

CEC's public lie

Self respect dictates his departure

THE emphatic claim by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice MA Aziz that he had not met the caretaker government adviser Lt. Gen. (Retd) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury on Thursday has no doubt surprised the nation beyond measure. By trying to refute what appeared to be a plain truth, the CEC has further tarnished his image as a person in a crucially important position.

It is very much on record that the caretaker adviser along with the military secretary to the president did meet with the CEC on Thursday night at his residence on behalf of the caretaker government to discuss the possibility of his resignation, which is the number one demand of the 14-party alliance echoed by the majority of the people. But the CEC publicly denied even after the media reminded him of the above-mentioned visit. When the said adviser commented, "Both of us cannot be telling the truth", he clearly takes a stand that puts the whole issue on a different perspective.

It is bad enough when someone lies, cause for alarm when a judge does it. And it may spell disaster for the country when none other than the chief election commissioner is faced with a charge like this. There are instances of high-ranking politicians or even governments failing to get away with hiding facts and figures. Readers may recall the debacle that came president Nixon's way. It all started with a lie. So was the case with President Clinton.

Back home, when the credibility of CEC is at stake the whole Election Commission comes under a shadow of doubt. And need we explain what it may lead to in the context of today's volatile and chaotic political situation. Therefore, we want to appeal to the CEC to stop evading the truth and bury the controversy once and for all. After what the nation has been through on his account he should opt for a dignified exit, as has been demanded by all and sundry, and spare us further agony. We believe this is the least we may expect from him.

Democrats take control of US Congress

Indictment of Bush's Iraq policy

DEMOCRATS are now in control of both the chambers of the US Congress for the first time in twelve years.

In US and elsewhere in the world the victory of the Democrats has been viewed as a crushing blow to Bush's Iraq policy. We have to also agree with those that view the result not only an indictment of George Bush's Iraq policy but also a referendum on his presidency.

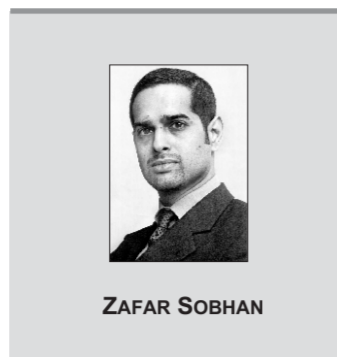
Through their verdict the people of America have sent a very clear message to Mr. Bush that change in Iraq policy is a must and by showing Rumsfeld the door President Bush has made known that he has got the message loud and clear. With one of the triumvirates of Bush policy makers gone we hope that there will indeed be a positive and visible shift in strategy in Iraq.

However, although a major change has taken place insofar as shift of power base is concerned, the question is, will this really make any tangible shift in the existing US policy? Although the victory of the Democrats is the expression of the popular demand to change course in Iraq, the Democrats all through their campaign have not provided any clear indication as to their plans or programmes they would follow in this regard once they are in control of the affairs of the Congress. We however continue to be optimistic not only about changes in US policy towards Iraq but also about a prospect of a new direction in the Middle East peace process.

In another respect, the victory of the Democrats may make things difficult for George Bush for the rest of his presidency because he had not involved the them in any major decision making process since he took office, while at the same time the democrats may not always have it their way with the threat of a presidential veto on any legislation they might contemplate.

The Republican debacle reconfirms the adage that you cannot fool all the people all the time.

The virtual election campaign



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

Both sides seem more pre-occupied with the rules of the game than what the outcome of the game might mean for the people of Bangladesh. This makes perfect sense given the current situation. But the public is left wondering when, if ever, the dickering over rules will end and the real election campaign will begin. The virtual campaign has gone on long enough.

open question.

The AL, for its part, has not focused much on the policy differences between it and the immediate past government.

It has pointed out the failures of the 4-party alliance and promised that if voted to power that it will do better, and it has pointed out that compared to the 1996-2001 period that the immediately preceding period of BNP rule has been much worse on a number of scores. The AL-led 14-party alliance has even laid out a 23-point plan for what it would do if it comes to power.

But this has all been in passing. The AL has not really been hitting the campaign trail and taking this argument to the people day in and day out.

The people are receptive. Current sympathy for the BNP after its disastrous tenure in office is, according to pollsters (and confirmed by causal empiricism), at an all-time low. People's movements in Kansat and Shonir Akhra and Phulbari and Mirpur and elsewhere are clear indications of the unpopularity of the immediate past government.

