and which even his party members, namely the LGRD and Law ministers, had pointed out as possible options for him, he either deliberately paid no heed to them or willingly ignored their suggestions. Were the tasteless remarks of the BNP lawmaker so unintelligible as to be beyond the Speaker's comprehension to merit further examination at a later time by him? By doing so he provided the leeway to the MP and helped in vulgarisation of the parliament.

It must be mentioned though that the riposte of the Leader of the Opposition to a remark by a ruling party MP earlier, something that was uncalled for given her stature, brought her unnecessarily into the verbal fray.

Political leaders, particularly the parliamentarians must be warned that such bawdy behaviours are bringing their image down in the public estimation. If they often complain as to why the people think and speak so poorly of them they do not have to go very far to find the answer.

Punishing the voters

Please relinquish your responsibility

UR comment is in two parts: first, we react to the latest bombshell dropped by the election commission (EC) by way of demanding extraordinary efforts that eligible voters must make in order to be enlisted with the EC; and secondly, we reiterate our earlier observations about the way the EC affairs were being conducted which warranted honourable exit of the

It is as though an alien is applying for citizenship right in a foreign land, out to prove his continuous residence in a country with all sorts of documents one can conceivably think of. The election commission has asked its own people intending to register as voters "to submit receipts of municipal tax or house rent or payment to local guards, and affidavit on age or attested copy of SSC certificate with their applications in prescribed form. This extraordinary design is being contrived as a substitute for going house-to-house to ascertain the voters' bona fides. Now, to be enfranchised he is having to go to district or upazila election offices, get a form, rummage through all his papers or have them from various sources and then at the end of a long winded process walk back into the election offices to submit his fat file.

It is almost certain many people wouldn't like to take the trouble. All that the voters had earlier needed was to fill out a simple form handed to them by enumerators. So, the arrangement being envisaged now is actually discriminatory against a very large number of voters. To be a voter is my constitutional right and a statutory body such as the election commission has been constituted solely with the intent to facilitate my exercise of that valuable right. Is the EC facilitating or debilitating?

Our well-formed impression is that by his conduct of affairs the CEC has lost the last remnants of public confidence in him and his office. He has not only failed to produce an authentic and credible voter list by now or signs of it, he has also trifled with the judgement of his judicial peers. And it is only after the Supreme Court verdict that he apparently relented, but just; his egotistical detours continue. His credentials as a judge were said to be good, but now he has lost public confidence which is why we implore him with all modesty that he relinquish his charge as CEC for the good of the nation.

Politics, morality and things below the belt



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

KHTAR Hamid Siddiqui thinks he has never A experienced the kind of language used lately by Sheikh Hasina in the Jatiyo Sangsad. He is, both as an individual and as acting Speaker of Parliament, entitled to his opinion. But what certainly comes to the fore here is the question of whether a guardian of a legislative body, which the Speaker certainly is (and it matters little that he is not yet a Speaker in the full sense of the meaning), should persuade himself to speak in tones that betray his overall attitude towards a political figure who has been prime minister and could well occupy that position again. Anyone who understands the principles of democracy, of how parliament works in a pluralistic dispensation will agree that the Speaker, once he enters upon his office, simply rises to a perch that is above everyone else's. The unfortunate part of the story in Bangladesh, in recent times, is that more of partisanship and less of professionalism has

defined the workings of the office. It should have been for Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui to take swift action when ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party lawmaker Moshiur Rahman plunged into an uncalled for tirade against the person of the Leader of the Opposition. Decency demanded that Moshiur Rahman be immediately asked to retract his words or, in the event of his failing to do that, have his microphone switched off. Neither of these two GROUND REALITIES

The commerce minister, also burdened with managing the nation's water resources, made us happy when he told us sometime ago that prices would come down in the market in June. This is June, and half of it is gone. Prices have kept on going up. The sky is the limit, or so appears to be the mantra of the syndicates running the show and ruining our lives. Now Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan gives us a new time frame for prices to fall. Two more months, says he, and happiness will be ours again.

