

## Anomalies in updated voter list

How fair can the election be?

WHEN all this time we had been clamouring for a genuinely updated voter list, the "updated" one we have been presented with has given rise to many questions that may remain unanswered for all that we know, given the inclination of those manning the EC currently. Much as some in the government would like to think otherwise, it causes anxiety among those that would like to see a free and fair election held in the country.

For example, how does one explain well over a crore voters who have not been accounted for? And how is it that there are 17 lakh new voters that have come to be included in the updated list, a considerable increase in numbers from the scrapped list? And that too when one gets to hear that a large number of persons have been left out of the list of the enumerators, including some very prominent personalities, and when the cut off date for eligibility was January 1, 2006. It seems rather incongruous, too, that about 65 percent of the population are eligible voters, when statistics show that only 55 percent of our population is above the age of fifteen!

If the statistics are confusing, the possible outcome is even more foreboding because of the grave implication that the statistics in the updated list present us. What will come of the unaccounted for voters? Inevitably it will enhance the prospect of ghost voters coming into play, false voting and election fraud being the predictable consequences.

The obvious question we are faced with is whether the voter list will ensure a free and fair election. It needs no repetition that the first and foremost requirement of a broad-based free and fair election is a voter list that is comprehensive and acceptable to all. The admission of the EC Secretary that the updated list is not flawless and yet he is unable to take remedial measures to put it right, presents us with a fait accompli.

It is most unfortunate that those entrusted with conducting a free and fair election in the country, by their acts of omission and commission have delivered a very questionable voter list, which most may not find easy to accept. The prospect bodes badly for the institution of democracy in the country.

## HSC results cheery

Uniformity of standards imperative now

THE highest pass figure in six years at the HSC examinations is a welcome development and an indication of greater commitment on the part of the students and the teachers to the process of learning and imparting education.

The education authorities also deserve credit for the effective steps they had taken to stop large scale cheating at the examination halls which had become an annual feature. Their success lies in eradicating to a great extent a social malady that had a crippling effect on the entire system of education.

That said, the high percentage of success means there will be greater pressure for admission to universities and similar institutions. Access to quality educational facilities is limited. Through the process of elimination a large number of eligible candidates will be left out, as the good universities cannot accommodate all of them. So, where will the left out students go? What plan do the education authorities have for those students?

There is no room for any complacency despite the fine showing by the students. In fact, the problems in the education sector assume quite a different character when the percentage of success at the HSC level becomes quite high. On the other hand, we can ill afford to forget that nearly 40 percent students failed and these students are going to be a burden unless alternative arrangements are made for them to remain afloat in a setting where unemployment is already a major problem.

Another noticeable aspect of the HSC results is that students of colleges in the rural areas have given a poor account of themselves. This is a problem that is indicative of the asymmetry existing between the standard of the colleges in urban centres and those in remote areas. If nothing is done to remove this imbalance, the edge that students from urban areas have over their rural counterparts will become all the more marked in the days ahead.

The education authorities have quite rightly been trying to set things right in some important areas. However, they must also strive to attain a uniform standard that can ensure equal opportunities for all learners.

## The essence of civil society



ANM NURUL HAQUE

CIVIL society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family, and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred, and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power.

The term civil society is currently often used by critics and activists as a reference to sources of resistance to and the domain of social life which needs to be protected

## BY THE NUMBERS

**In the process of elections becoming a game of black money and hooliganism, the civil society, as we know it today, emerged with a vision for Bangladesh and took initiative to create pressure on the major political parties to nominate clean and competent candidates for the upcoming parliamentary election. The civil society has also been playing a significant role in addressing the needs of a free and fair election which has had a profound response from the common people across the country.**

against all sorts of exploitations. However, within the United Nations context, the term civil society has been a source of some controversy, as its meaning also includes businesses as well as private voluntary organisations.

The civil society also refers to the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations or institutions which form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force backed structures of a state. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups, women's organisations, professional associations, self-help groups and advocacy groups.