However, rather than hammer home the issues of corruption and prices and power, which

should have been slam dunks, and would have perhaps united the county behind it, the AL chose to concentrate almost all of its fire-power in the past year on the issue of the removal of Justice Hasan as caretaker chief.

So single-minded, indeed, has been the AL in its devotion to this single issue, that even other procedural reforms, such as of the composition and functioning of the Election Commission, which were arguably far more critical to a fair and free election, were left unresolved.

In the end, the AL got its way with respect to Hasan, but only at the expense of Iajuddin, which party leaders concede in private was a lousy deal. In other words, the entire political strategy for the past year has delivered less than nothing. Imagine how much better a strategy aimed at winning over the people all over the country would look right about now.

Hasina, despite what impression the urban middle and upper-middle classes have of her, remains a popular draw around the country, especially in the rural regions. If she were freed to speak to audiences in the language of hunger and depriva-

tion and suffering, then she could have struck a chord.

This is her gift. She is very much of the people, and can connect well with ordinary people and feel their pain. But this is not what she has done this past year. Of course there is still time, and she could still barn-storm the country and campaign on these issues, but every day it seems less and less likely that she will take this course of action.

In this sense, she is running a virtual election campaign based on what to the voters must appear to be abstract principles rather than real bread and butter issues.

In terms of issues, the BNP is doing a better job in theory, since its leaders are making the argument at every venue of what they have done and what they will do. Unfortunately for them, what they have done isn't too impressive and what they claim they will do is not too believable. In this sense, they, too, are running a virtual election campaign.

The current squabble between the two sides is over the Election Commission. Once again, the debate has virtual overtones. The AL is surely right that the commission has demonstrated many times over that it is not

competent to hold credible elections.

But this is hardly the kind of issue that one can get the public excited about. The public senses that there is something amiss in the actions of the chief election commissioner, and the fact that the enumerators may or may not have come, and that no draft roll has been published, but it is not the kind of issue that inclines one to storm the ramparts.

One may not even know if he or she is on the list until election day, and the fact that there may be as many as 11 million extra names on the list, though scandalous, is hardly of the same immediacy in the public mind as the price of rice. No one has ever marched on Dhaka to demand bureaucratic reform.

This is not to say that the AL should let the issue go, but only to make the point that this kind of campaign runs the risk of estranging the party from the voters and does not capitalize fully on the discontentment and disenchantment that pervades the country.

To the extent that people are paying attention, the BNP again has the easier of the argument, since it is merely trying to enforce the status quo. But the people have seen enough of the party's electoral machinations to know not to trust what they have to say, either. The people know the situation on the ground and they know that there is some black in the lentil. If the AL leaves them cold or confused, there is little confusion in the public mind about the BNP. They know to be suspicious of

the party that can be a little too calculating and mendacious for its own good, to say nothing of the good of others.

I would like to say that once the argument was about who would win the election and now it is more about whether there will be an election or not.

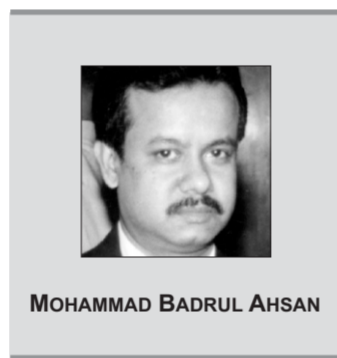
But the truth is that it has always been the latter. The issue has always been whether the elections would be free and fair, who would be the chief advisor and the chief election commissioner, whether the AL would boycott, and whether there was enough common ground between the BNP and AL that elections could even be held to the satisfaction of both.

This has been the pre-eminent subject of political concern for at least the past year. One can forgive the public for being a bit confused. One party is making illusory promises and the other is bogged down in the minutiae of the electoral process and scarcely bothering to make any promises at all.

Both sides seem more pre-occupied with the rules of the game than what the outcome of the game might mean for the people of Bangladesh. This makes perfect sense given the current situation. But the public is left wondering when, if ever, the dickering over rules will end and the real election campaign will begin. The virtual campaign has gone on long enough.

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A colony for corrupt men



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Believe me, it will not be a bad idea to segregate the corrupt population. If we can't eliminate them, let us at least isolate them. It is the way we handle ferocious animals. We keep them in the wilderness or trap them in the zoo. Even better, we can start a night safari to make some money out of them.

wealth, sow their wild oats, reminisce, leer, jeer, and spend their money. They can elect their own commissioners, their own representatives to the parliament. I think it's a great idea. Let us give it to them.