methods was adopted. The result was a scandalous demonstration of how a lawmaker could easily make a laughing stock of himself and take the country down a path of unbridled embarrassment through rounding on one of the more preeminent of politicians in the country. The scandal was repeated on Monday, when Nasiruddin Pintu gleefully caused an entire nation to go red in the face through speaking maliciously of Sheikh Hasina. You ask yourself: How much lower can we go? And how soon can we put such symbols of obscenity in their

When does the Speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad realize what remarks by members of the lawmaking body need to be expunged? In the recent past, both Jamiruddin Sircar and Akhtar Hamid Siddqui have conveniently fallen back on the argument that they need to examine the record before they can pronounce judgment on whether or not unparliamentary language has been employed in the House. That has hardly satisfied the country, for that has not been an acknowledgement of objective reality at all. The truth is always a simple affair, or should be. When a Member of Parliament sinks to a level where he can accuse the Leader of the Opposition of touching or kissing the feet of a controversial man in the nation's history, one hardly needs to go into an academic study of what constitutes irresponsible, unparliamentary behaviour and what does not. The acting Speaker, of course, did not see

things that way in the House last office not uphold the tradition week, which is a pity. And pity is what you see or feel in abundance these days when you realize how the years effectively dwindled into a national importance are carefully and systematically pushed under

Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar has in an inexplicable way of handling the business of the House made it by and large a point to rule Opposition arguments out of order. That has certainly not added to the majesty of democracy. Nor has it reinforced our feeling that Parliament could well return to being the wave of the near future, the well-spring of all our constitutional ambitions. And it does not help either that Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui has developed the feeling that the Awami League is intent on creating a crisis in the House by raising such issues as will eventually lead to a walk-out on its part. We do not expect Speakers of the Jatiyo Sangsad to adopt such a questionably defined, disturbing stance toward a major political party in the House. If in earlier times, men like Shamsul Huda Chowdhury, Sheikh Razzaq Ali, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury and Abdul Hamid could bring thempositions and politics and thereby accord to parliamentary procedure the weight and substance enshrined in its very essence and subsequent working, why can others holding the same exalted

Ah, but that is where matters of

morality come in. Over the past Jatiyo Sangsad has in the last five many years (and we need not go too far back in time), the perforforum where issues of crucial mance of politicians on the before it has shocked us. If the purpose of power remains the attainment of public welfare, the manner in which a good number of ministers have gone about their jobs can only have been an unmitigated disaster for the country. Altaf Hossain Chowdhury's highly unremarkable performance at Home and then Commerce should have been a sorry tale of the past, cast into the bin of forgetting. That he continues to be emblematic of all that is wrong with ruling çoalition politics today comes from his new-found need for two new officials to be attached to him, despite the very real truth that as a minister without portfolio he is essentially a minister with nothing to do. And he is not the only one in government whose continued presence in politics worries us. There is at least one other minister without portfolio who should have gone a long time ago. And the ministers of state whose very public failures have resulted in their removal from selves to stay clear of partisan office should have properly been considered good riddance. The cheering that might have been reserved for the prime minister had she thrown these men out of office altogether simply did not materialize, for these symbols of adminis-

and unabashedly shifted to other departments of the government.

Overall, then, it is that small matter of morality that rises before us again, thick and unmistakable. We place before ourselves the very loaded question of why ministers in Bangladesh (except in militarydominated regimes) have never quite been informed that their services are no more required by the country. The answer, if you insist upon having one, is that traditionally governments here have been averse to doing things that might be looked upon as an admission of failure. If you ponder the issue, you just might spot the matter of morality once more. You recall the forensic skill with which Jawaharlal Nehru dismissed Krishna Menon after the 1962 debacle with China; and in these volatile times, you have the story of the extremely efficient Natwar Singh being shown the door over some Iraq-related doings. In our own Bengali clime, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took swift action against Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury in 1973. In 1974, he asked Tajuddin Ahmed to resign, and the man who conducted the War of Liberation for us in 1971 obliged, without protest. These are instances of morality. These are some necessary stories of selfesteem we in these parts are heir to. Why are such stories not written