In the developing countries civil society is popular with the common people as it can make government behave in a better way on ideological and political issues. In Bangladesh the civil society is the story of ordinary people living in a society where the ugly political rivalry, religious fundamentalism and a rabid hate for minorities are overtaken.

Though the prominent feature of modern civil society is to take keen interest in social, political and economic development, driven by a vision that is ruled by love, truth and compassion, sadly, the civil society in Bangladesh suffers from the problem of irritation of the political leaders who have virtually failed to

weave any vision for the nation. They hardly miss any opportunity to harshly criticise and harass the civil society members.

The leaders of the political parties feel quite uncomfortable when they are urged by the civil society to scan a candidate's financial integrity and past record while providing him with party nomination. Certainly there is no denying the fact that black money has become a part of politics and has been plaguing the process of democracy in the country.

The civil society members are creating public awareness about honest and competent candidates and also to resist the black money holders, who are otherwise political

criminals, to enter parliament in order to bring a meaningful change to the country's politics. That is why the commendable initiative of the civil society irritates politicians so much.

The Board of Investment chief Mahmudur Rahman has recently disgraced himself through lodging a criminal defamation case (now withdrawn) against five most eminent citizens with considerable national and international repute. It has been learnt from the media reports that Mahmudur Rahman was just the front man, instigated from behind by powerful personages.

The invectives against the civil society members by the BNP senior joint secretary general Tarique Rahman for their initiative to locate honest and competent candidates in the upcoming general election, has offended the conscious citizens of the country at large. Insinuating about the source of income of the civil society leaders, who are happen to be the most eminent citizens of the country, Tarique Rahman said: "They receive money from foreign organizations and have expensive meals at five-star hotels. They do nothing but hold seminars and meetings."

Not Tarique Rahman alone, but many other politicians both from the ruling alliance and opposition have expressed their irritation to the civil society initiative with a vision to lurch a campaign for clean and competent candidates. The government had warned the civil society members for taking legal action against them.

Coming down heavily on the civil society, the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina recently said that they are out to destroy the democracy in the name of searching for honest and eligible candidates for members of parliament.

It was really encouraging that the Citizens Group, a platform of the country's civil society announced 37-point proposal to end the persisting deadlock in the electoral and political processes. The package proposals were presented at a press conference at the national Press Club, suggesting solution to the problems on four fronts: Elections Commission, Electoral Code of Conduct and others, Role of Members of Parliament, and Political Reforms. The Citizens Group prepared their proposals on the basis of the opinions of 2500 people of various professions from among the participants of eight

dialogues held in different districts and divisional headquarters.

Unfortunately the government did not pay any heed to these proposals and is now contemplating to lead the nation to a crisis of catastrophic proportions. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has recently expressed her utmost confidence that AL-led 14 party alliance has got no chance of winning the forthcoming general election and as such they are out to foil it. On the other hand, the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina asserted that election must be held in time with implementation of the proposed electoral reforms. No softening of stance is yet noticeable in either the prime minister or the leader of the opposition to avert political turmoil.

Certainly there is no denying that polls financing is a major source of corruption in Bangladesh and it is the weight of black money that is likely to make the big difference in the 2007 parliamentary election. The ruling coalition is reported to be making a mess of public funds in their firm belief of winning the voters by distributing largess. The opposition parties are also fond of choosing candidates capable of making a fat contribution to party funds, no matter if the money is black or

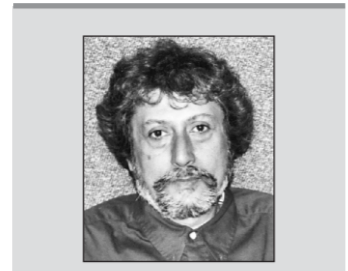
white. Such money power is now vitiating the country's politics.

