

Let the election observation business be stopped

In the meantime, an election working group has been formed with thirty-five private organizations to observe and monitor elections. Investigations have revealed that out of these thirty-five organizations, at least twenty-four are direct supporters and associates of the present alliance government. It is a fact that although the election working group was formed to ensure free and fair elections, none of the member organizations, in spite of the High Court judgement, has raised any single voice against the illegal role being played by the EC in the work of updating the voter list.

NOOH-UL-ALAM LENIN

THOUGH the ninth parliamentary election is imminent, still it is shrouded in uncertainty. The way in which the Election Commission is playing with the updating of the electoral roll, the holding of fair elections seems well-nigh impossible.

Nor is there any apparent sign of removing the wide differences between the government and opposition over the reforms of caretaker government, EC, and election system.

Rather, the political situation in the country is gradually becoming more tense. One would not be very surprised if the existing conflicting political state of affairs suddenly gives rise to a tsunami-like mass explosion in the country in the coming two to three month's time.

True, the political parties have not halted their preparation for the election in spite of conflict, bloodshed, and uncertainty. But despite all these preparations, it can be said without any hesitation that without understanding and unanimity between the two principal parties, no desirable election can be held in Bangladesh.

Whatever be the uncertainty in the internal political situation centering round elections, the traders in the election observation business are not sitting idle. The self-appointed attorneys for election observation of the country, armed with finance from abroad, have been perspiring with their vast preparation for the last more than one year.

Crores of taka will be spent for the observers to certify whether the election to be held in Bangladesh is fair and acceptable. The Asia Foundation and various donor agencies, through local NGOs registered in Bangladesh, will perform this great task.

Foreign representatives of various international organizations will also come to observe the election directly. The European Union and an agency of the UN have also announced their intention to observe the election.

Recently, the "election observation" affair has been established as an international phenomenon. Specially in developing and undeveloped countries whose democracy has not taken deep root and where a reliable election system has not grown up, the international election observation arrangement has been recognized as a practice.

The presence of observers will discourage fraud and coercion in the election and the certificate or opinion of the observers will give legitimacy to the government of the winning party -- this is the idea working behind the observation system.

Due to the absence of dependable election system, we have accepted in principle the observation system since 1996 parliamentary election. So the question of opposing the presence of neutral international observation teams in the ensuing election does not arise.

On the other hand, the experience of our observation of local government election is not a very happy one. Rather this motivated observation-trade has proved to be an impediment to free, fair, and neutral elections.

In our country, election observation was first started in 1986 during the national parliament election. At that time, a few local and foreign observers performed the duties of mobile observation in a limited way.

Organized observation started in 1990 during the upazilla elections. With the return of parliamentary democracy after the termination of autocratic rule in the country, some 30,000 local and about 4,000 foreign observers, on behalf of various civil organizations,

observed the national assembly elections in 1991 and 1996.

We have no documentary data to show how far our election system has been benefited by this observation or to what extent the faults and deviations detected in the eyes of the observers have been corrected. But the local private organizations have fully enjoyed the sweet taste of the vast amount of money spent for these observations and have been able to transform this observation system into a lucrative business for raising income.

In one jump, the number of observers rose to 500,000 in 2001 election from 30,000 in 1996 election. Seventy-five private organizations got the official recognition of the Election Commission as election observers. And when observers certified the fraudulent election of 2001 as free, fair, and neutral, we don't fail to understand as to what type of spectacles were worn by these observers.

In the 1991 and 1996 parliament elections, the observers had to face many limitations and restrictions. But in the election of 2001, the observation matter was shamelessly politicized.

Though the EC and NGO Bureau framed eight-point conditions and a set of rules, in reality, these were flouted by the EC itself. Lakhs of officials of local organizations applied to the district returning officers for permission to work as observers, and observers of many organizations were given permission on party consideration.

The returning officers tried to keep the number of observers within limits. But in the meantime, the BNP-Jamat ring-leaders behind the caretaker government succeeded in convincing the chief adviser and the chief election commissioner of the necessity of bringing the matter of appointment

of election observers to the direct control of the EC office, in blatant contravention of the set rules. But the objection raised by one election commissioner in this regard was rejected.

The Awami League also opposed this process. The Awami League raised questions about the neutrality of fourteen private organizations who were supporters of the four-party alliance, and demanded, in clear terms, that they be barred from official observation. But the EC, again in contravention of the set rules, turned a deaf ear to this demand.

