

What if people power is not right?

At the end of a week of agitation, the Coal, Natural Gas, Port Protection Committee is claiming "people's victory" and celebrations are in the streets of Phulbari and our TV screens. But is it a victory for anyone and everyone? I believe, in the long run, it certainly is not for Bangladesh. We have put in doubt (if not back by half a decade) the much-needed foray into coal mining. A long shadow has been cast on our exemplary record when it comes to the country's sovereign dealings. Further FDI in areas of infrastructure and basic industry development has taken a few leaps back. The country's "risk premium" has gone up quite a few notches!

NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY

ARE we throwing the baby out with the bath water? A junior minister of the BNP government and the Rajshahi mayor in their infinite wisdom have decided what will be Bangladesh's FDI and Coal Policy. At the same time given official endorsement to the mass uprising that has been instigated by a group whose political and economic beliefs are still rooted in the communist Soviet era.

Asia Energy (AEC) deal might be suspect and we should examine it to the bone, but does it mean we let our dealing with one company dictate our national policies? It is like saying that because the deal to build a bridge has not been transparent, let us tear it down! We are overlooking the benefits accruing to the nation by going in for the coal mining project weather with AEC or otherwise. A project of this magnitude does not only have direct benefits but also through a multiplier effect has ripple effects across the economy.

Few simple examples: say to transport the coal to its markets, the rail and port networks have to develop. Can you imagine what benefits it would give North Bengal? And what about the hundreds of people employed in the area to

support those who have been employed by AEC. Shopkeepers and teacher; policemen and rickshaw pullers; cleaners and security guards the list goes on. And think of the ancillary industries that could be developed using coal as raw material. Project of this nature would have made Dinajpur prosperous and the nation with it.

We should examine what are the arguments put up against AEC's project:

1. Open Pit vs. Deep Shaft Mining: The big debate stems around the choice of mining methods. The productivity of the Open Pit mining (up to 90% as opposed to 20%) itself should have been sufficient an argument. But added to that there are other benefits of this method. For example, Shaft mining is notoriously hazardous to human health. Fire, cave-ins, gas leak, etc all lead to quite a few disasters each year across the world. Our Barapukaria mine itself is no exception. Another thing to note is that the coal basin in the area is quite deep underground. I believe more than 400 meters down. This makes shaft mining quite unproductive and unmanageable.

2. Ground Water Management: Experts have rightly pointed out that there is a major issue with ground water system. Apparently the

deposit is under an underground aquifer. So to extract the coal all the water has to be pumped out. This creates two problems. Firstly the question of what to do with the excess water that comes up and secondly the general water level of the area might go down. Both these issues need to be managed. Despite what some people are saying, the water will not be just pumped out into the open. Creating an artificial lake and re-using the water in the mining process can be a solution. Why, an irrigation system for the North Bengal itself can be developed, bringing year-round farming to the entire drought (Monga) prone area. Interestingly there are examples in South India where Chennai's water supply comes from mines hundreds of miles away. We could perhaps solve the water crisis that has hit Dhaka through this method.

3. Environmental Management: The idea of soot falling all over the area and creating black skies is as old as the demise of the British mining industry. New environmental systems can easily mitigate such issues. Coal, unlike in shaft mining, is actually dug up by giant excavators and human exposure to it is minimum. Of course a proper environmental management procedure needs to be in place. I understand

that the newer open pit quarries are not only up to Kyoto prescribed emission levels but can actually earn tradable credits.

4. Displacement of People: A side effect of this project will be the displacement of people. Now be it 40,000 (as AEC claims) or 100,000+ (as those opposing claim) there will be a lot of people losing their ancestral land. This is not a new thing. Building of any large infrastructure project will result in this. Say for example the new expressway between Dhaka and Chittagong that is being talked about; do you think this will only be on land currently owned by the government? However, proper compensation for this loss needs to happen. This is not only market price of the land being paid, but also finding long-term earning potential of those displaced. Jobs that will be created should of course go to those displaced first.

5. Vast Areas Required: I've heard a few arguments of how the national mining policies have guidelines of how much land a mine should or can use. One needs to re-examine this. Is it not common sense that we should utilise the maximum amount of land so that we have the maximum return? Also the non-coal earth that will be dug out needs to be stored in proper manner so that after all the coal has been brought out the area can be re-filled and re-claimed to be used as farmland.

6. Royalty Earning: there is a lot of confusion regarding this one. 20% vs. 6% the argument goes. Well for one the National Coal Policy has not been agreed upon as yet. We need to ensure that Bangladesh benefits to the most degree possible. If this means 20% or more so be it. We should not let this negotiation be done on any-

one's terms but ours. Currently per se 6, 20 or 50 percent makes no sense without proper justifications backing it. Does it mean that we cannot have a new coal mining policy with new royalty levels? No. We need one that all stakeholders need to buy into.

