

For an inclusive globalisation

World leaders need to work towards it energetically

It was thoughtful of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) to have organised a dialogue towards an inclusive globalisation with two Noble laureates Prof Amartya Sen and Dr Yunus on hand to give their crystallised views on the topic.

George Soros, a global financier and founding chairman of Open Society Institute also chipped in with his valuable contributions. He criticised the fact that globalisation placed ultimate reliance on market regarding it as a 'fundamentalist' project.

Both Prof Sen and Dr Yunus with their pro-poor insights thought that globalisation per se is not something to be critical about; on the contrary, there are reasons to be optimistic about it. For it holds opportunities and potentials that await tapping and utilisation for the good of the majority people in the world. What we need is to weigh up the pros and cons of globalisation as Prof Sen suggests so that we can adopt the merits and guard against its demerits.

China, a communist country accepted free market economy only that which is commensurate with its national ethos and necessities.

Globalisation as is practised today is leading to monopolistic tendencies, and, to some extent, formation of cartels whereas it should have promoted competition across the board. It hardly offers any playing field between the rich and the poor, far less any level playing field. As a result, inequities are growing in the world instead of healthy interdependence for the sake of collective good.

We fully endorse the view that globalisation is moving in a wrong direction as a majority people are denied the privileges becoming weaker and weaker while the rich countries get stronger and stronger with the prerogative of giving the global economy the shape they like.

It is shocking to learn that two percent of people possess 50 percent of the world's total assets. To turn things around, the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation need to play robust role in putting a human face to globalisation. One way of turning the tide would be for translating the rhetoric on technology transfer and inter-country movement of labour into tangible realities.

Violence against women

Recommendations from activist groups need to be heeded

THE national convention against domestic violence organised by the Action Network to Combat Violence Against Women on Wednesday has actually put us in perspective about the work done in this vital field and what more needs to be done to contain the veritable social scourge. Violence against women is not only bad in itself but is also worse in its implication as the children are affected by it.

It is good to know that domestic violence has now been incorporated into human rights movement. This obliges the activist groups and society at large to get their act together in carrying forward a cause that has so far been the most neglected one among the human rights issues.

We fully endorse the view that the first thing must be done first which is to identify the families facing domestic violence and taking up programmes to raise the level of awareness at the household level. It may not be an easy task because violence is perpetrated on women and children by their near and dear ones against whom the victims would not like to speak out. Secondly, charity must begin at home in that professional organisations should address domestic violence concerns among its own members of the staff.

Then it merits maximum attention that the violence issue is embodied in the education curriculum. The media in the fitness of things must consciously also portray positive image of women.

The human rights groups movement has indeed gained some momentum. In this context, it is not only desirable but also necessary that rather than depending on the donor agencies in carrying forward their task the rights activists are thinking of moving forward by mobilising their own resources.

Devil's advocate



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE last couple of days have done nothing for the AL's reputation for indecision and vacillation, to say nothing for its reputation for political expediency.

Let's look at the first one first. Since October 28 the party has been split over the issue of whether to contest the elections or whether not to. On the boycott side you essentially had almost all the senior leadership and on the election side the party chief.

The fact that this was such a long-drawn-out and back-and-forth debate actually gives the lie to the conventional wisdom which says that Hasina makes all decisions without consultation.

October 28 ended with Justice Hasan formally declining the chief advisership, but the AL immediately found itself presented with a three-pronged problem. One, the president was going to appoint himself chief adviser, two, the violence on the streets was reaching frightening heights, and, three, the threat that the army was lurking in the wings, waiting to come in.

October 29 might have been the time to stand its ground, but it didn't. Here the party made the mistake of saying that it would wait and see. In the end, it waited until December 24 to decide, by which time it was pretty late in the day, and had it gone for elections immediately,



STRAIGHT TALK

Should one now vote for the BNP-led 4-party alliance or should one still give the AL-led grand alliance the benefit of the doubt or should one simply stay home and vote for no one at all. These are the questions that they are asking themselves right now. I guess it all depends on which one thinks is worse -- to be a sincere and genuine opponent of secularism or to just play one on television and have no sincerity at all.

diately, the party would have had two more months preparation.

What did it get from waiting? Not much, really. AL succeeded in getting rid of Aziz and Zakaria, but the returning officers hand-picked by the BNP remain in place and the voter list remains crooked. Certainly, had AL made this decision in October it would be in a much better position to contest than it is today.

But more than whether it was a good decision or a bad decision, the fact that there was a kind of zig-zag quality to the decision-making didn't help matters. One day it was elections, the next boycott.

On December 18 AL all but announced that it couldn't sit for elections on this schedule, less than a week later on the 24th, it threw its hat into the ring. Now, again, everything is up in the air due to the rejection of Ershad's nomination. No one knows where this comedy of errors will end.

This brings us neatly to the subject of political expedience.

There can be little doubt that the unseemly jockeying for Ershad's favour has done neither party much good in the public eye. Certainly, it has made them both seem opportunistic and one wonders whether it makes that much sense for the AL now that the party has decided on elections, since its principal fear was that Ershad would be used to give cover to AL-boycotted elections.

The subject of political expedience, of course, brings us nicely to the recent agreement inked between AL and the Khelafat-e-Majlish that has caused an uproar among the progressive community who feel that the AL has abandoned its commitment to secularism and joined hands with the worst kind of reactionary elements in order to split the fundamentalist vote.