It will be good for us and it will be good for them. What is society if it doesn't guarantee that every individual can enjoy his freedom? So, let corrupt people enjoy their freedom, and let the rest of us enjoy our freedom. It can happen so long as two sides are not on the collision course. Yes, it can be done, and it's possible. There are designated areas for the smokers in the airports. In some of the beaches they have got designated areas as nudist colonies.

That is what I mean. Let us give a designated area to the corrupt individuals. Let us give them identity cards so that they can step out of their neighborhood whenever they like and use our products and services at a premium price (surcharge for their infamous acts). We shall

lay down a couple of ground rules for them. They will not wear shoes when walking amongst us and must go back to their neighbourhood before it gets dark. They must know in clear terms that we feel neither proud nor safe to have them around us.

If prostitution is the oldest profession, then corruption must be the second oldest. People feel tempted to take advantage when the house is empty, do mischief when nobody is looking, and abuse power if they have an opportunity. One sells the body, another sells the soul and we must put away the latter like we put away the former. Why not create a red light district equivalent for them? Call it yellow district or orange district, whatever name suits them.

There must be enough space in that district so that the newcomers can easily join. We can draw up the list of qualifications as to who can be there and who can not. Then the allocation can be done based on the level of

corruption. More corrupts will get bigger plots. The family size can be one consideration. Or, should we leave it to their bidding power, depending on how much cash they are ready to cough up?

Perhaps we should not discriminate amongst them for the same reason we don't drink a glass of milk if it has the tiniest drop of smut. An influential US talk show host named Rush Limbaugh was investigated for illegally buying prescription drugs. He was suffering from back pain and used false names to get more than the prescribed quantity of painkillers. No, I am not kidding. Corruption is corruption no matter by what margin of moral deviation.

That takes us back to the dairy analogy. Have you ever noticed that corruption is a lot like ice cream? Whether it comes in cups or cones, the flavours are already fixed. There are four flavors of corruption which are bribery, embezzlement, fraud, and extortion. Any

misdeed or any mischief has to come from one of these strains.

Believe me, it will not be a bad idea to segregate the corrupt population. If we can't eliminate them, let us at least isolate them. It is the way we handle ferocious animals. We keep them in the wilderness or trap them in the zoo. Even better, we can start a night safari to make some money out of them.

I assure you it will be a big hit. Since the world knows we have got the best of the best in corruption, tourists will start pouring in from all over the world to see how these folks graze in their natural habitat. The tourists will be curious to watch if, those who stole public money, cheated, lied, and deprived others by day, could live in peace at night without doing the same things to one another.

Social scientists, behaviorists, and psychologists will find it a fertile ground for research. They can set up camps in the corruption colony and study the lifestyle of the grotty and the greedy, how they socialize, raise their children, treat their neighbours, and hide the shame and burden of what they have done. It will be interesting to learn what those rotten minds brag about, and how they instruct their children to hold their heads high. What goes on inside their minds? Do they ever make confessions, in the privacy of bath-

rooms or in their deathbeds? Do they repent? Or, do they know something the rest of us don't, that there is no life after death?

Look at the lepers, look at the prostitutes, the mentally sick, the smokers, the criminals, and the nudists, and all of them are rolled together into one corrupt entity. The rotting, the wantonness, the madness, the addiction, the wrongdoing and, above all, the "nakedness" or lack of shame together comprise the mindset which gives one the audacity to live in the midst of society where everybody knows he doesn't live by honourable means.

Only way to deal with that audacity is to challenge it, and that challenge is to bring back the stigma attached to corruption. Right now there are two roads open before us. The road to redemption takes us to the corruption colony. The other road goes to perdition, where those who love corruption will get the upper hand and squeeze us into a concentration camp.

If the women find the title of this article as sexist, I would like to offer them my apology. They are yet to make a big name in this whole rotten business. Shame is that some of them are the unfortunate mothers, wives, and daughters of these pathetic men!

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Nothing to be proud of

Perhaps it is time to reconsider ourselves and our political system, and ask if we have grown enough as a people, as a country, to have a government that can hold honest elections. It's time that the party in power calls an election, and it is held, with one government handing the reins to the next duly elected government, without "caretaker" intervention. If we have not yet progressed to this level, do we yet have a system we can be proud of, or can trust?

MM HAQUE

BANGLADESH, rightly or wrongly, takes great pride in having a caretaker government that comes in at the end of one party's, or coalition's, time in government, and stays during the period leading to the election of a new government. Our stated belief is that the world holds this innovative system in high esteem.

