

# Right to govern: Leaders' pledges and voters aspirations

ZAHID HOSSAIN

WITH the next general election knocking at the door, the celebrations of this year's Victory Day add a new dimension and significance. The two major election alliances are expected to declare their election pledges soon, highlighting respective areas of priority and emphasis, while the voters are generally aspiring for good governance and corruption free administration during the tenure of the next government. Restoration of rule of law and social and institutional values is also the expectation of the voters.

It has very often been said that the 20th century was the century of the common man. As one looks around, one wonders whether the common man in the past century was more a victim than a beneficiary. Nonetheless, the development of various human rights instruments was quite visible in the past century.

In the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights, adopted following the end of the second World War, the right of every person to participate in his or her government, and to share in the selection of that government through free choice, was proclaimed. One must be aware that the many nations which adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights did not have a universal definition of what the political process should be in their respective countries. Nonetheless, the United Nations adopted the international covenant on civil and political rights several years later, which again re-iterates the right to participate in one's government.

The specific relationship of this concept to the functions of government today arises, because, as we know, there are many nations which, even in this 21st century, do not have free elections. However, there are also nations which are attempting to have free elections following a period of dictatorial military rule, or following a period when there were legal restrictions

which excluded the participation of the people in determining their country's policies for governance and participation.

More or less every country is now trying to organize political affairs, or managing the affairs of the state, through some political system. These countries are apparently, or practically, being run by a set of people who are using their authority as the representatives of the people. The main issue, therefore, is their authority to govern, and how this authority has been earned. Contrarily, how this authority has been snatched away by physical force, or by any other means of questionable nature. As for the political process through which the right to govern has been earned or managed, everybody is claiming it to be credible, acceptable and therefore the mandate of the people. But in reality things are not always the same, and the ground rules are often not very clearly defined regarding the freeness, fairness and credibility of the elec-

toral process.

In any case, free and contested elections are critical to all definitions that distinguish democratic systems from other forms of government. Voting typifies the way in which most people take part in democratic politics. In democracies, those who would rule can only reach their goals by convincing enough citizens to cast ballots for them, and not for the other would-be rulers. Consequently, candidates devote enormous amounts of time, money and energy to attract voters. No wonder, then, that questions of who votes and how many votes are central to democratic politics.

Elections are a process of choice. But they are not necessarily a choice between alternatives, and if they are, they are seldom, if ever, a simple process of choice. Most electoral systems are, in fact, required to enable the electorate to do at least two rather different things at the same time. One is to choose candidates, the other is to

register the approval of certain policies. Now, it is not wholly possible to register approval or disapproval of any specific policy by the choice of candidates because candidates do not necessarily agree with one another on specific policies. This can be true even in cases where they regard themselves as being of the same party or holding very similar views. There are, moreover, numerous policies to be accounted for, many of which may seem irrelevant to an individual candidate, or to the electors in the area in which he/she is standing. All elections, therefore, involve some compromise between things as they ought to be and things as they are.

The people of Bangladesh are going to exercise their choice very soon. Their choice will be for candidates as well as for their programmes. The politicians will announce their pledges to draw the attention of the voters, while the voters will have clear aspirations and expectations from the leaders

they will choose for governing them for the next five years.

The people of Bangladesh on this auspicious 35th Victory Day can genuinely aspire that their new leaders will ensure restoration of good governance in every field of our social political and economic life. They expect that the parliament will be the real seat of power where the parliamentarians will get the opportunity to discuss all the major issues of the country, and that laws will be enacted for the welfare of the common people. Voters' aspirations will not be too much if they ask for an uninterrupted supply of power throughout the country so that the production line of the manufacturing companies remain undisturbed, and the farmers can have power at the time of their irrigation purposes.

The voters must have the right to buy essential items at reasonable prices, and they can make such a demand to the politicians. This demand is not too much to ask for, and as citizens of the country they

have the right to have a decent and peaceful life. The voters can demand effective communication to orient the service providers to the role and rights of the public and also to sensitise the public, specially the vulnerable, about their public rights.

The voters have the right to ask for separation of judiciary, as per the directives of the higher courts, because the independence of the judiciary and the modernization of the legal infrastructure and judicial procedures are critical elements of any programme of governance reforms.

Above all the major problem for Bangladesh has been the all pervasive corruption that has not only created uncertainties in the policy environment but has also raised the cost of doing business. Therefore, the leaders and politicians have a responsibility, as well as obligation, to the voters who aspire for good governance and proper behaviour from them while exercising their authority in running the affairs of the state.

