

The election and a few questions

Accuracy of voter list remains a big issue

REGARDING the election there are two questions that we would like to put. We are certain that these queries are representative of the questions that are in the people's mind too regarding the forthcoming election.

There are no two opinions in anyone's mind that there is no alternative to an election, and that the election must be free, fair and credible in a democratic dispensation. Needless to say, the election is governed by two very important factors that cannot be made a short shrift of. A free and fair election is predicated on a credible voter list while the paucity of time is a major constraining factor.

Let's take the voter list first. Regrettably, in spite of the three attempts that have been made so far to update it, twice by the now-on-leave CEC, Justice Aziz, and the latest exercise to remove the flaws, conducted over the last ten days, we are where we were at the beginning of the year. There are far too many questions that render the current voter list less than credible. The people have no idea about the recent update. To say the least it was a most haphazard affair, and as per report the enumerators did not go from house to house in most cases as they were obligated to do. We would like to know also as to what has been done to include the names of the genuine voters who have been left out and what has been done to delete names of about 13 million or so duplicate/false or extra, call what you may, voters? Under these circumstances can one really inspire a person to go for election?

As for the paucity of time the body that should be held responsible for wasting all these days is the caretaker government led by the chief adviser-cum-president. We are sorry to say that it was his procrastination that is responsible for the paucity of time. He appointed two new election commissioners one of whom was an active member of a major political party. It was his foot dragging and U-turn on issues that were all but resolved, his dilly-dallying, going one step forward only to retrace two, have brought us to a situation where we are faced with a flawed voter list and not enough time to rectify it.

These are questions that need to be answered before the people can be convinced that the election that they are so eagerly waiting to participate in will be credible.

Government borrowing

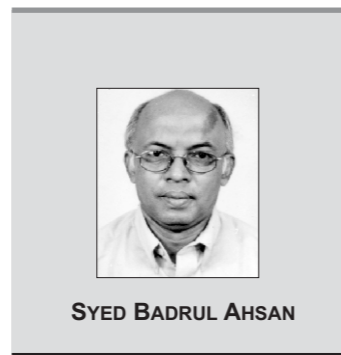
Put a lid on it

COMPARED to last year, during the five-month period of this fiscal year, government borrowings from banks have registered an upswing of 32 percent. The staggering rise in borrowing is attributed to comparatively low revenue income and a massive drop in foreign aids. Finance Ministry sources have further indicated that government might have to borrow even more due to additional spending to be incurred in elections and a possible fall in revenue earning due to political instability. Government has achieved a mere 8 percent in revenue income as against the targeted 21 percent compared to the earnings of 15 percent during the corresponding period of the last fiscal year.

It is thus imperative that the government take some concerted measures to keep the borrowings under control in order to maintain overall economic stability. The keynote for achieving this goal is to curtail the government's spending. It is our strong belief that the caretaker government is best equipped for the job because of its size and apolitical character. The required steps to be taken would be to tighten disbursements of project funds under ADP after careful scrutiny of all the projects in terms of their respective value including factors like the time available at hand with the caretaker government between now and the election and coming of the next government, the viability of each of the project and their proper implementation etc. As a matter of fact, consideration could also be given towards withholding release of funds for particular projects as deemed appropriate. On the other hand, government projects 'funded by lump-sum grants' that have the potential of giving rise to 'corruption' and influencing the election process should be dispensed with.

We sincerely hope that this vital issue of national interest will be duly addressed amidst the otherwise pressing obligations of the caretaker government.

When bureaucrats go for career change . . .



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

That is not what you can say about many of the higher functionaries of the civil structure today. Forget the fact that the bureaucrat in our times is a mediocre being and that his intellectual accomplishments may not necessarily be at par with the generation which preceded his. But that ought not to be an excuse for him and his friends to fling rules and conventions to the winds.

HAIDER Ali, barrister-at-law and a senior bureaucrat here in Bangladesh, has lately been made an officer on special duty. We have no arguments with that decision. We will neither support nor oppose that move, for it falls within the purview of routine and regular policy making on the part of the civil service structure. But what does come, as a bit of a surprise is the revelation that Haider Ali called on the former parliamentary affairs advisor to former prime minister Khaleda Zia the other day.