Rather, the EC itself, breaching its own conditions and rules, took over the responsibility of appointing observers from the jurisdiction of district returning officers. Even before the last moment of election, the EC had no list of observers as per the rules. Only three days before the election, in great haste, on 48 hours' notice, lakhs of identity cards were printed and distributed among seventy-five private organizations.

The EC allowed the observers to take identity cards indiscriminately, without caring to require picture, names, addresses, educational qualification, age, etc of the observers. And with these identity cards issued in the name of various organizations, the BNP-Jamaat cadres threateningly roamed each election centre. They approached even up to the polling booths and influenced the presiding officers, raising false allegations against the agents of the Awami League and forcing them to leave the booths.

These so-called "observers" acted as faithful cadres of BNP-Jamaat. The EC cannot even tell as to whom they allowed to work as observers and where. Election Commission and NGO Bureau had no record to show whether or not the observers were without party affiliation, whether or not they had any connection with the organizations in whose names they were given accreditation, whether or not they had any idea about the responsibilities, duties, and rights of the observers, and how many observers were allowed to work.

The leaders in Hawa Bhavan and the intelligence agencies have built up an election observation network of their choice much earlier this time. To our knowledge, the

formalities for appointment of observers belonging to the syndicates of the private organizations, under the direct or indirect control of the ruling alliance and its allies, have been almost finalized.

Like last election, this time also the foreign donor agencies have taken the move to provide Tk 80 crores to finance the local private organizations and election observer groups through the Asia Foundation.

It is gathered from a reliable source that although the responsibility for selecting NGOs rested on the chief of the organization, but in this regard the program adviser, who has links with BNP, played the principal role. As a result, many experienced NGOs have not been selected for election observation work. So the question has been raised in various quarters regarding this selection of election observers.

In the meantime, an election working group has been formed with thirty-five private organizations to observe and monitor elections. Investigations have revealed that out of these thirty-five organizations, at least twenty-four are direct supporters and associates of the present alliance government.

It is a fact that although the election working group was formed to ensure free and fair elections, none of the member organizations, in spite of the High Court judgement, has raised any single voice against the illegal role being played by the EC in the work of updating the voter list. No comment or anxiety has been noticed from the working group to the fact that preparation of a correct voter list is a pre-condition for a fair and meaningful election.

We are, of course, not at all, surprised at this. Because the leading organizations of the workers group, namely Khan Foundation, Democracy Watch, Odhikar, Lighthouse, and FEMA are all directly linked to the alliance government.

The chief of Khan Foundation is the wife of an alliance government minister, and the director of Democracy Watch is the wife of one of the PM's pre-eminent mouth-pieces. The director of Odhikar recently left the job of attorney general of the alliance government and the present attorney

general is its executive director. Naturally, a question may arise as to how loyal attorneys of a party can be neutral. Bogra-based Lighthouse is blessed by the son of the prime minister. The control of FEMA is also with alliance supporters now.

These organizations were directly involved in the implementation of the blue-print of the four-party alliance during the 2001 general election. That is why objections were raised and formal protest letters were sent by the Awami League to the EC, the caretaker government, and even the president, against these organizations.

The opposition parties are justifiably fearing that the four-party alliance will this time use these so-called election observers with a view to engineering the election. Since twenty-four organizations out of thirty-five of the working group are under the influence of the four-party alliance, there is no possibility of neutral election observation and monitoring by the local observers.

In the meantime, an executive committee has been formed consisting of eleven organizations. Out of these, the heads of seven organizations are known to be associated with BNP politics. Of these organizations with party blessings, six have been given observation duty in twenty-two constituencies each and one for ten constituencies. These decisions were taken in the executive committee.

From the rest, ten will be given five constituencies each and eighteen will be allotted six constituencies each. There will be a spokesman for these NGOs. Final process has also been made to give the responsibility of the spokesman to the head of Democracy Watch, which is supported by and has close links to, the alliance government.

Indeed, if the caretaker government, EC, and administration play their role fairly neutrally, there is no necessity for the election observation certificate. But as this observation-trade is linked with the re-instatement of the four-party alliance government and at the same time gaining of a vast amount of money from the foreign donors, the so-called local observer-group and four-party alliance will not want the discontinuation of this observation-business.



But we think that associating the local observers will call a free and fair election into question. So we feel that those political parties, members of civil society, and good citizens who want free and fair elections should come forward in order to stop this election-trade of the local private election observer organizations.