The political parties and candidates are the real actors of any democratic election, and credibility of any election largely depends on their behaviour pattern and mode of operations before, during and finally after the election.

Finally, at the same time the losing party, or parties, serves as alternate government in opposition, scrutinizing the government, criticizing its policies and administration, publicizing its blunders, offering alternative programmes and techniques and standing ready to assume the responsibilities of the office whenever the voters favour them. Thus, in a democratic system the leaders of the government as well as those of the opposition have almost the same responsibilities and obligations to the voters.

Zahid Hossain is a political analyst

## Russian roulette

MICHAEL HIRSH AND OWEN MATTHEWS

ALEXANDER Litvinenko said a lot of outrageous things when he was alive. He claimed that al Qaeda's No 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a Russian agent. He alleged that he had a tape of Russian President Vladimir Putin having sex with another man. And he declared, just before dying, that his enemies in the FSB, Russia's secret service, had poisoned him in order to silence him. Some of Litvinenko's allegations were hard to believe. But as British and FBI investigators followed a radioactive trail left by the deadly isotope, polonium 210, that killed the Russian exile on November 23 — finding traces of it on planes from Moscow to London — they began to believe he might have been on to something. Litvinenko, hairless and ghostly pale, had devoted his last minutes of consciousness to fingering the FSB and Putin himself. "You have shown yourself to be as barbaric and ruthless as your most hostile critics have claimed," the former FSB lieutenant colonel turned dissident said on his deathbed. "The howl of protest from around the world will reverberate, Mr Putin, in your ears for the rest of your life."

The Kremlin called Litvinenko's allegation "nothing but nonsense." Putin himself dismissively suggested that Litvinenko might have been "sacrificed" by his dissident allies as a ploy to cast blame on Moscow. British investigators cautioned that they had turned up nothing that led to any particular suspect. Some suggested that Litvinenko's poisoning was done too sloppily for the culprit to have been the FSB, the successor to the fabled KGB. Professional hits are supposed to be neat, quiet affairs. But so many traces of polonium 210 were found in London restaurants, hotels and posh neighborhoods like Mayfair that British tabloids began to run radiation scare headlines. Authorities said some 33,000 British Airways passengers may have been exposed, though the health risks were considered minor.

Still, the fears in London reflected the unease in many Western capitals about the kind of place Russia has become. Grown richer on gas and oil profits, an increasingly

haughty Russia has begun to behave like an international bully, US and European officials complain. After a decade in which it meekly accepted its status as a second-rate power, Russia has cut off fuel supplies to the Europeans, strong-armed former Soviet satellites like Ukraine and Georgia, obstructed Washington over sanctions against Iran and harassed US companies in Russia.

Equally worrisome, Russia has become a nation where corruption is systemic, where the only order and security come from bribes and protection rackets and contract killings are as common as buyouts on Wall Street. Politics and profits are so intertwined that top Kremlin officials control some of the country's biggest companies. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev is also chairman of Gazprom, the \$220 billion gas monopoly. Presidential administration deputy chief Igor Sechin is head of the giant state oil company, Rosneft, and Putin aide Viktor Ivanov chairs national air-carrier Aeroflot, as well as the main air-defense contractor, Almaz-Antei. "We used to have a private oligarchy — now we have an oligarchy drawn from the secret police," says former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov, referring to the KGB background of many of Putin's advisers.

Indeed, some US and European officials suggest that Putin's Russia now has the characteristics of a fascist state. "There's no longer a sense that Russia is just on the other side of the divide but still within the family," says Stephen Sestanovich, a former top Russia adviser in Democratic and Republican administrations. "The Russians are no longer the errant cousins. They're looking like a different gang altogether."

One thing is certain: enemies of the Kremlin and its many business interests have been turning up suspiciously dead lately. A month before Litvinenko's murder, journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a critic of Putin's war in Chechnya, was shot to death at her Moscow apartment. The Litvinenko poisoning was the most brazen attack yet, occurring in the heart of London in early November. Despite the failure to find a culprit, intelligence assessments sent to the White House recently indicated that most theories

pointed back to Russia.

Most experts agreed that the killer's use of polonium 210 was the hardest evidence tying the assassination to elements inside the Russian government. In the quantity that killed Litvinenko, the obscure isotope could be obtained only from a nuclear reactor or a nuclear-powered sub. "It is not at all easy to get hold of," says Boris Zhukov, head of the radioisotope laboratory of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Nuclear Research Institute. "And absolutely impossible outside state control, at least in Russia." Some US and British intelligence sources, however, suggest the polonium 210 that killed Litvinenko could have come from some place besides Russia.