The whisper, a pretty loud one, that Haider Ali is keen to take the plunge in politics, and that too on the side of the fence occupied by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been acquiring increasingly thicker shades of colour. Now, of course, we are tempted to suggest that the newly made OSD is perfectly within his rights to go into politics and that, as a citizen, he is eligible to look for opportunities for making newer contributions to public welfare.

But temptations must be resisted, indeed, must be rolled back, when the matter is one of what the bureaucracy has been doing lately in this country. Having watched with amusement, combined with revulsion, the sinister doings of nearly a couple

of score of serving and former bureaucrats at the Uttara office of a former energy advisor only weeks ago we, as a people, are quite naturally keeping watch over all these members of the civil service who are so keen to give a rough shake to our sensitivities.

And, speaking of sensitivities, let your mind wander until it comes to rest on the story of Abu Hena. He enthused us not long ago and gave us to believe that there were men like him ready and willing to spot wrong and then repudiate that wrong. His principled stand against the political patronization of terrorists operating in the guise of the Islamic faith renewed our faith, somewhat, in the ability of men doing less than transparent politics to understand, at a point in time, that they have been among the wrong kind of crowd. Abu Hena used to be a good bureaucrat, one of those old-timers in whose judgment there was always the flavor of administrative good sense. It was good sense that he ultimately did not see reflected in the programs of his party. His expulsion from the BNP, and his subsequent linking up with the Liberal Democratic Party, were a natural corollary to his changing moods.

And now Abu Hena has turned his back on the LDP and retraced his steps back to the BNP. You might now inform us, in the infinity of your wisdom, that there is no last word in politics, that men like Abu Hena keep playing with words until they find the right ones to base their work upon. We do not have to buy your line of reasoning because, contrary to what you might advise us, there is, of course and definitely, a last word in politics. That word may have turned into a cliché. But if it is good enough for me, it might as well be good enough for you. It is called principle. Even bureaucrats must adhere to principles, and they do in all civilized societies.

In our social milieu, once upon a time, there used to be civil servants who made it a cardinal point in life to serve the administration and so remain, as it were, faceless. You could think of Mujibul Haq and AKM Ahsan. You could go back to the times of Anisuzzaman. And then there were Kafiluddin Mahmud and M. Asafuddin. They were men, as long as they served the republic as civil servants, who upheld the conventions of the bureaucracy through not being seen but, nevertheless, being an integral part of the process of governance.

How many instances can you point to of these men, and of others in their era, calling in the media and speaking to them in clear, full and outrageous violation of the rules of service? This generation of civil servants, for all

the charges of elitism and social snobbery hurled at it, operated on the basis of etiquette and on the core belief of the bureaucracy being subservient to the political leadership of the land.

That is not what you can say about many of the higher functionaries of the civil structure today. Forget the fact that the bureaucrat in our times is a mediocre being that his intellectual accomplishments may not necessarily be at par with the generation, which preceded his. But that ought not to be an excuse for him and his friends to fling rules and conventions to the winds. When a couple of weeks ago the two home secretaries, the one being reassigned and the one who had just come in, chose to speak to the media pack the overwhelming question of how audacious and rude the civil administration has become in these times came upon us yet once more. The sadder reality is that there is hardly anyone in the political tier of government who can pull these men up and then send them packing.

A bureaucrat who minces no words in publicly articulating his indignation at being moved to a new department deserves to be disciplined in much the same way that a secretary who toys with political ambitions even as he serves the state needs to be swatted down. ASM Abdul Halim,

clearly enjoying the power that came with being cabinet secretary, went on tours of his local area trying to drum up support for his probable political future. The politicians he served saw little that was wrong with that, in their narrow partisan interest.

And because they ignored such lapses on the part of such politically motivated bureaucrats we now have the spectacle of Haider Ali linking up with a politician, of other government officials (all with pronounced political leanings) meeting in conspiratorial darkness and so compelling the goodness in our collective being to take on the disconcerting shape of cynicism.

