

Promotion in excess of vacancy

Yet another blatant example of politicisation

It was not very long ago that we commented on the government's rather dubious act of dishing out promotions to the rank of deputy secretaries in a very sweeping manner.

Coming on the heels of a large number of such promotions, it has again, in what can best be described as a brazen faced act of impropriety, promoted another 332 officers, without regard for public opinion and media criticism, superseding a large number of deserving officers. That a government can even think of promoting one person beyond the approved vacancy, let alone countenance a situation where there are more than 500 officers beyond the approved establishment figure, as is the case now, defies logic.

And when so many officers are living in a state of limbo -- that is the only way that one can describe the state of the officers on special duty (OSD) -- the only motivation of the government for such large number of promotions, at the very fag end of its tenure, raises doubt in public mind. The act is disingenuous and has no doubt been resorted to, without regard to rules and regulations, in order to reap political dividends in the forthcoming elections.

This is ill discipline of the highest magnitude that will set a very bad example for the future. Another shocking feature is that the large number of OSD are reportedly those that are considered to be not loyal to the present government. When the full capacity remains unutilised, the government feels no qualms in promoting even more. What a travesty!

The fallout is obvious; it is dangerous. It will have a tremendous demoralising effect on the bureaucracy at this very crucial juncture when a transition from the political government to the caretaker is in the offing, and the normal function of the bureaucracy in this interregnum is very important. There is little doubt that the government's action will deal a severe body blow to the system of administration from which it would take time to recoup fully.

Although there had been politicisation of the bureaucracy during the previous government's rule, the scope and intensity of the way that not only the higher echelons but also other levels of the administration have been affected now, will leave a very fractious, divided and impaired officialdom in its wake.

That will be a great disservice to the nation.

Visas for workers at last

Avoid messing up things in future

THE news that the Malaysian authorities have started issuing visas for Bangladeshi workers, numbering around 22,000, has brought some relief to both the job seekers and the recruiting agent. The process of sending the workers to Malaysia had earlier bogged down, as procedural complications had arisen and there was an apparent failure to comply with the requirements of the employers.

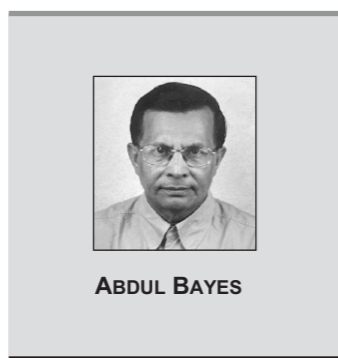
The workers were supposed to travel to Malaysia in August, but trouble started when the recruiting agent decided to charge an extra amount of money in addition to the amount that the workers had to pay under the agreement reached between the employers and the recruiters. That nearly spoiled this opportunity of exporting manpower to a booming job market.

The crisis reached a point where the Malaysian authorities clamped a temporary ban on October 4 on hiring workers from Bangladesh, since none of the 22,000 recipients of job approvals could land in their country, even two months after the scheduled time of arrival. It is heartening to know that the two sides have succeeded in resolving the problem to a great extent and it is expected that all the workers will get calling visas to travel to Malaysia very soon.

Since manpower export occupies an important place in our economic scheme of things, it is doubly necessary that the issue be handled with great care and efficiency. The recruiting agents and the government department concerned must be aware of the conditions set by the employers and be ready to fulfill the same without wasting any time. In this particular instance, they gave a poor account of themselves. The results were frustration among the job seekers and the Malaysian authorities getting a negative impression about our way of dealing with such matters.

Procedural bottlenecks seem to obstruct, delay or even block up many an opportunity, as we are still following the traditional methods of handling issues that are time-sensitive and have the element of competition from others. This should come to an end if we do not want to squander the possibilities coming our way.