We will not go into the cliché of enlightening ourselves, yet once

through, the everyday agony we happen to be plodding through. hen a ruling party Member of Parliament instills fear in journalsts, enough to compel them to eave his electoral area for dear life, we are alarmed at the bad signals being given out here. Months after the murder of Jamaluddin Chowdhury and weeks after the interment of his bones, the prime suspects in his abduction and killing remain free and beyond the reach of the law. The police, in a disturbing demonstration of physical intimidation, land baton blows on all, lawmakers and common citizens alike, and feel little shame nation's water resources, made us happy when he told us sometime ago that prices would come down in the market in June. This is June, and half of it is gone. Prices have kept on going up. The sky is the limit, or so appears to be the mantra of the syndicates running the show and ruining our lives. Now Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan gives us a new time frame for prices to fall. Two more months, says he, and happiness will be ours again. Over there in Sylhet, the drama over the Saifur-Ilvas affair is drama no more. The finance minister will not be ditching his prime minister after all; and his young bete noir has fallen quiet. A new bridge, on the Manu, has just adopted Saifur Rahman's deceased wife's name

Meanwhile, the Chief Election Commissioner and his colleagues hang on, just, to their jobs. We hold our breath, for unless they go of their own volition or by compulsion, this nation of free men and women will seriously begin to wonder if free, unfettered elections will be possible come January.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka

The Zarqawis among us



IKRAM-SEHGAL writes from Karachi

TH accurate intelligence locating Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and some of his aides in a hut in Baguba, US aircraft successfully targeted the most wanted terrorist in Iraq with two 225 Lbs bombs. Zargawi did not die immediately after the bombing, the 45 minutes leading to his actual death raised a minor controversy. Zarqawi was no intellectual, he was simply an operator made larger than life by media propaganda. In death, the murderous uneducated Jordanian remains very much the man of controversy he was in real life; the tragedy is that as a martyr he will inspire others to more insane acts of terrorism, atrocities not

A small time thug who reached Afghanistan in 1990 after the Soviets had left, Zarqawi ran a camp to train guerillas in a bid to overthrow the monarchy in Jordan, Arrested on return, he remained in jail for 7 years till his release when he somenow entered Iraq in 2001. After Saddam's fall Zarqawi became a terrorist and a very brutal one at that. One need not shed any tears over his demise. Three types of insurgents presently populate Iraq, viz (1) native Iraqi Sunnis, (2) Sunni neo-Salafis and (3) Shia militants. Under this broad canvas exist a myriad number of guerilla groups

People like Zarqawi were really leading double lives, one in which they attacked uniformed opponents which may not be right but was at least legitimate when differentiating freedom movement from terrorism, and the other where they used mayhem and murder to terrorise the population irrespective of their religion and sect, caste and creed. The government's efforts notwithstanding, all of us must also ensure that society as we know it does not disintegrate with this wanton onslaught on the very basis of our religion.

these include Shia groups and fanatical Saddam Hussein followers. The few foreign militants left are mostly in the second group. The Iraqi-fixated native Iraqis

who make up the first group are in a vast majority, they seek to get back the ability to influence or control the administration of Iraq as they once did under Saddam Hussein. In contrast the smaller group of hard-line neo-Salafi Sunnis to which Zargawi belonged seek a regional or global Jihad that will eliminate any presence of Christian and Jews as well as other sects of Islam by forcing them to their interpretation of the religion, their goals affect all Arab states and all of

Zarqawi was an equal opportunity terrorist, his violent Sunni neo-Salafi (and other Sunni Islamist extremist) groups clearly differ from other Sunni insurgents in their willingness to use violence against non-combatants and the innocent even against other Muslims. Far more willing to use extreme methods, like suicide bombers, against coalition soldiers as well as Shi'ite and Kurdish targets, equally used against Iraqi

of different sizes, 200 or so in officials and Iraqis in the military, "gung-ho" only about the negative killing those who do not accept it. Zarqawi's cells, a total of about security, as well as police services, 5000 6000 fanatical others more or and Iraqis of all religious and less on the Zarqawi track. A 100000 ethnic background that do not tion of Jihad. They act on the principle that ordinary Iraqi citizens can be sacrificed in a war fought in