In the process of elections becoming a game of black money and hooliganism, the civil society, as we know it today, emerged with a vision for Bangladesh and took initiative to create pressure on the major political parties to nominate clean and competent candidates for the upcoming parliamentary election. The civil society has also been playing a significant role in addressing the needs of a free and fair election which has had a profound response from the common people across the country.

The entire nation now looks forward to a free and fair election with honest and competent candidates. If the exuberant essence of the civil society fails to articulate their vision, the nation will have to continue paying the price for the fact that political parties are to nominate candidates capable only of donating big money and to hire goons to terrorize opponents.

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## Last act at Agargaon



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE play at the Agargaon Theatre has entered its last scene with the appearing on the stage of a new but powerful player named Mahmud Hasan Mansur. The last scene, scripted meticulously by the same playwrights on the payroll of the powers that be, promises lots of drama and melodrama.

The arrival of the powerful actor, who has an "impressive" track record of attaching loyalty to certain quarters, has brought back the boyish smile on the face of the

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

**The CEC had his way, after surviving all the verbal brickbating (strange, isn't it, even mighty Achilles had that vulnerable heel, but our CEC had none!). Now he has got a new partner to help him carry forward his mission. But the public of this great republic are curious to know what kind of a magic wand the new election commissioner has brought along with him to ensure a free and fair election.**

main protagonist, the CEC, who kept the audience spellbound so far with his dramatics.

He has assured the country with the following prophetic words: "There is no crisis now and there will be no crisis in future. Good sense will prevail and all the political parties will participate in the next parliamentary election. There will be an election on time and it will be successful as we have been able to create a level playing field." (Amen).

With a new compatriot beside him, he is now offering that precious smile free of cost to the

whole world.

The speed with which things have developed in and around the EC office at Agargaon in the last two weeks has amazed the citizens of this country. The selection of "the chosen one" was quick. Everyone was ready. Everything was in place. The oath was taken. Photo session was completed. The chosen one uttered the much-rehearsed lines for the nation. Everyone went home smiling. Voila! The nation has been saved!

Cynics standing outside commented, if only the entire administration and judiciary worked with

such speed and diligence in attending all other cases of national importance, then surely we would have been as developed today as Japan.

But, isn't that wishful thinking? According to the cynics, if politicians do not have any stake (read financial gain) in anything, things do not move faster, actually they do not move at all. Show them their cut, see how things move. If they do not have a cut, they may cut you up into little pieces.

Time is running out fast; letter-writing frenzy has died a natural death; the one-way dialogue for

the two-way dialogue is going on, and after much ado, we finally have something in the form of a voter list, to hang around our neck, like that dead albatross.

The CEC had his way, after surviving all the verbal brickbating (strange, isn't it, even mighty Achilles had that vulnerable heel, but our CEC had none!). Now he has got a new partner to help him carry forward his mission. But the public of this great republic are curious to know what kind of a magic wand the new election commissioner has brought along with him to ensure a free and fair election.

Will he be able to take up the reforms issues that the opposition wants to see settled before considering contesting the coming elections? Has he brought along any magic potion to feed the opposition leaders to make them accept former Justice KM Hasan as the chief advisor of the next caretaker government? There is no reason to believe that the main opposition party Awami League

has suddenly become oblivious of the fact that he is the same justice who felt embarrassed at the trial of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murder case.

If Mansur does not have any trick up his sleeve then why was the commotion made to have him inducted at the last moment? As far as our knowledge goes there was no vacant post to be filled at the EC. We already know politicians do not do anything unless they have a stake in it. So, what stake do they have in the appointment of Mansur as the third election commissioner? Intriguing, indeed.

Some cynics are already trying with the questions: Has Mansur come to the EC office with a purpose, a dark and sinister one at that? Has he come to ensure that the blueprint of election gets implemented upto the minutest of details? Naughtly thoughts, aren't they? Strange are the ways of politics in Golden Bengal.