For the people



ABDUL BAYES

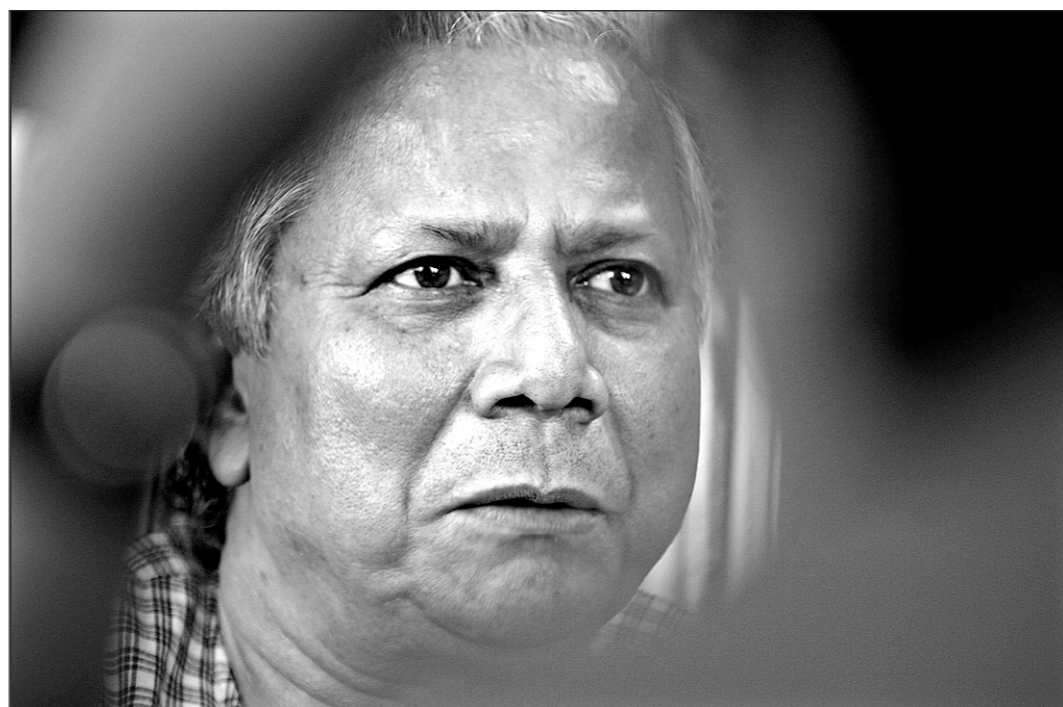
JUST when we were we down and despondent over the political conundrum the nation has been thrust into, especially with the looming fear of a possible attack on our freedom to vote in a free and fair fashion, and just when we were reeling under unprecedented economic strain -- the news of Dr Muhammad Yunus's Nobel Peace Prize has all off a sudden caused sunlight to break out over the nation.

The prize was conferred upon Dr Yunus for his work in poverty reduction and for peace. In fact, poverty and peace are mutually exclusive: peace cannot enter where there is poverty and vice versa. It is true, not only in Bangladesh, but also in other parts of the world. A peace loving nation must, therefore, be a pro-poor nation in terms of the persuasion of state policies.

I personally congratulate Dr Yunus and his esteemed institution for the honour they have brought for us. The first Bangladeshi, and the third Bengali, to win the prestigious prize has proved once again that we can create history, and stand high in the world community -- as we did in our war of liberation -- provided we commit ourselves to the cause of the nation.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Another message should be clear. With the coming of the Nobel Peace Prize to this country, expectations with respect to Bangladesh and Bangladeshis have increased in the world. It is time to bury the ugly titles we have been bestowed with over the years, e.g. corrupt, fundamentalist, undemocratic, etc. We should stand by a truly democratic form of governance, and resist all kinds of interventions to steal the people's choices. The whole nation should be in both a celebrating and a resisting mood.



The professor, unlike many of us, did not stop at only professing the terrible gravity of the poverty, but also took practical steps, spending year after year in the areas where the poor live, trying to solve their problems. His concept of credit as the center point of helping the poor succeeded

not only in Bangladesh, but is also being followed in other parts of the world.

I had the opportunity to evaluate one of Dr Yunus's pet innovative projects: the village pay phones. This was a time when only 100 mobile phones were placed with

100 poor women in 100 villages in and around Dhaka city to allow them to sell services and take home a return.

Mobile phones replaced livestock, poultry, and puffed rice where the credit used to go earlier. I was amazed to see that a woman who used to be a

"servant" (kajer beti) in others' houses was moving with a mobile set, taking the calls to the recipients. The mobile increased their mobility within the village, and to be more illustrious, the village heads -- Sarkers, Talukders, and Bhuiyas -- used to come to their house for a phone call. I mean, the master to the servant.