Let there be any misunderstanding about these observations of mine, I want to emphasize in clear terms that we have no objection to any observers from EU, US, UN, or SAARC countries, and other reliable international election observers.

It is our earnest desire that they should start observation and monitoring from the very beginning of the enrollment of voters and cover the whole process of election, and detect the flaws, faults and mistakes, if there be any. But we have already observed that the alliance government has not allowed the EU or Tuesday Group to hold an assembly on election affairs.

The international election observation groups are being discouraged and obstructed from pre-election observation. It has been learnt that the foreign lobbyists appointed during the present government are also being engaged in election observation. They have been working to restrict the influx of foreign observers to the minimum. And it has been gathered that they have been successful in a limited way. Still, we hope that international election observer groups will get a chance to work freely.

Lastly, we feel that there can be no greater observer and preserver of election results than the people of Bangladesh. In the Chittagong mayoral election, it was not the official observers but the lakhs of people of the city who protected the election result and their voting rights. In the future also, only the organized strength of the people can help holding of free and fair elections and of protecting the result.

A personal memory of Shamsun Nahar Begum

ARUNDHATI ROY

THIS is a tribute to an extraordinary person, Mashima, who I knew for the last 56 years.

I wonder how many of her close friends and family have heard the accounts of her life's extraordinary journey. I was fortunate to have heard most of it from her. She had candour, humour, and passion with which she lived her life. Her life with her husband, my Meshomoshai, was certainly one of romance, mutual respect and dignity, rarely witnessed today. Whenever she wanted to talk about him, I could sense and feel the diminishment in her life.

She grew up during a time of tumultuous social and political change in the subcontinent, leading to the partition of India. At that time she decided to travel to Bangladesh to settle down. I am sure it was the right choice that she made, young as she was, in the prime of her life. She wanted to look ahead and not back. What a proactive mind indeed, considering those times of our history! Sadly enough, she left behind a multitude of friends who never ever forgot her. After Meshomoshai's death, she came to Kolkata only once and made it a point to reconnect with them, to their joy!

Again, she learnt about the world by reading books that were very close to heart; literature was her passion till the last moment of her life. I spent hours sharing our

reading experiences from prose to poetry, drama, philosophy, religion, and what not. She was a humanitarian to the last dot. In her life, Mashima had to absorb shock after shock due to tragedies in the family. She quietly cried and cried, over the phone every time I spoke to her. I tried to console her with words of endearment after which she would gather composure.

I cannot deny that I had the most delightful and happy relationship with Mashima. I will never forget the toast biscuit for tea on my tea-tray every day; the big koi fish kept alive in the water container for orange koi, kalai kebabs, parathas galore, which we devoured merrily! She felt and exuded such love that one

could see it to believe it. Jamai ador (hospitality shown to a bridegroom by his in-laws) was very special for her, and she never differentiated between Jyoti, Manaf, Karim, Reza, and Jameel. I think my husband is much blessed.

On a more serious note, I want to emphasize the fact that she was a true humanist. I never saw a flash of arrogance or annoyance on her face. She cared for the poor and the rich alike. Simplicity was her hallmark, and it shaped her life. I always admired her because she was more than a mother to me: a friend, a philosopher, and a guide. I feel this is the strongest possible bond between two human beings. She was every-

thing to everybody: a model of inspiration, a patient counselor and a sterling example. Her enormous depth of commitment to all people can be only perceived by discerning minds. She possessed grace and beauty of a rare quality and was admired by all who came in contact with her.

I feel that Mashima has not really left me. I can visualize her as vividly as I did in the past. I remember her voice, her recipes, the things she told me. No, I have not forgotten anything! I can see every line and contour on her face. Her monumental presence in my life will always be felt. Much of what I am and have become is in some way attributable to her. She was an epitome of motherly heroism. May her soul rest in peace.

Nasrallah's men in America

DAN EPHRON AND MICHAEL ISIKOFF

IT began, as the Feds tell the tale, with a run-of-the-mill tax-fraud scheme. Imad Hammoud and his ring of Lebanese Americans from the Detroit area would buy boxes of cigarettes in North Carolina, where the state tax on smokes is among the lowest in the country, allegedly truck the goods back to Michigan and sell them at a profit of more than \$10 a carton. Hammoud, an immigrant with ties to Hezbollah, according to an indictment filed with a US district court in Michigan earlier this year, would then wire a portion of the earnings to a member of the group in Lebanon. By 2002, Hammoud and some of his colleagues were believed to be running \$500,000 worth of cigarettes a week across state lines and expanding into stolen contraband and counterfeit goods, including Viagra tablets. During a three-month period that year, authorities allege, more than 90,000 Viagra knockoffs were purchased, with a plan to sell them as the real thing. "They're small, they're high in demand and they're easily transportable," says Bob Clifford, a senior FBI agent. "They're the perfect medium."