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## Government must accept culpability



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

BANGLADESH, a country which started with a dream and then became a conviction baptized in fire, has been brought to a position of failure for which the people are not responsible. Responsibility lies solely on the shoulders of those who got themselves elected through a process

which even after the passage of five years many people are convinced was influenced by money and muscle power. The next general elections are around the corner, yet the institutions which are expected to steer the country out of the quagmire have been made so controversial that while the ruling party is determined to retain the institutional framework and the people expected to man them intact, the opposition parties are equally determined not to let the government hold any elections without significant change in the caretaker government, the overhauling of the Election Commission (which includes the exit of the chief election commissioner and his three deputies), and reforms in the electoral laws.

The possibility of dialogue for resolution of the almost binary differences, anxiously awaited by the people and the international community alike, appears to be receding coupled with the distinct possibility that the government in power will shift the ball to the court of the caretaker government, the presumed head of which is not acceptable to the opposition.

Added to this comedy of errors is the blundering Election Commission, totally besieged by chorus of rejection and calling upon those holding responsible positions to resign for their colossal wastage of time and money and presenting the country with a voters list which prima facie appears incredibly inflated.

This government has presented the country, already a poster child of natural disaster, earning the sobriquet of most corrupt nation on earth for the fourth successive time. Plundering of national wealth for personal use and those of kinsmen, regressing GDP growth by two to three percent, has been endemic in Bangladesh.

It is heartening to know that the recent G-8 meeting held at St.

## GOING DEEPER

**The government in power must realize that the people did not fight the war of independence to remain in abject poverty nor to be described as citizens of the most corrupt country in the world. Since power is transient in nature the authorities would be well advised not to repeat the mistaken path taken in 1996, but give the people a free choice to select their representatives in the next elections without fear.**

Petersburg has decided to strengthen international efforts "to deny kleptocrats access to our financial systems and safe heaven in our countries, stronger efforts to combat fraud, corruption and misuse of public resources, and increased capacity internationally to prevent opportunities for high level public corruption."

President Bush on August 10 described kleptocracy as a grave and corrosive abuse of power and as the most invidious type of corruption. He added that it impedes promotion of freedom and democracies, and poverty, combat international crime and terrorism, undermines faith in public institutions and steals prosperity from the people. In order to fight kleptocracy, President Bush has added a new element in his National Strategy to Internalize Efforts Against Kleptocracy.

One hopes that the Bush administration being unequivocally wedded to war on terror his identification of kleptocracy as elements of international crime and terrorism attention would not be solely given to financial assistance extended to

Islamists but also to kleptocrats who steal prosperity from the people.

One cannot but be skeptical about President Bush's public announcement given the history of promoting kleptocrats like Zaire's Mobutu, Nigerian military dictators, and many others during the Cold War when turning a blind eye, and indeed promoting public corruption was modus operandi of not only Western governments, but also of Western multi-nationals.

One may, therefore, wonder how far G-8 commitment is based on principles and how much on expediency. Successive World Bank official in Bangladesh and in Washington DC went public with "system loss" in the power sector resulting from collusive theft by employees of the sector and some dishonest members of the public, port inefficiencies costing over one billion dollars a year, banking sector and governance problems slowing down GDP growth resulting in Bangladesh failing to get 100 crore taka from the Millennium Challenge Account.

The ruling government is culpa-

bly of either collusion or inefficiency in failing to unearth the August 21 carnage that was aimed to eliminate the entire leadership of Awami League including former prime minister and present leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina. That she survived while many perished, was a miracle.

Had the nefarious act succeeded then the country could have been described as a state facing serious "internal problems that threaten continued coherence." The continued display of barbarism by the law enforcing agents on the opposition parties anti-government political activities or even non-political display of public discontent as at Kansat over power shortage and Phulbari over open-pit coal mining are reminiscent of medieval use of state powers.