At that time I was teased by some teachers with the argument that mobile phones belong to multinational corporations (MNC) and, hence, such credit led activity would only serve the purpose of the MNCs. These days, I am happy to see some of those critics with mobile phones in their pockets, possibly paying more to the so-called MNCs than the poor of the villages do. Importantly, mobile phones are in every nook and corner of the country, helping trade and business.

One important aspect of the Grameen Bank (also applies to Brac and Proshika), to me, is that its programmes are gradually changing with the tune of the time. The programs are responsive to technological change, the growing size of the loans, and other factors that might cause stagnation. Many of the models in the world, including the socialist ones, met premature death just because they stood still when the platform was moving. Therefore, whether the Grameen model will be sustainable or not would depend on whether Grameen can itself adapt to the changing world.

Sustainable poverty reduction does not depend on Grameen alone. It is a function of a wide array of variables, some of which are under the control of the government, some of which depend on what is being undertaken in the universities and laboratories, some of which depend on the private sector, and some of

which depend on natural calamities. We have, over the decades, made minuscule progress towards poverty reduction and social development, even though Grameen has played a leading role in the struggle.

The most important thing is that the world at large has recognized a model from Bangladesh. Wherever we go we face a query about Grameen. It is, therefore, a pride for the people of Bangladesh. It is a prize for the nation's performance.

Another message should be clear. With the coming of the Nobel Peace Prize to this country, expectations with respect to Bangladesh and Bangladeshis have increased in the world. It is time to bury the ugly titles we have been bestowed with over the years, e.g. corrupt, fundamentalist, undemocratic, etc.

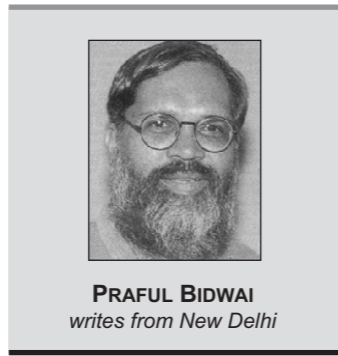
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We are celebrating the prize for economic freedom, of a section of the poor, that Professor Yunus and his institutions are engaged in. Alongside this, we demand economic, social and political freedom for all segments of the society.

And let us vow to resist the evil that threatens us as a nation. Our greetings go to the micro-credit pioneer, Professor Yunus and the Grameen Bank, and also to the people for their long struggle towards a fair society.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

After the North Korean blast



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

NORTH Korea has punched a big hole through the global nuclear order, changing the Asian balance of power and probably impacting Iran.

The explosion underscores some plain unvarnished wisdom: the best way to deal with "problem cases" like North Korea is to sincerely pursue global disarmament. The alternative is to risk a more unsafe world with more nuclear powers.

North Korea shows that a small (population 23 million), poor, economically and politically isolated country, which recently experienced famines, can build nuclear weapons if it is determined to. Nuclear weapons require neither high science nor very advanced technology.

The science is 60-plus years old, and the technology no more advanced than what a car garage has -- if you have fissile material or reactors. The test sets a terrible example. Some 40 countries have significant civilian nuclear programmes which can be diverted to make weapons.

The remedy lies in negotiating a return to the global disarmament agenda. What the world needs is de-alerting of all nuclear weapons, separation of nuclear warheads from delivery vehicles, and phased destruction of nuclear armaments. Regional initiatives are also necessary to dissuade North Korea from pursuing a weapons programme by offering it security assurances, generous agricultural and industrial assistance, and food and fuel aid. Such arrangements can lead to the creation of a Northeast Asian nuclear weapons-free zone. The world cannot afford any more breakouts before it takes the nuclear bull by the horns.

Why did North Korea test? It has a long history of conflict with South Korea and the United States. During the 1950-53 Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur had plans to launch nuclear strikes against it.

More recently, President George W Bush torpedoed the reconciliation process between the two Koreas. In 2002, he named North Korea an "Axis of Evil" state and reneged on aid promises. This negated improved Washington-Pyongyang relations achieved through the 1994 Agreed Framework under which North Korea suspended its nuclear activities.

In 2003, Pyongyang quit the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The six-party talks with Pyongyang faltered largely because of inept US diplomacy.

Yet, in September 2005, Pyongyang signed a preliminary denuclearisation agreement in Beijing. Four days later, Washington declared economic war on it!