According to a classified US intelligence bulletin on the case that was described to Newsweek, one theory among many is that the culprits could be rogue elements of the FSB. A possible suspect is a quasi-mythical group called Dignity and Honor, an alleged organization of ex-spies who target Kremlin critics on their own initiative. "We are talking about death squads here, like the ones they had in Latin America, of former KGB special units who are experienced in war, intelligence and murder," says Aleksei Venediktov, director of Ekho Moskvy, a prominent radio station, and one of Moscow's best-connected commentators. "These people lost everything in '90s. They felt betrayed first by (Boris) Yeltsin and then by Putin. Beginning in about 1998, they formed private groups, radical and militarized. Their aim is to kill enemies of the motherland." (One case is under investigation, though no murders have yet been conclusively tied to such groups.)

But if Putin was blameless in the Litvinenko killing, he didn't exactly jump into the investigation, either. "Why isn't Putin saying, 'This is awful and we will help you track the responsibility wherever it goes?'" asks Sestanovich. "Their own words and actions here convict them, if not of direct responsibility then at least of an approach and attitude toward a crime like this that is way out of the mainstream." Asked about the possibility of rogue FSB killers, one senior US official who deals with Russia cautioned against making the same mistake President Truman

once did when he remarked that "poor Stalin" was a "prisoner of the Politburo." Putin, a former KGB colonel, "is a very smart man; he keeps his eye on detail," said the official, who would speak about the case only anonymously.

Even if the Russian president weren't directly involved in Litvinenko's killing or other assassinations, it is clear that extremist elements in his security apparatus think they can act with impunity. Last June, after the murder of Russian diplomats in Iraq, Russia's rubber-stamp Parliament authorized assassination of "terrorists" anywhere in the world — not that the lack of such a law stopped the KGB (or indeed FSB) in the past. Vladimir Ryzhkov, a deputy in Russia's Duma, believes that the motive in murders like Litvinenko's is "not to just get rid of individuals, but to lead a psychological campaign to threaten the mass of people back home. The message is, 'You are next.'" But most contract murders in Russia tend to be disputes over money, not politics, investigators say.

US officials caution that not all is going bad with Russia. Moscow is cooperating on nuclear nonproliferation and recently agreed to terms for entry into the World Trade Organization. President George W Bush still has "a very good personal relationship" with Putin, says a senior Bush administration official who would talk only on condition of anonymity. "They can discuss anything."

Even so, US officials fear that corporate interests have become so dominant in Russia that the West can no longer depend on statesmanlike behavior out of Moscow. Many senior Kremlin figures, for example, have strong financial interests in continuing to trade nukes and conventional weapons with Iran. "The only institution that works in Russia anymore is the Kremlin," says the US official who deals with Moscow. Whether the Kremlin is also working to silence its critics may be a secret that dies with people like Alexander Litvinenko.

With Anna Nemtsova in Moscow, Mark Hosenball in Europe and Stryker McGuire, Gianne Brownell and William Underhill in London.

© 2006, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

## US and the new UN chief

ABDUL RUFF COLACHAL

ON the very first day of next year a new Secretary General of UN will take charge and face the challenges that the world is currently confronting, with the most crucial one being the Middle East crisis, followed by the nuclear, global warming, poverty, health and democratic issues. The choice of South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon as the next Secretary General of the UN, who will replace the much experienced Kofi Annan, is a clear move by the USA and the West to create a strong counter to North Korean nuclear advancements, termed as a "shocking development" by the West, though Pyongyang had long ago declared its intentions to have nuclear facility at par with other nuclear powers. At the outset it should be clear that, since the USA is behind his election also, he is not expected to move away from the US control mechanisms. Moon should, however, ponder over some of the painful facts troubling world politics for a long time.

As the top most functionary of an international diplomatic mission, Moon will have to strike a balance between the super-power's goals and the legitimate interests of less powerful nations. The impartially attached to the high office of the UN will be reflected in the actions he takes on all issues that come up for UN resolution.

The notion that impartiality is an illusion, or a device to earn the wrath of the all powerful and all deciding USA, will take Ban Ki Moon to the gallery of his weak predecessors, and he will be remembered only as a mere custodian of UN charters, while keeping intact the oppressive power of the US-led West.

Massacre in Palestine and Lebanon continues to agitate the world, as the USA lectures on democracy, and, a new Middle East does not restrain Israel from its misadventures in these countries. Annan recently raised his voice for action against climate

change and the need to speed up development initiatives for the under developed world, as well resolving the Middle East crisis. He, however, never condemned, or acted to end, the devastating economic sanctions and war against the Iraqi people, and had remained silent over the US-Israel aggressive threats of invasion of Iran.