The Hammoud case is among a handful of money scams uncovered across the country in recent years bearing Hezbollah's fingerprints. Though the revenues are not huge, the cases together underscore a daunting reality: one of the most proficient terrorist groups in the world has at least a small web of operatives in America who, prosecutors believe, are loyal to Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah has not targeted Americans since the 1980s, when attacks on a Marine barracks in Lebanon and on the US Embassy there killed more than 300 people. Sometime later, the group apparently made a strategic decision not to tweak the world's only superpower. Law enforcers say there's been no sign of the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, with all the Arab anger it stirs against America, will goad the group into action against the United States. Still, security officials worry that if Hezbollah does one day decide to strike, it can exploit an already-existing network in this country. "You often see in these groups that people who deal in finances also have military backgrounds," says Chris Hamilton, who was the FBI's unit chief for Palestinian investigations until last year. "The fact is, they have the ability (to attack) in

the United States."

The FBI has made Hezbollah a central target of its counterterrorism efforts, setting up a unit dedicated to tracking the group and assigning agents to develop sources in Lebanese and other Middle Eastern communities across the country. Clifford, who once headed the unit on Hezbollah and Iran, made his biggest Hezbollah bust six years ago, cracking a North Carolina ring that forged credit cards and laundered money, using some of the profits to buy gear for Hezbollah. The ringleader, Mohammed Hammoud (no relation to Imad), was convicted of providing "material support" for terrorism and sentenced to 155 years in prison. Although he and his followers were not linked to actual terror attacks, the FBI found evidence they did engage in "tactical" arms training and would have been ready to strike if told to do so. "If they were given an order to conduct an operation in the United States, they would have found a way to do it," Clifford says.

What might prompt Hezbollah to issue such an order? American screw-tightening on Iran over its nuclear program, for one. Iran is Hezbollah's main political and financial backer. Some analysts believe the group's deadliest terrorist attacks, including bombings at Israel's Argentine Embassy in 1992 and at a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, were ordered up by Iranian handlers. "It would be enough for the Iranian leadership to say the word for Hezbollah to launch an attack," says Congressman Ed Royce, a Republican from California who chairs the House subcommittee on international terrorism and nonproliferation.

But Hamilton, who is now a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Studies, says Hezbollah would be more likely to attack Americans abroad. "They would go for soft targets in places where they have lots of resources," such as South America or Turkey. Other experts believe Hezbollah would have too much to lose from an attack on American soil. "Their fund-raising activities have been very fruitful in the United States," says Dennis Lormel, who was the FBI's section chief for terrorist financing until 2003. "With Israel clamping down on their other sources of revenue, it wouldn't make sense for them to wreck their own ability to continue making money here."

Support for Nasrallah runs high

in Lebanese communities across the country, and it spikes when Israel's war with Hezbollah or with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza heats up. When Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy John Stedman searched the home of a Lebanese immigrant in Los Angeles two years ago, he found Hezbollah flags decorating the walls, along with pictures of Nasrallah and audiotapes of his speeches. "We love him," Stedman quotes a resident of the home as saying, "because he protects us from the Jews." In a case against a Lebanese immigrant in Dearborn, Mich, who is suspected of tax fraud, prosecutors have showcased pictures of the suspect seated alongside Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, Hezbollah's spiritual leader, at a 2002 fund-raiser in Lebanon.

But Arab-American leaders complain law enforcers are too quick to equate the pride some expatriates take in Hezbollah's stand against Israel -- or even just the sympathy they feel for the Lebanese people -- with support for terrorism. "Any time somebody sends money to somebody in Lebanon, they (prosecutors) say it's for Hezbollah," says Maurice Herskovic, who initially represented one of the defendants in the Detroit case.