> Mainstream Islam, to which a majority of us belong, believe in not only deep respect for "peoples of the book" but also tolerance for the other sects of Islam and their interpretation thereof. Nowhere does Islam espouse converting others by force to a particular brand of understanding which they do not accept. The use of force is a very narrow interpretation, thankfully it is confined only to a few like Zarqawi. This very small but brutal group of people not only exploited the Iraqi anger at the US invasion, the economic travails in the country and the sheer collective lack of hope in the system, but also raise fears in a majority of Sunnis about being governed by Shiite rule. The Sunni extremists readily target what they are up against but have no real sense about what they are struggling for. If we take a close look at our own militant organisations one will find the same theme of being confused about positive aims and objectives, and being

ones. And do not stop at the militant extremists, ask a majority of just because the ultimate targets

One must strongly condemn the move by some members in the National Assembly (NA) to say "Fateha" for Zarqawi, this is an abomination of our religion and a slur on the name of all of Islam's real "Shaheeds". What is the perception Pakistan is giving to the world, in the face of being called "a terrorist State" by our detractors. That we accept the brutal killing by the beheading of innocents and video-taping thereof for public viewing? Terrorists like Zarqawi have not only divided the religion along sectarian lines but also pitted Sunnis against Sunnis.

By throwing up in stark and violent detail the differences between the various understandings and the bloody consequences thereof, Iraq provides us a great opportunity to recapture the middle ground of moderation, to define Islam correctly as a tolerant religion that encompasses all interpretation and respects each other's views. Islam is very clear about not forcing acceptance of any one particular interpretation

Zargawi has the blood of those Muslims who did not agree with those who gloss over the atrocities him on his hands, those not only

Politics aside, as a caucus of religious parties the Muttahida Mailis-e-Amal (MMA) was (and is) a very welcome development. By encompassing different sects within its fold, the MMA presents a united front of moderate Islam. However there is a contradiction. while refraining from imposing its religious beliefs on each other, the MMA is often guilty of trying to impose these beliefs on those who do not belong to MMA, thereby causing apprehensions about their intentions. It being only natural that those gifted with oratory will dominate debate, some elements among them look to militancy as the sole means of spreading their beliefs, does this minority represent the moderate elements within MMA who constitute the real force of Islam? If the MMA is not careful it will find that the minority militant forces with a gift of the gab will succeed in giving the entire MMA a bad name, in public perception the MMA are not far from such an eventuality.

The Shia-Sunni divide in Iraq is

the world of Islam. While Zarqawi will be eulogised as a martyr by a small fanatical group, his shortsighted brutality against follow Muslims must be held up as the symbol of all that has divided Islam. He seemed to revel in his cruelty towards detractors. Was Zarqawi trying to second guess our beloved Prophet (PBUH) who considered the "peoples of the book" as our brothers?

Very luckily Pakistan has been spared the spate of "suicide bombers" that have proliferated in Iraq and Palestine. How many times have "suicide bombers" attacked military/police installations and uniformed personnel thereof? For the most part women and children have been the victims. Is that what Islam is all about, targeting the innocents and the helpless? At least this is the message going out to friend and foe alike. People like Zargawi were really leading double lives, one in which they attacked uniformed opponents which may not be right but was at least legitimate when differentiating freedom movement from terrorism, and the other where they used mayhem and murder to terrorise the population irrespective of their religion and sect, caste and creed.

The government's efforts notwithstanding, all of us must also ensure that society as we know it does not disintegrate with this wanton onslaught on the very basis of our religion. Not for one moment we can countenance that militant minority with no respect for human lives should gain dominance over a moderate majority. We have to remove the Zarqawis amongst us, with counsel and debate that will focus on the stark choices, but with force if necessary.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is on the other, what to talk about a very dangerous development for a political analyst and columnist

OPINION

EC courts no mercy

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

T'S an absolute irony! Our Election Commission (EC) has become a tyranny, a nasty hotbed of controversy! EC, in a recent meeting, decided that the prospective new voters would have to go the registration offices for being included in the updated voter list which decision leave sheer prospects of genuine voters being out of the voters' list, nonexistent voters remaining in the roll and many ghost voters creeping in the updated voters' list as there will have scope for no practical verification in this not door-do-door method.