It is widely acknowledged that the UN is being controlled by USA. A clear, shameless record of UN having pledged fealty to the crime syndicate governed by the USA makes the UN chief a willing co-conspirator in its reign of terror for world dominance. After a long run, the UNSC, today, functions like a club owned by its major shareholders, and the role of the UN chief is reduced to being, a figurehead chosen and installed by the USA, the major contributor.

Kofi has been unusually compliant to an extent but he failed to work by the UN Charter he took oath to uphold. He succeeded in serving the agenda of the power that put him in his place. As a nominee of the USA-led West, he generally did not bother about options to choose from. But Moon, with his vast diplomatic experience, cannot afford to misread the aspirations of small or less powerful nations.

Disarmament, a key issue between the erstwhile Soviet Union and the USA continues to haunt the world today, and arms reductions attempted insincerely by the world powers so far have only weakened all efforts for total disarmament. Nuclear disarmament is an illusion, as the UN and UNSC follow double standards in addressing and regulating the issue. UN does not talk about those who possess nuclear weapons, but tries to cripple the nuclear efforts of some other nations. The US sponsored UN resolutions, like the one on North Korea, demand that the non-UNSC members don't go for nuclear fuel, even for peaceful purposes, and eliminate nuclear issue with Iran diplomatically.

The UN should not have permit-

ted double standards in nuclear matters. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) binds every nation that deals in nuclear materials. Nuclear non-proliferation is not the sole responsibility of the USA, but all countries must face it together. The USA does not have monopoly over nuclear matters, and, hence, should avoid behaving like the sole authority to demand punitive action against some other country for advancing its legitimate national interest. Kofi Annan, during the last leg of his term, has somehow managed to bring about some sort of peace arrangement between Israel and Lebanon on the one hand, and Palestine on the other. But the USA has once again pushed the Israeli forces into Palestine with air strikes, thereby undermining the peace efforts of Kofi Annan.

Arms trade has emerged as the most lucrative business, and USA is not lagging behind in that respect. The United States, Israel, South Korea and at least seven more nations are now believed to have nuclear arms, with constant efforts being made for more precise nuclear weapons systems. Yet North Korea's nuclear test, just as the Iran's nuclear ambitions, is termed by the UNSC as unwelcome and dangerous. The US objection stems from the supposed history of trading in weapons and components. N. Korea's nuclear advancement is particularly worrisome to its neighbors in the Korean peninsula, and to the international community as a whole.

Sanctions are the crudest possible economic terrorism, and are the modern way of imposing the will of the most powerful nation on less powerful ones. Actions like those who possess nuclear weapons, but tries to cripple the nuclear efforts of some other nations. The US sponsored UN resolutions, like the one on North Korea, demand that the non-UNSC members don't go for nuclear fuel, even for peaceful purposes, and eliminate nuclear issue with Iran diplomatically.

The UN should not have permit-

and pre-emptive wars.

An important issue which deserves the attention of the UN is standardization of political processes in electoral politics. Notwithstanding the announcement made by every so-called democratic country, hardly any country conducts the polls truly freeky and fairly. Democracy should be properly defined and illustrated by the UN. Issues like poverty, health and global warming have assumed alarming proportions over years of neglect by the UN. The world community as a whole has to rise to reduce poverty levels, as well as the extent of green gas emissions; the USA tops the list of countries contributing to hazardous global warming phenomenon.

If Ban Ki Moon actually takes his obligation and sworn oath seriously enough to respect the rights of all nations, uses his prominent public stage as an advocate for them, and works for peace and an end to all injustice and conflicts still raging around the world, he will have safeguarded the UN Charter. More importantly, the freedom loving peoples/nations, struggling for their own sovereign states, should be assisted to fulfill their long cherished dream.

The UN, henceforth, should be in a position to halt invasions by stronger nations as a foreign policy strategy, and the new Secretary General should generate fresh thoughts and evolve positive tactics so as to release the world from the clutches of military means to resolve regional and world problems, apart from redefining democratic values in international politics and setting purely diplomatic means to settle the disputes. Reduction of regional tensions and establishment of truly democratic human societies all around the world should be the motto of the UN functionaries. That is, in fact, the mandate of Ban Ki Moon.

Dr Abdul Ruff Colachal teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

## Fixing the RMG sector

SHERINA TABASSUM

THE apparel and textiles sector in Bangladesh has been at the heart of the economic activities of the country for the last two decades. This sector has become the largest foreign currency earner and constitutes 75% of the country's exports. The country has experienced a reasonable amount of foreign investment in this sector. As the apparel and textiles sector has matured and become stable, it has become a major source of employment, especially for Bangladeshi women.