7. Export of Coal: As in the case of Natural gas, we are rightly very possessive about what happens to our limited resources. Some argument has been tabled that some large coal producing countries do not export their coal. That is because of their domestic demands. Energy hungry countries like China need all that they can dig up. I agree that we need to find enough value addition that we can do to the product in our economy. We need to diversify our energy basket and take the pressure of producing electricity away from natural gas (as it has other high value addition use) and use coal (which in this case has a very rich calorific content) for this purpose. So if we can create a substantial domestic market at prices that will allow AEC to offset production costs and earn a reasonable profit, there is no reason why we should not limit, or stop, the amount of coal that they can export.

8. Debate: This argument is my favourite. I hear everyone say that the deal should not be "against national interest." Of course! Is that not a given? I am being bit naive here. Given Bangladesh's history, this has not always been the case. So, yes, a national debate should happen. And the deal needs to be transparent. But how can this happen? The government and the opposition should ideally be discussing it in the Jatiya Sangsad. After all, our elected representatives have been mandate by us to decide this matter. Unfortunately for



our young democracy, our leaders have not agreed on being in the same room at the same time, let alone things that affect our lives! So where can this debate happen? Currently this is being conducted via proxy in the media. While the scrutiny by our journalist friends have ensured we don't get a raw deal, it is not a very conducive or conclusive manner of debate. And running street battle in Phulbari is certainly not the way to go about the issue. Brings me back to square onedebate must happen, but where? Answer to this one I don't know.

At the end of a week of agitation, the Coal, Natural Gas, Port Protection Committee is claiming

"people's victory" and celebrations are in the streets of Phulbari and our TV screens. But is it a victory for anyone and everyone? I believe, in the long run, it certainly is not for Bangladesh. We have put in doubt (if not back by half a decade) the much-needed foray into coal mining. A long shadow has been cast on our exemplary record when it comes to the country's sovereign dealings. Further FDI in areas of infrastructure and basic industry development has taken a few leaps back. The country's "risk premium" has gone up quite a few notches!

And scariest thing of all, we have given the people idea that by being able to create a false favour we can achieve almost anything. So when we give into students protesting and

demanding that examination dates be postponed so that they can watch football; when we give into employees and run a loss-making airline; when we give into agitating typists and ensure the growth of bureaucracy; we also give out a signal that the loudest (and not always the brightest) is mightiest! Unfortunately there are times when people do get it wrong.

Nazim Farhan Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star. You can read more of his writings at <http://nazimfarhan.blogspot.com>.

Caretaker controversy and the army

The PM is apprehensive of a "crisis" erupting when the CTG will be saddled in power, disrupting its ability to govern the country and conduct the elections. Therefore, she is suggesting that the armed forces get involved by upholding the authority of the CTG and quelling opposition, if there is any, in its holding elections. Her logic for expecting armed forces backing for forthcoming CTG is that it would be a constitutional government.

GHULAM RAHMAN

PRIME Minister Khaleda Zia, once a docile middle-class house-wife, by now has become a shrewd politician. I believe, she is a wise, tolerant, and patriotic leader committed to democracy and the welfare of the people. However, her recent moves and utterances have dismayed me, as I find in them ominous portents.

The prime minister in a public meeting at Banchkhali on August 29, said that the chief advisor to next caretaker government (CTG) will be appointed as per the constitution. Further, she declared: "Elections will be held in accordance with the constitution and the chief advisor will assume office as per constitution. It does not matter who accepts it or who does not." She also opined that the Election Commission is performing its functions properly, but the opposition is not cooperating with it and obstructing its assigned functions.

Earlier in the morning, she

addressed a "darbar" of army, navy, and air force in Chittagong cantonment where she said: "As per constitutional provision, a caretaker government will take over on expiry of our tenure in October this year and make arrangements for holding a free and fair election."

She then emphasized that members of the armed forces not only participate in war but also cooperate with the civil administration during "crisis time." She reminded the troops of defense forces taking part in maintaining peace and in restoration of democracy in different countries. Finally, she expressed her conviction that members of the armed forces will play their effective role in holding the forthcoming national election.

A careful reading of the PM's views expressed in the public meeting and her address to the troops in Chittagong, which she repeated in Rajshahi and Bogra later, indicates that she is in no mood to reform either the CTG system or the Election Commission

as demanded by her political opponents and intends to hand over power to a caretaker government of her choosing with the current EC in charge.

She is, however, apprehensive of a "crisis" erupting when the CTG will be saddled in power, disrupting its ability to govern the country and conduct the elections. Therefore, she is suggesting that the armed forces get involved by upholding the authority of the CTG and quelling opposition, if there is any, in its holding elections. Her logic for expecting armed forces backing for forthcoming CTG is that it would be a constitutional government.