There is, after all this talk of the bad doings of bad bureaucrats, the matter of how we in Bangladesh can deal with the menace of a politically indiscreet, in effect rapacious, bureaucracy. There are some pretty simple things that can be done. In the first place, see to it that a bureaucrat retires when he must retire. But if you give him a contract to carry on, and then let him go on and on because his political beliefs tally with yours, you simply punch yet one more hole in the heart of civil administration.

Kamaluddin Siddiqui spoke for a lot of us when, a few weeks ago, he noted on television that contractual appointments needed to be discouraged. But that statement of belief, assuming it was belief, came rather late in the day. He would have made much better sense of it all had he declined his own contractual appointment in the early days of the BNP-led alliance government. He did not; and like him, many other such officials could not hold themselves back from happily picking up what came their way. The result was administrative chaos,

with good officials watching, in dismay, their chances of promotion go up in smoke.

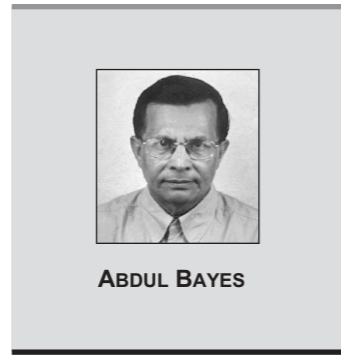
And in the second place, make sure that bureaucrats, of both the civil and military variety spend a fairly reasonable amount of time, once they have passed into superannuation, staying away from politics. Let three years or, ideally, five years go by before these gentlemen, desirous of a career change after their careers are actually over, are welcomed into politics. It becomes a worrying situation when the gap between the end of a civil service career and the beginning of a political one turns out to be perilously close. Bureaucratic proximity to the powers that be, or have been, has generally produced some of the more disturbing of times for us in these parts.

Field Marshal Ayub Khan's patronization of elements of the Altaf Gauhar brand in the 1960s clearly damaged much of the administrative process in Pakistan. In General Ershad's era, some of the most loyal of civil servants he banked on for support were soon -- and that was after his fall -- to veer off into different political camps. In the years since the return of an elected government in 1991 bureaucrats have leapt across and trampled upon one another in demonstrations of fealty to the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, with results that have been as quixotic as they have been damaging for grassroots politics.

And the damage? Take a peek inside the secretariat, inside the ministries, inside certain dark rooms in the Uttara twilight. The truth will dawn on you with astonishing clarity.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

Delayed election better than dirty election



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Election is needed for democracy, but "any election somehow" could be bad for democracy. The February 1996 election is a glaring example of this. We want a general election every five years, but that does not imply that the game should be played whether the field is level or not, whether it is engineered or not.

BY now it is crystal clear that a dirty election had been planned by the Election Commission (EC) to bring the BNP-Jamat alliance to power again. In support of this "serious" allegation, we can bring the status of the voter list to your notice. The voter list is the main plank upon which the spirit of a neutral election stands. It has been more than a year since the voter list prepared by the EC was found to be fake, and the political parties sought a correction to this effect.

Unfortunately, the EC rejected the appeal for revision outright and, despite a High Court ruling, went on with preparations for holding the election. Meantime, the former CEC M. A. Aziz was forced to go on leave, and the self-proclaimed CEC, Mr

Mahfuzur Rahman, also rejected the demand for a revision. It was not until NDI made the same allegation that EC decided to go for a revision or updating of the voter list.

The EC launched a half-hearted attempt to show the donors that the voter list had been revised. The field assistants were rarely found to be working. Thousands of eligible voters from opposition parties, especially Awami League, who were excluded from the list were not registered, and in many places a large number of voters was left out. That means, till today the voter list remains as it was before, but still the election schedule had been declared.

Against this background, one could question the very sincerity of the EC for holding a free and fair election with the participation of all the political parties. It

appears that the EC intends to, somehow, exclude the major political parties in the upcoming election and stage a re-run of the 1996 episode. Otherwise, how could the scheduled be declared without publication of the voter list?