What happens in actuality is that a government stays in power for the maximum time it can under the parliamentary system, not even thinking of holding elections before the end of its term. The only reason that I can think of for parties not holding early elections, is that they don't have the confidence of the

voters, and don't feel that they'll be voted back to power. Thus, our two principal alliances are, essentially elected for a complete five year term.

Because the political parties, and alliances or coalitions, don't trust each other to hold free and fair elections we have a caretaker government in place. Either one, or both the alliances object to the activities of the caretaker government claiming favouritism or partiality, regardless of how neutral we say our caretaker government is (and that's the reason we have a caretaker government, because we know that the party in power wouldn't be fair or impartial enough to hold an honest election).

It's not enough that we always

claim that the election lists are rigged, we then claim that the supposedly neutral caretaker government reshuffled the civil administration and the police administration, not to ensure neutrality, but as a part of a sinister plot to rig the elections, or else it was for punishment of those authorities. If all former leadership, or political, appointees are reshuffled or dismissed, we claim it's because the opposition influenced the caretaker government (or the caretaker government is beholden to the opposition). If any political appointee is not reshuffled or dismissed, we do not claim that the person is essential or doing a good job, or that he or she is honest and dedicated to the job, but claim that the appointee is

working for his political masters who appointed him. It was recently written in this paper that "it is the collective responsibility of the caretaker government's advisers, who are oath-bound to remain neutral and not favour or dis-favour anybody in any circumstance, to neutralize the administration and Election Commission. They would have to create a level-playing field where all the political parties find an equal opportunity."

It is hard for any Bangladeshi citizen to understand how, under a caretaker government system, it's leadership is held by the president of the country, who himself is essentially a political appointee, beholden not to neutrality as one would hope under such a system, but to the people that essentially appointed him president, and then the head of the caretaker government.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider ourselves and our political system, and ask if we have grown enough as a people, as a country, to have a government

that can hold honest elections. It's time that the party in power calls an election, and it is held, with one government handing the reins to the next duly elected government, without "caretaker" intervention. If we have not yet progressed to this level, do we yet have a system we can be proud of, or can trust? Is there any reason that no other country has followed our "glorious" innovation, the caretaker system?

Our credibility, as a governing people, will only be established when we can hold elections under the incumbent government, have as fair and free an election as possible, and either the party in power is re-elected or gracefully hands over the reins of power to the newly elected party; and when the party that didn't assume power accepts the results of the election, and assumes it's rightful position in parliament.

All that said, our members of parliament must then have the ability to vote for the needs of their constituents, their constituency, or their personal beliefs,

because that is why we elected them, to represent us. The system of party members having to blindly accept the party leadership position, and being mandated to vote that way, means that there can be no honest debate of issues in parliament. When you, as a representative in parliament, are required to follow one line only without a chance to dissent, and when the opposition leadership feels that its role in opposition is to always oppose then you, in the opposition party or coalition, must oppose, not because of your beliefs but because your leadership says you must. Then you are not interested in governing, you are interested in power. You are not interested in leading, you are interested in selfish opportunity.

At this point in our democracy, if we can honestly call it that, we should hold elections under the governing party (whether it be early in its term or at the end of its term), and our members of parliament should be voting (in parliament) without a constitutional requirement to vote only

with the leadership. The BNP secretary general recently asked the chief adviser not to transfer government officials having "no direct links" with the upcoming elections, because of the upcoming final examinations of the children of those officials. If our leadership had faith in the people, and the political parties and the political system, this wouldn't be necessary.

However, because we don't have such faith, we transfer many people and then complain that their children will be affected.

Furthermore, it is a complaint that the caretaker government (which we like to call a non-party interim government) does not have the scope (whatever that should mean) or the authority, to do anything other than carry out routine official work, and help the Election Commission to conduct a free and fair election, and that it cannot perform any policymaking.

Our political parties complain that the chief adviser and others are holding "important" ministry portfolios. Yet we don't complain

that the prime minister, for example, not only heads the government and her party, but also heads the ministry of defense and other ministries. Isn't running the government, and her party, enough work? Is there time to do more? If she can do it, why shouldn't the chief adviser and others head the various ministries? Surely there's time for only a few people to do everything. Right?

Government doesn't stop for elections; the needs of the country and its relationships with other countries, especially in the world today, continues, and cannot take a 90 day sabbatical. We can't expect that everything can be deferred until a new government is in power.

Either we accept that we have a caretaker government system that needs to do what it believes is necessary -- because it is the government as far as our system is concerned -- or we transfer power at the end of each parliamentary election.

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