The CTG is a unique form government which exists nowhere else in the world. The CTG concept has not developed in a day or out of the blue. We witnessed its birth in Bangladesh in an environment of usurpation of state power by autocratic military rulers and bankruptcy of democratic and moral values.

General Ershad, in the face of unprecedented agitation for peo-

ple's democratic rights, relinquished power in 1990 to a caretaker government which was formed on the basis of consensus of opposition political parties.

The BNP formed government in 1991 but could not keep from large-scale electoral irregularities in the March 1994 Magura by-election. A democratically elected government, like its predecessor, lost trust. This sparked nation-wide political unrest and the demand for incorporation of a provision for a neutral caretaker government in the constitution for conducting free and fair election and orderly and peaceful transfer of power.

In February 1996, the BNP government organized a fraudulent election in a voter-less poll amid non-participation of the AL. The new BNP government lasted only to enact an amendment to the constitution incorporating provisions for a neutral CTG for holding election at the expiry/termination of tenure of each elected government.

In 2001 election, BNP-led four-party alliance won a thumping victory of two-thirds majority in the parliament and formed the government. Ironically, once saddled in power it embarked on a plan to perpetuate its rule through an engineered "make believe" fraudulent election in 2007. It started tampering with every state institution responsible for holding a free and fair election.

• First, the constitution was amended to raise retirement age of Supreme Court Judges from 65 to 67 years to pave the way for a BNP loyalist, the then Chief Justice K.M. Hasan, to become CTG chief during 2007 election.

• Second, President Badruddoza Chowdhury, another BNP man, was removed from office when he tried to uphold the "neutral image" of "presidency" and present president Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed escaped removal in the face of hue and cry of the media and the opposition political parties, particularly of AL.

• Third, an Election Commission was constituted with persons whose neutrality is doubtful. The CEC Justice M.A. Aziz and his colleagues in EC are overtly partisan. The AL and other opposition parties view that no credible election is possible with them at the helm of affairs.

• Fourth, the government politicized the entire administration, appointing party loyalists in every election-related position. Two senior most secretaries, considered to be somewhat neutral, were first retired and then appointed ambassadors, apparently to remove them from the line of promotion for becoming cabinet and principal secretary during the next CTG.

Given this scenario, the opposition political parties have put forward a number of demands

including reforming of the CTG and EC as preconditions for their participation in the election in January 2007. Conforming to a suggestion made by the prime minister, the opposition placed their demands in the parliament and since then a process of negotiation started but than stalled on disagreement over composition of the government's negotiating team.

However, now it seems that the government was not sincere in proposing negotiation with the opposition. Instead of sorting out the problem, the prime minister has started calling upon the armed forces to side with the CTG of her election.

The PM's recent statements could be construed to suggest that she is soliciting the country's armed forces to become a party to her game plan. This is unfortunate. Our armed forces are the symbol of our national unity, independence, and sovereignty. They are trusted treasure of the nation. They should be kept above all political controversies.

In 1990 they did not side with President Ershad, though he was once one of them. Neither is it expected they would take sides in any political rivalry in the future. In recent past, the armed forces of Thailand and Ukraine also did not take sides in the government-opposition row.

The CTG's right to govern the

country arises from the trust and confidence of the people in its perceived neutrality. Allegiance of major political parties is germane to the legitimacy of any CTG. If political parties which commanded support of almost half of the population in the 2001 election do not trust a CTG it would have no moral, and perhaps also no legal, right to govern the country.

Justice K.M. Hasan, CA designate, once international affairs secretary of BNP and President Zia's ambassador to Iraq, is known to be a man of impeccable integrity. As a judge he felt embarrassed in the Bangabandhu murder case, reportedly because one of his relatives was facing death penalty. He refused to take part in a bench of a high profile case as his relationship's involvement might influence his judgment. He being such a moral person, would he assume the post of chief advisor, when half of the country has already moved no-confidence in him?

In case he makes himself "unavailable" for the post, as per the constitution, another judge, who might be acceptable to both BNP and AL would become CA and in such a scenario the present EC would, perhaps, find the exit quickly. On the other hand, if Justice Hasan takes over as CA and lacks the backing of the armed forces, his unelected government would not be able to govern the country and hold the election in the

midst of opposition agitation. It would fall like a house of cards, plunging the country into total uncertainty.

Despite five-year's poor report cards due to failure when it comes to curbing spiraling prices, shortages and scarcities of electricity, fertilizer, diesel oil, protecting Bangladesh citizens from BSF fire, rampant corruption and toll collection, the BNP is still the party of choice for millions. In a free and fair election, its chance of victory and coming back to power is as bright as that of any other party. For turning this possibility into reality the sine quo non is the holding of a credible election in January 2007.