Again, as proposed by the caretaker government (CTG), the EC has not yet been reconstituted. The "engineers" are still there with their tools to manipulate the election results. The politically appointed election officers are still there despite the demand to withdraw them from election related functions.

That the chief of the CTG has never been neutral, since his assumption of power is not an allegation from the opposition now. Even the Ambassador of the US questioned the neutrality of the president. In his three midnight speeches President

Iajuddin Ahmed slashed the opposition in a language quite akin to that of the BNP-Jamat alliance leaders. Mr Shafiqul Huq Chowdhury -- one of the "domesticated" advisors who were picked with the precondition that they would not call a spade a spade -- also said that 50 days of the CTG have been lost due to dilly-dallying and the hesitation of the CTG. In other words, out of the 90 days, almost half have been wasted by the CTG itself.

Right now it appears that, barring the BNP-Jamat alliance, all political parties stand against holding of the election as per the schedule declared by the EC. In fact, Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the grand alliance, asked the EC to reschedule it's timing after duly updating the voter list. Her clarification was backed up by the opinion polls, which show that

the general public expects a farcical election with the current voter list.

Now comes the question of the constitutional mandate for holding an election within 90 days. Notwithstanding the issue of the president himself violating the constitution, we can argue that if the election cannot be held within 90 days then the CTG and the EC should be held responsible. The EC should have started the updating task, and the CTG should have reconstituted the EC much earlier. The inefficient and inept CTG and the impotent EC seem to have driven us to this so-called constitutional crisis. In fact, the dilly-dallying and the lukewarm attitude toward the looming crisis could be deliberate, to hasten the process and complete the election.

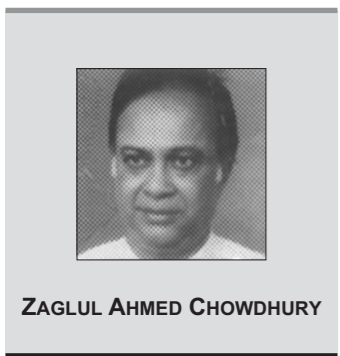
Food intake is necessary for human survival. But that does not mean that any food is good for the human body. Examination is needed for getting a certificate. But that does not mean that examination with leaked out questions, or manipulated questions are good for the system. Likewise, election is needed for democracy, but "any election

somehow" could be bad for democracy. The 1996 February election is a glaring example of this. We want a general election every five years, but that does not imply that the game should be played whether the field is level or not, whether it is engineered or not.

Therefore, a delayed election is better than a dirty election. The voter list must be updated to the satisfaction of the voters, and the EC should be reconstituted within the shortest possible time. The EC needs overhauling not because the members of the EC have alleged allegiance to a particular party, but they should be removed because of their inefficiency, arrogance and sheer negligence of duties. For the sake of saving the nation from upcoming turmoil the CTG should see that a dirty election is not held. Let us delay the election and produce a transparent, credible and participatory election that the president and the people of this country could boast of. Anything short of that could result in great economic and human loss the responsibility of which would lie on CTG.

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Long way to go



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE Saarc Charter Day was observed on December 8 with the renewed pledge for taking every possible effort to turn the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) into a really effective and vibrant organization. Certainly, the occasion is momentous for the 1.4 billion people in South Asia as it was on this day, 1985, that heads of states and governments signed the Saarc charter on the concluding day of the first regional summit in Dhaka. The development was seen as a milestone in South Asia, which is largely known as a poverty-ridden populous area where tensions and rivalry among

MATTERS AROUND US

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the states are the orders of the day.

The emergence of Saarc did not provide any tangible program towards economic uplift for the region, but it was definitely a reversal of the trend of hostility and belligerence. The forum committed itself to working in concert for the overall socio-economic development of the region in the long run. Thirty-one years after the landmark day, one is not very convinced that much has been achieved under Saarc. But it is also admitted that the forum has helped improve the political climate in the trouble-prone region, though not remarkably, and also made modest progress in different areas of cooperation, ranging from culture to disaster management.