After the US-led invasion of Iraq, North Korea became desperate to

prevent "regime change" in Pyongyang. Recently, it grew uncomfortable with the appointment of the militarist Shinzo Abe as Japan's Prime Minister and South Korea's Ban Ki-Moon's lead in the election for the United Nations Secretary General.

On October 3, its foreign ministry said: "A people without a reliable war deterrent are bound to meet a tragic death and [loss of] sovereignty... This is a bitter lesson taught by the bloodshed... in different parts of the world." Then came October 9.

North Korea's test exposes the folly of relying on purely physical controls -- like International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards under the NPT -- to prevent nuclear materials from being put to military use. IAEA safeguards are leak-prone.

In some past years, IAEA processing-plant inspections failed to account for over 20 kg of plutonium -- enough for half-a-dozen nuclear bombs.

More important than safeguards, and critical to a country's decision not to cross the nuclear-

weapons threshold, is its political will. In many countries this will has got greatly weakened -- because the nuclear-weapons states (NWSs) have refused to undertake nuclear disarmament.

This flagrantly violates NPT Article VI, which mandates the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan slavishly imitate the NWSs in their hypocrisy. India's nuclear deal with the US is widely seen as involving double standards: indulgence for America's friends, and punishment for adversaries. All NWSs practise double standards.

The world has few options to deal with Pyongyang. Military force isn't one. The US is bogged down in Iraq.

Over 37,000 US troops are stationed in South Korea. North Korea's 1.2 million-strong army, with 11,000 artillery pieces, and an arsenal of missiles, can make devastating conventional strikes against South Korea and even Japan, where another 40,000 US troops are stationed. There's the risk of a nuclear attack too.

India and Pakistan have strongly condemned North Korea. This is another instance of hypocrisy. Pyongyang cites the same reasons for going nuclear as they did.

It doesn't lie in India's mouth to condemn Pyongyang. And even less in Pakistan's after it traded uranium centrifuges with North Korea's missiles. Today, India and Pakistan both practise the same double standards as the N-5!

India has strongly warned against "the dangers of clandestine proliferation." The reference is to Pakistan. Some Indian commentators cite President Musharraf's book which says: "Dr Khan transferred nearly two dozen P-1 and P-11 centrifuges to North Korea," along with supporting equipment, etc.

However, on all available evidence, the Korean test used plutonium, not uranium. The plutonium came from a small reactor at Yongbyon, built by the Soviet Union in 1965, whose used fuel North Korea reprocessed.

It would be foolish for India to use the Korean test as a stick to beat Pakistan with. The demand that Khan be subjected to interrogation for his Korean operation won't cut much ice anywhere.

North Korea's test will strengthen the non-proliferation lobby in the US, and create more difficulties for the India-US nuclear deal which already faces hurdles.

Japan and South Korea would be singularly ill-advised to go nuclear in response to North Korea. That will trigger an arms race involving China, destabilising the entire region.

If the US develops a "theatre

ballistic missile defence" ("Star Wars") shield for Northeast Asia, matters will get worse.

The time has come for a radically different approach, which reforms the global nuclear order by honestly implementing the two-way bargain on which it was originally based.

Under the bargain, the non-nuclear weapons-states agreed not to make or acquire nuclear weapons, and subjected themselves to IAEA inspections. In return, the NWSs committed themselves to serious negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide. However, the NWSs have betrayed the bargain.

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The world cannot afford any more breakouts before it takes the nuclear bull by the horns.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Caretaker government challenges



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE BNP-led four-party government has already completed its full tenure of five years on October 10 and is scheduled to step down within two weeks of the dissolution of the current parliament. The parliament will stand dissolved on October 27, the day it went into its first session five years ago. Then the power will be handed over to the caretaker government (CTG) for an interim period of three months.

The two major political parties, the BNP and AL, are now negotiating over the appointment of the chief of the next CTG, as the AL believes that Justice KM Hasan is a

BY THE NUMBERS

The nation now very eagerly hopes that the next CTG will take courageous steps to remove all the hurdles to holding a free and fair election while maintaining its neutrality. The CTG should also ascertain that the mainstream political parties do not indulge in vengeful politics once they are in the opposition. The culture of casting doubt on the election results, indulged in invariably by the defeated political parties, must be resisted.