As the readymade garment (RMG) sector expanded, the necessity to uphold various labor standards such as basic human rights, occupational safety, proper hazard management system, etc. have become imperative. So far the industry has been successful in reshaping itself to accommodate various international standards and

Codes of Conduct. However, the recent unrest in some manufacturing units/factories in the sector, both inside and outside the EPZ, has shown the importance of an effective mechanism of communication between the workers and the management/owners to address issues of concern for all.

Perhaps establishing a proper grievance handling procedure can mitigate many of the problems that the sector has recently seen. Grievance can be defined as a complaint or formal expression of dissatisfaction made by an individual employee about the work situation or about violation of the terms of workplace agreement. A proper grievance handling procedure ensures that employees who feel aggrieved about the way they have been treated, either by the management or by their colleagues, are given every opportunity to express their views and to have the issues resolved in a fair and reasonable

manner, which will be beneficial for both the workers and the management. The procedure can be based on the laws of the land and certain international labor standards, the ILO conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Global compact and other existing standards.

Raising a grievance is a natural and emotional expression. It's an expression that takes place everywhere — in every industry, society, and family, in every walk of life. In the absence of a proper grievance handling procedure and the management structure that supports it, and when suppressed for a long time, the outburst of the grievance can be extremely harmful for the factory, or the organization and, eventually, the industry, because grievance has a contagious effect and a proper grievance handling procedure can prevent the outbreak. Therefore, in an organizational situation, a definite path has to

be marked to raise grievances.

Instituting a process to handle grievances is necessary because it sends a strong message to the employees that there is a platform to carry out discussions between the workers and the management, and that an employee can seek redress through organized channels and a predetermined process. The process should be transparent and easy to understand. It is important that the workers know that such a mechanism is in place so that they know that they will be treated fairly and that their complaints will be addressed by the management if the immediate supervisor fails to, or does not have the capacity to, address those.

It is equally important for the management to understand the necessity for instituting such a mechanism. The grievance handling procedure will help the management to address a complaint/grievance without causing

disruption in the flow of work. It should be emphasized here that if production stops, losses incur not only to the owner but also to the workers. The complainant can carry on with his/her regular duties while the management takes the complaint through formal channels to resolve it. That way, production is on track to meet deadlines, workers can earn their regular wages/piece rates and owners do not have the risk of paying for airfreight.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to let the workers know that they can raise an issue with the management and solve it in an organized way that will benefit both parties. A proper grievance handling procedure will strengthen positive labor relations, which is a two-way traffic. Both management and workers must work together as relationship building is vital for successful industrial relations. Care must be taken so that each step in the procedure is followed, to facilitate the resolution

of grievances and to give room to both parties to provide meaningful inputs to the process. Continuous denial of grievances in the initial stages of the process will invariably hurt the entire grievance handling procedure, and result in ill-feeling between the management and the workers.

We have already witnessed the worst-case scenario in Bangladesh, perhaps largely due to the absence of such a mechanism of communication between the factory owners and workers. It is, therefore, imperative to build the capacity of supervisors and managers in handling grievances through an established grievance handling procedure. Once the procedure has been finalized through consultations at various levels of the management and workers, a copy of the document outlining the procedure can be distributed among the workers for their information and understanding.

An effective grievance handling procedure is the process or mechanism whereby management formally deals with the officially presented complaint(s) of workers. The mechanism clearly establishes the steps in the process by which these issues will be resolved. The necessity of such a process is to identify and resolve grievances in a timely manner through consultation, constructive discussion and cooperation between management and the workers. Such a participatory process can do much to boost employee morale and encourage a supportive and conflict-free workplace.

The process should be transparent and easy to understand, and should be properly communicated to all levels of the organization. The objective of the process is to simplify the reporting of workplace problems. A simple but effective grievance handling procedure is a peaceful method of conflict resolu-

tion, which reduces agitation and provides stability.

The procedure will not only help the management to reach a quick and effective solution but will also result in improved working relationships, and boost overall employee morale. Although instituting a grievance handling procedure now may not compensate the Bangladesh RMG sector for the losses already incurred, we can surely hope that such a process will lessen the level of dissatisfaction and agitation among the workers. Undoubtedly, those factories and manufacturing units, which are already handling grievances effectively, have suffered the least during the recent unrest as these units have proved that the management is willing to listen to the workers, and to make an effort to address the issues of concern.

Sherina Tabassum is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.