The last Saarc summit in

Dhaka, in November last year, vowed to re-invigorate the grouping that has now stepped into the third decade of existence. It has also decided to expand its arena by accepting, in principle, Afghanistan as the eighth member from the next summit and agreeing on "observer" status for two important nations -- China and Japan. The former is a geographically near-by giant, while the latter is an economic-power with close economic links with South Asia.

These decisions are likely to benefit the Saarc, and they have raised expectations about the performance of the forum in the days ahead. It is important that such high hopes be matched through increased action-oriented programs. They should get to the bottom of the basic

objectives of Saarc -- collective socio-economic benefits for the vast multitude living in the worlds most densely populated region where a large segment of people are mired in abject poverty.

The forum was unquestionably afflicted by political and other problems, making it somewhat ineffective for the most part of its existence. However, it is heartening to note that the regional body has swung into several concrete programs in various areas in an effort to revitalize its activities.

This has been particularly discernible during the last one year as the forum has been moving without any major political problems. Some of the decisions taken since the last summit in Dhaka include the agreement by the tourism ministers to connect their capitals by direct air routes.

Not all the seven nations of the Saarc have direct air connections with each other, and it often takes a long time via different routes to reach a member country. For instance, there is no Dhaka-Colombo direct flight and in most cases the trip is made through Bangkok, which takes time. Indeed, it was a good decision by the Saarc tourism ministers some months ago in Bangladesh's seabeach resort of Cox's Bazaar. However, it appears that sufficient progress has not been made towards that direction, and the matter needs serious follow up actions. Direct air links are necessary for greater interactions in trade, commerce and other fields.

The interior ministers of the Saarc countries also met in Dhaka earlier this year and discussed a variety of issues related to cooperation in vital areas like the law and order situation, and terrorism and combating cross-border crimes. It was a high profile conference that was attended, among others, by Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil and Pakistan Home Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao. These were followed up by Saarc envi-

ronment ministers meeting in Dhaka, who took several decisions for a closer understanding of an area that is crucially important to the region plagued by natural disasters and other problems.

It should not be concluded that all the meetings produced good results, and that whatever decisions were made would necessarily be implemented within the timeframe agreed upon. Going by past experience, often such decisions are subjected to inordinate delay in implementation, and are at times left in cold storage. Nonetheless, when the member states meet with some specific purposes there has to be some gain. The present activities of the Saarc, beginning close on the heels of the last summit, definitely deserve praise. This appreciation is all the more befitting because the forum appears to have geared up multi-faceted activities that seek to belie the negative image that exist in many quarters that it is somewhat moribund.

Many also feel that Saarc often remains hostage to the political problems and rivalries in the region, mainly between two key

players of the region -- India and Pakistan. Fortunately, the overall ambience seems much better following the last summit. Barring unforeseen developments, the next summit in India in April seems very much on the schedule, unlike many other occasions when the summit hung in imbalance.

The relatively better atmosphere notwithstanding, Saarc has several issues on hand that merit greater attention for the sake of the forum. The strengthening of the Saarc Secretariat in Katmandu remains a priority to make the organization more effective. It is also necessary to quicken the implementation of Safta related decisions. The Safta accord has been signed, but some bottlenecks still persist, preventing its smooth implementation. These are largely between India and Pakistan -- two major members. The people-to-people contact programs have not made much headway, as certain decisions taken in this direction are yet to see a bright day. It will definitely be the height of folly to expect early realization of all the

decisions, but the ball must be set to roll. These cannot be left on the backburner, which is often done in Saarc. The foreign ministers' meeting in Dhaka reviewed the half yearly activities of the forum. The expectation was that speedy progress will be achieved in removing these problems, but that has not been witnessed.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that, by large, the forum is demonstrating greater interest and vigor to make it more vibrant, and hopefully this trend will go on with more seriousness. No one really expects anything spectacular from Saarc, but hopes for modest gains and a friendly, cooperative climate in South Asia.

These are the avowed objectives for the forum, and positive signs are have been discernible in Saarc during the last one year. However, the forum needs more dynamism, and the Saarc Charter Day reminds the member nations of their bounden duty to definitely make the presence of the regional forum felt in a bigger way.

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