BNP loyalist and therefore not acceptable as the chief of the non-party CTG. The dialogue which was started on October 5, reportedly reached very close to consensus on many points.

Article 58C (2) of the constitution says: "The prime minister and her cabinet, who were in the office immediately before the parliament was dissolved, shall continue to hold office until the chief adviser takes oath within 15 days after the parliament is dissolved or stands dissolved."

Rumour is in the air that some of the BNP policymakers are out to persuade Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to remain in power for the

constitutionally mandated additional time-frame of 15 days after dissolution of the parliament. Their argument is that Sheikh Hasina, the erstwhile prime minister, did the same in 2001.

Meanwhile the cabinet division has the started groundwork to arrange a ceremony to administer oath to the next chief adviser although the incumbent government is yet to fix a date to step down. As the present government's tenure will expire on October 27, there is a constitutional obligation to administer oath to the chief adviser of the CTG any day between October 28 and November 11.

Though the core responsibility of the CTG is to hold a free and fair general election for constituting the 9th national parliament, it will have to shoulder an overwhelming responsibility for creating a congenial atmosphere in which to conduct the election. The 13th amendment to the constitution has been made with a definite purpose to ensure neutrality of the persons who shall be running the non-party CTG and also making the process easy and acceptable to all.

The Citizen Group-2006, a platform of the country's civil society members, has already put forward 19-point suggestions for the CTG. On electoral and political reforms,

the group said that the CTG would have to ensure a neutral, efficient and competent election commission to conduct the national election 2007 in time and it has to be fully vigilant in maintaining law and order situation.

The Citizen Group suggested that the CTG must take special efforts to stop any post-election backlashes and make sure that military and terrorism do not re-emerge during the election period. It also said that the CTG of 2006 should finish the unfinished agenda of the last CTG by taking appropriate legal measures for the separation of the judiciary from the executive.

Depoliticizing of administration will pose a major challenge to the next CTG and it will be required to initiate a massive reshuffle in the civil administration to ensure an even playing field for all the contending parties. The administration has been nakedly politicized through mass promotion and infiltration of key posts with a clear intention of election engineering. Unless this process has been negated through a series of courageous moves and

reshuffle, the prospect of holding a free and fair election will remain bleak.

The BNP-led coalition government at the fag end of its tenure has given mass promotion to civil servants on political considerations turning the civil administration into a political one. The government on July 3 promoted 153 deputy secretaries to joint secretary superseding seniors and depriving around 100 eligible officers. Similarly, five additional secretaries were promoted to be full-fledged secretaries. The selection of officers for promotion, superseding the seniors, was done considering their loyalty to the BNP and its major coalition partner Jamaat-Islami.

The next CTG will also have a tough time keeping law and order situation under control. The law and order situation is likely to deteriorate as the ruling BNP and main opposition AL are preparing for street showdowns with their political programs after the BNP-led government tenure expires on October 27. Confrontations between the activists of the BNP

and AL have already begun in many parts of the country and have every chance to grow violent if the ongoing dialogue fails to reach a consensus.

The main opposition AL has already directed its grassroots level leaders and the activists to get prepared and form action committees across the country to launch the last spell of agitation to press home its demands for reforms if the dialogue fails. BNP chairperson and prime minister, Khaleda Zia, has also directed her party high command to gear up the grassroots level leaders and activists to face the opposition politically. This is sure to put extra pressure on the CTG in their efforts to maintain law and order.

The unique system of CTG as enshrined in our constitution has drawn the attention of constitutional experts across the world. The matter lies with the members of the council of adviser to make the election free and fair as the general election 2007 is very crucial for the country in the rough political weather prevailing over last five years.

Bangladesh hovers close to a failed state status mostly because BNP and AL could not find a single agenda of bipartisan cooperation leading the country forward. There has been a common trait in the rules of BNP and AL that ignores the basic principles of democracy. The most unfortunate aspect of this trait is that each party has denied the other the legitimacy to rule the country accusing each other of manipulating the election results.

The nation now very eagerly hopes that the next CTG will take courageous steps to remove all the hurdles to holding a free and fair election while maintaining its neutrality. The CTG should also ascertain that the mainstream political parties do not indulge in vengeful politics once they are in the opposition. The culture of casting doubt on the election results, indulged in invariably by the defeated political parties, must be resisted.

Anm Nurul Haque is a columnist for The Daily Star.