However, without an agreement between the BNP and the AL on the issue of CTG and EC, no credible election would be possible, and any future government formed on the basis of the results of a poll boycotted by a major political party would not be able to govern the country effectively.

Therefore, it would be statesmanlike for the prime minister, in the best interest of her party as well as of the country, to resolve the row over the next CTG and EC reforms with the opposition before she leaves office in October, instead of bringing the country's armed forces into the BNP-AL political dispute.

The author is a former Secretary to the government.

THE VOICE OF TOMORROW: EPISODE 3

Are beauty contests compatible with Bangladeshi culture and heritage?

Some audience members even compared the right to participate in such contests to democratic rights, and questioned why society should obstruct someone from doing something that she may want to of her own free will. Some also said that this could pave the way for promoting the apparel and textile industry of our country to the world at large.

CHOWDHURY ABD-ALLAH QUASEED

THE discussion commenced on a very interesting note with two panellists denouncing the practice of beauty contests in the context of Bangladesh, saying that this is contrary, not only to the religious values of most people of the nation, but also to the historical heritage of our country, where beauty has been perceived traditionally as something to be expressed through conservative mannerisms rather

than through flaunting and exposure, which is what most beauty contests seem to centre around at present.

One panellist said that inner beauty, the kind which is timeless and which cannot be tainted with age or disease, is what ought to be glorified rather than the external beauty. While censuring beauty contests from the cultural standpoint, it was said that though the country's culture itself has changed radically since the early 90s due to the satellite television channels, and that limitations have to be

imposed on the extent to which we should allow our culture to change.

Another panellist said that such contests were making young women more conscious about their appearance and were helping to find many new talents in the entertainment industry and was paving the way for better careers and earning opportunities for many people as well.

The last panellist also supported beauty contests saying, that in the same way that "interest" had become well accepted in our banking system and economy, in spite

of being forbidden in Islam according to certain schools of thought, that in the same way, beauty contests could also be absorbed into the lifestyle of the country gradually subverting any religious barrier, if there should be any, in consideration of the positive aspects of the practice.

When I took the discussion to the gallery of university students, I was quite astonished to find that almost the entire audience supported beauty contests to varying degrees, while some did so, but with certain conditions. But none totally rejected the concept, showing that the youth of today certainly have a much wider and more liberal spectrum of thinking.

According to them, beauty contests could prove to be a means of promoting the country on a global platform and earning prestige for the country in the same way that dozens of glamorous damsels

from India have done for more than the last decade and half by winning various international pageants. The audience lauded the idea of promoting beautiful people to the point that she may have many fans follow her advice, and then have her spread positive social messages, as it is an innate human instinct to be inclined towards facially and physically beautiful people.

On cross examination by myself, it was admitted by almost everyone that people of all ages seemed to enjoy watching international beauty contests, but at the same time, it was also agreed that somehow most people did feel that it was inappropriate for Bangladeshi women to participate in the same contests wearing all the revealing outfits that women of other countries wear. Stiff opposition continued from some members of the panel who debated that such

competition was demeaning for those women who may not possess the qualities cited as "beautiful," but the audience rebuffed that by saying that there are competitions to bring out the best in everything including sports, intelligence, talent, etc. and so questioned why beauty should be an aspect where exceptions have to be made.

The panellists countered that all other qualities could be honed upon and improved but that beauty was an aspect that almost no one has any control over. Thus, in their eyes, they said competitions of talent should be glorified far more than competitions for proving beauty. They also added that these competitions had originated from pagan practices of ancient times where such contests were held for tyrannical rulers to choose their consorts and concubines, using the historical information to try and evoke negative sentiments against

the practice.

Nonetheless, some audience members even compared the right to participate in such contests to democratic rights, and questioned why society should obstruct someone from doing something that she may want to of her own free will. Some also said that this could pave the way for promoting the apparel and textile industry of our country to the world at large.

When the panellists argued that such contests created bias against women with dark complexions, the audience retorted by pointing out all the dark complexioned pageant winners from Africa, Caribbean, and India.

Indeed, after a lot of heated as well as amusing arguments, a consensus seemed to gradually evolve that beauty contests as a whole may not be an idea to totally condemn, but that they should be held within certain limitations. It

was suggested that perhaps if such competitions were to be held on a domestic level only such clothes should be worn which would not be in contradiction to cultural or social values.

Some of the local pageants held were praised for not having encouraged indecency, but at the same time, some did opine that some of the clothes used in the local competitions were becoming increasingly revealing in emulation of Western cultures and hence were starting to transcend limits of acceptability.

The most important thought that seemed to emerge is that even if one were to participate in such a competition locally or globally, or organize such an event, that a high degree of decency has to be maintained to increase acceptability across our nation.