German-born political scientist Hannah Arendt once expressed her fear that nowhere is the self-defeating factor in the victory of violence more evident than in the use of terror to maintain domination. Terror, she adds, is not the same as violence; it is rather the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate, but, on the contrary, remains in full control.

Despite the capture, trial and death sentences awarded to the alleged kingpins of Islamic extremists in Bangladesh, suspicions continue about governmental sincerity to exterminate Islamic extremism in Bangladesh. Suspicion is well-founded due to the inclusion of two Islamist parties in the four-party alliance government and the increasing influence

currently being wielded by Jamaat-e-Islami in administrative and political matters.

The suspicion is further strengthened by successive US Department of State religious freedom reports, Canadian Services Intelligence Service report on Bangladesh, update of the Washington based International Studies on Transnational Threat, Bertil Lintner's monograph on Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh, Senators Kennedy and John Kerry's worry over Islamist threats emanating from Bangladesh, recent report published in the Washington Post on Islamic militancy, reports carried by Time magazine and Jane's Intelligence Review, etc.

Bangladesh is standing at the cross-roads of its political development. Unfortunately though it is, the Brookings Institution and Center for Global Development have included Bangladesh as one of the 52 countries in their "Weak States Matrix" and laced Bangladesh in the category of fragile democracy.

The government in power must realize that the people did not fight the war of independence to remain in abject poverty nor to be described as citizens of the most corrupt country in the world. Since power is transient in nature the authorities would be well advised not to repeat the mistaken path taken in 1996, but give the people a free choice to select their representatives in the next elections without fear.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

## Immigration reform that works

BRIAN BYRNES

THE fire that swept through a Buenos Aires textile plant on March 30, killing six Bolivian immigrants, left behind more than wreckage. The victims of the sweatshop blaze had no permits to work in Argentina, and their deaths pushed the government of President Nestor Kirchner to start up an innovative program that encourages illegal immigrants to register with local authorities. Known as Patria Grande (Greater Fatherland), the scheme offers a two-year residence visa to for-

eigners who have no criminal record and can prove they are citizens of countries affiliated with the Mercosur trading bloc. The response has been overwhelming: more than 200,000 applications have been processed since Patria Grande was unveiled on April 17, and each weekday morning hundreds and even thousands of undocumented immigrants queue up outside consulates and other government-approved offices to fill out the requisite paperwork. "Overall, this is a step in the right direction," says Juan Carlos Acero, a 26-year-old native of La

Paz who moved to Argentina in 2001 and now works as a construction laborer. "This will benefit those of us who work hard and support our children."

It benefits Argentina, too. Officials contend that in addition to reducing black-market labor and discrimination, the registration program will help make Argentina's porous borders more secure, and bring in much-needed tax funds. "I think this is a good idea that deserves to be studied," says Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States in Washington.

Argentina's openness derives in part from the South American nation's historical background: millions of immigrants from Spain and Italy arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the same country that gave refuge to Nazi war criminals after World War II is also host to the largest Jewish population in the Western Hemisphere outside of the United States. The Patria Grande program is a product of principle as well. When he took office three years ago, Kirchner identified immigration as one of the human-rights issues he would emphasize, and under his leadership

about 400,000 foreigners have been granted residence visas, more than double the number between 1993 and 2003.

Some skeptics argue that legalizing undocumented foreigners, estimated to number between 700,000 and 1 million, takes jobs away from native Argentines. That's a touchy issue in a country where unemployment soared to 22 percent during the 2002 recession. But government officials counter that a booming economy has slashed that figure in half, and most Argentines don't want the menial jobs in construction and agriculture that foreigners are

willing to take. "To have registered and legal migrant workers doesn't diminish work opportunities for Argentines," argues government immigration chief Ricardo Rodriguez. "On the contrary, it helps to improve working conditions and salaries." And that's not all: immigrants who sign up with Patria Grande also gain access to a spectrum of social services, like public schools and hospitals. When it comes to humane immigration policies, Argentina would seem to have few peers.

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