Recently two of the defendants reached a plea bargain with prosecutors, admitting to several fraud charges that carry a penalty of up to 30 months in prison, but they were not charged with terrorism. Hammoud was not among them. Though three of his brothers entered not-guilty pleas in the case, prosecutors say Hammoud slipped out of the United States and is probably back in Lebanon, where Hezbollah gunmen are waging bloody street battles with Israeli troops. "This is a new organization (compared with what it was years ago)," says Bob Baer, a retired CIA agent who spent years in the Middle East. "It's fighting a conventional war." Yet it also has the capacity to carry out devastating terrorist attacks. In Europe and South America, and possibly in the United States as well, that's a threat law enforcers must take seriously.

With Jamie Reno in San Diego, John Sparks in New York and Mark Hosenball in Paris.

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RMG needs good trade union

KAZI ABDUR ROUF

OUR garment industry plays an important role in the world economy and thereby makes Bangladesh prosperous. We, as citizens of the country, feel proud because of the rapid growth of this industry, further expedited by foreign investors as they are encouraged by our comparatively cheap labour cost. Nationally and internationally acknowledged, our success can lead to the highest economical growth imaginable.

However, in May 2006 a disturbing epidemic came over the garment industry. Some desperate labourers were singled out as being responsible for such an infernal act. Huge loss of time, money and materials were lost for investors and garments manufacturers. TV cameras revealed that 90% of the women workers refrained from picketing. From various information sources it is clear that most picketers did not belong to garment factories and a group of non-labourers indulged in the violence.

Only few women workers attended negotiation meeting for regaining some facilities. Our national intelligence sources

said that they knew about the incident. If so, then did they not take necessary measures before the incident? Industrial labourers have a right to place their demand and they need a strong and authentic labour union with whom they can proceed to solve all kinds of service problems. But alas! Nothing is done according to principle.

A strong and powerful union means a union that satisfies both the owners and the labourers and which in turn keeps the industry running well. The disturbance seemed to be a pre-planned destruction and sabotage by misled people. Authorities still have not found out the real reasons for violence. Eventually, the garment factory owners' association called a press conference after the unlawful situation to express views that no garment worker was involved in the violence.

In our country, no demand can be granted without street procession. Why does it happen? Usually, workers' rights unmet by owners, incite them to act aggressively. On joining a garment factory, most workers do not know about the training period, probation period, whether

or not they will get tenure, or for that matter, what their gross salary and net salary will be.

All rules of compliance are usually maintained by workers. But they complain about the deprivations they suffer on many levels. Chief among these are: having no appointment letter, job identification card, government-declared minimum salary, overtime benefits, weekend vacation, yearly vacation, maternity leave, yearly medical checkup, injury treatment during working hours. Setting up garment factories and running them profitably is a big achievement of the owners, but at the same time they should take into account their social responsibility towards a worker who is such an integral part of the business.

A powerful trade union is nothing but a useless signboard unless it is licensed and verified by all corners of management and the government. Trade unions should have their well-established administrative offices and these offices should not work under pressure from any agency. They should not be paid by the government or by any factories. The union must abide by the labour law, industrial law,

and government instructions. Only one trade union should be given permission to be raised in the garment industry.

To avail of the benefits workers should have to subscribe monthly as settled by the trade union and the owners' associations. On the other hand, same amount per head should be subscribed by every owner of the industry. Both amounts will be deposited to the trade union account. This money will be treated as non-refundable. Every expenditure shall be covered from this fund: salary of union management, workers, insurance, treatment facilities, yearly physical check-up, yearly eye and dental care, student scholarship, micro-credit, retirement allowance, a well-equipped hospital for labourers, etc.

It may take time, but if it is achieved, it will brighten up the industrial atmosphere. We actually need a permanent solution for a better future. I am sure if the factory owners take cognizance of the suggestions I have offered, violence can be averted in future. Workers should understand they have to respect the rules and regulations. If they fail to carry out duties properly and get

involved in undisciplined behaviour, they may be dismissed from service. For example, theft, drug addiction, intoxication, sex abuse, sabotage, procession inside factory, fighting, compromising the privacy of the factory, or any kind of vandalism may lead to suspension from work for an indefinite period or even to job loss.

The trade union cannot be appealed to for re-instating jobs lost because of the above reasons. But the union should have the right to probe the facts. If the team finds injustice, the case can be pursued for reconsideration. The union can take action if a worker is not getting his or her salary and the union can also hold meetings with the authorities for yearly increment or any other welfare benefits. The union representatives should be allowed to visit factories as and when they wish to.

What the industry needs is a conscientious and functional trade union that is dedicated to the protection of the workers' interests. This will be good for all parties.

The writer is a retired army officer.