As EC is a storehouse of exalted powers and positions, it could even have asked the non-

existentespecially, the deceasedvoters to withdraw their names from the voters' list. After all, EC is steadfast in its endeavor to make an updated voters' roll in line with the Supreme Court directives and all and sundrydead or aliveshould do their utmost to cooperate with this desire of the Election

Yes, my above observation is sort of a satire. Why not? EC officials are constitutionally empowered to do or get done whatever they desire. It is seemingly at their fingertips and, of course, mercy to interpret the rules the way they like so that their brand of interpretations give maximum indulgence to their inflated ego even after being bruised by the Supreme Court. You may question the wistoo much (?) of satire. Yes, I do agree. But, does our current EC invoke anything other than infinite satire? Do its officials have any interest in exhibiting sanity, let alone practicing intellect? Admittedly, the role of Election

Commission can hardly be overemphasized. Many claim thatin the context of Bangladesha firm and proper Election Commission is required more than an apt caretaker government as it is EC which will have do the bulk of activities in holding free and fair elections and the caretaker government will just provide it with assistance from outside. In many established democracies including our powerful neighbour Indiabiggest democracy in the worldelections are conducted quite successfully dom of this write-up as it contains by the Election Commissions.

And, who doesn't know the name of Indian proverbial Election Commissioner T. N. Sessan. Yes, proverbial for his enviable capacity to give berth to gimmicks and controversies!

Ironically, however, our Election Commission is all set to shut up all avenues of holding free and fair elections. While all machineryincluding the vital ECare supposed to make all out efforts to prepare a ground for holding the 2007 general elections assumed by many to be the most important election of Bangladesh's contemporary period --, the EC is wasting inordinate time quite lavishly and jovially by violating or circumventing HC directives and making controversial decisions, the latest

being preparing updated voters' roll without visiting voters' houses. What else can be a worse irony and misfortune for this problem-ridden nation?

This decision of EC has been rightly criticised by legal experts. They have called it illegal, But, I think the matter of practicability is more important than legality in this regard. In context of Bangladesh society, I am pretty sure that this move is entirely impossible to put in. Many have already expressed valid concerns about it. While it will be really difficult for the poor and timeconstraint rural people to reach the rather remote Upazilla registration officers, the urban people will find it a real nuisance. Another real concern can be added to it. Yes, the perennial bureaucratic

incumbents. I fear even the ones opting to go to the registration offices might as well meet with prohibitive bureaucratic hazards in the registration offices.

In fact, this queer move of the EC gives rise to other apprehensions. The EC earlier decided to use information from the nullified fresh voters' rollwhich has been reported to contain around 65 lac fake votersin preparing updated voters' roll. Though EC dropped this decision later on, there is a point in having this skepticism that the current EC might as well pass the nullified voters' roll off as the updated voters' roll which might be difficult to contradict by the general people. This observation might sound quixotic to the gentlemen. But, is it too much to

frame of mind of the official assert that the all-powerful gentlemen in the EC can stoop to anything? Yes, having weighed the integrity and morality of the present EC big bosses, one is certainly tempted to have such a percep-

It can also be said that the present EC under supervision of three such election commissioners have no intention whatsoever to make an enabling environment for the next general elections. They clearly have totally different schemes of things: they have already shown their infamous skill at excuses and guiles. I wonder how polite the civil society people and the masses of the country are. They expectedonly to be dejected once again, thougha u-turn in the attitudes of EC bosses after Supreme Court verdict, even after

their previous bizarre and stub-

Anyway, was there not an opportunity for the EC top officials to make amends? But, this is not to be because it matters little to them what the whole of the nation think. After all, they have constitutional pedigree. May I, however, remind of the plain fact that people of Bangladesh have a valiant history of removing the tyrannical establishments? Who knows that the public won't resort to such historic methods unless the current EC key officials the trio, including CECopt for early exit so as to smoothen the build-up to the next general elections.

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