Let me point out one or two things here. First, criticism coming from disillusioned AL supporters or the segment of the population further to the left is legitimate and fully warranted. They have every reason to feel that the AL has badly let them down.

But the smugness on the part of BNP-voters who are relishing this latest turn-around on the part of the AL is surely less warranted. It ill-behoves those who have supported the BNP-Jamaat combine (for whatever reason) in the past to now complain when the AL begins to cozy up to the fundamentalists.

Make no mistake, regardless of what the electoral ramifications of these moves are, and right now it is hard to predict whether they will presage a net gain for the AL or not, this frantic last-minute putting together of a motley "grand alliance" is really making the AL look a little desperate.

We already knew that the BNP would do anything to stay in power, witness the party's machinations

with regard to the Election Commission, the president's unconstitutional assumption of the chief advisership, the burning down the houses of those who jumped ship to the LDP, etc.

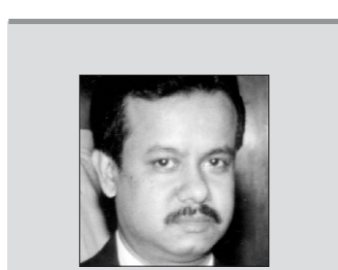
But now the AL has also shown that victory is more important than principle. Who knows: with an attitude like that, the party might even win.

This has not been an easy time for progressives and secularists who for the past few decades have made an uneasy home for themselves within the AL. No one is buying the AL general secretary's complaint that he has been misquoted and that the agreement has been misrepresented.

Jalil's second stab at soothing the ruffled progressive feathers, that there was nothing to worry about, the agreement would never be implemented, didn't go down much better. It is never a good thing when the best avenue for a political party is to claim that it isn't being sincere. For some reason, this causes people to doubt its sincerity.

That said, I am not sure that I am overly sympathetic to the "how can we believe anything you say?" line of argument that we are now hearing. The truth is that all political parties say lots of things, some true, many false, and the smart voter believes the ones that are believable and disbelieves the ones that are not.

A probable conspiracy theory



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ALMOST 3000 years ago, the famous storyteller Aesop lived in the Aegean region. He narrated in one of his fables that the earth began to tremble and the sky blackened when a deep and frightening sound erupted from Mount Ida. The people were terrified and ran for shelter, some got down on their knees and prayed, others fainted in fear. Suddenly the roaring, the shaking and the shocks just stopped. Then, slowly, and with hardly a whisper of sound, a tiny little mouse slowly emerged from the huge cleft in the mountain peak.

That, in a nutshell, is the story of the mountain which gave birth to a mouse. Thank our lucky stars that we lived to watch a rerun of that spectacle last week when Awami League and its allies did about-face and agreed to participate in the parliamentary election. After



CROSS TALK

The issue here is not that the mountain has conspired to give birth to a mouse. Rather, the issue is how far it could go to take that conspiracy to its logical conclusion. For a moment last week the mountain looked like a dirty rat.

months of bloodshed, violence, big-mouthing, full-throated invectives and threats of dire consequences, lo and behold, Mount Sudha has produced a mouse!

It is, at once, good news and bad news. The good news is that the country will see a surcease, albeit temporary, in political chaos. There will be a national election with the participation of all political parties and, hopefully, the country will inch towards a national reconciliation. But the bad news is no less important. There is a probable conspiracy theory that the nub of the onion is not going to change.

So, if the only thing constant in life is change, the constants are not likely to change. Those who ran for elections in the past are going to run again. Those who got money out of power will get power out of money and then more money again. The crooks and criminals will enter the race, then the parliament, slowly taking up their positions in our national life for another five years. Basically, we are going to see more of the same.

The crux of the conspiracy lies there, where all parties worked in cahoots so that nothing would change. When the Supreme Court stayed the landmark High Court verdict on disclosure of the candidate's profile, the politicians could not care less. In case you have not noticed, corruption has been shoved from the centre to the fringe of discussions. Instead, the politicians made politics so rough that people wanted to forget everything, and begged them to go to the polls.

I must say the cabal of conspirators has planned it well. They carefully calculated every move, and each time synchronized cause with its effect. In the process they have discredited every institution that could possibly throw them a challenge. The judiciary, the police, to some extent the army, the media, the intellectuals, the business community, one by one, everybody tried and failed, and got their reputation more or less tarnished.

That leaves out only the people, the fickle-minded people, who are

pre-occupied with their own survival struggle. Once in a while they get upset and bring about a Kansat or a Phulbari, but then return to the rigors of life merely to hold body and soul together for another day. It was the conspiracy of the politicians to make that struggle more difficult for the people, so that they would not dare again to scrutinize how the politicians liked to do their business.

Thus, under the surface of struggle the politicians are actually conjoined by complicity. When Ershad was sentenced a former minister from another regime went to his house and enquired about his whereabouts. Months ago, when the son of a former prime minister had visited the same house whose occupant had served time before, he was accompanied by none other than the enforcer of law, the then incumbent home minister of the country.

Now that is one rare quality amongst these politicians. They can be readily detached from one

The problem is not that one cannot believe anything the AL says. In point of fact, there is much that the AL says that is eminently believable, such as when it argues that it will not disband Rab. But the fact is that when it comes to its commitment to secularism, one simply can't be sure any more, these days.

By way of -- not analogy exactly -- let me turn your attention to the 2004 US presidential elections. Not too many people thought that John Kerry was much good as a candidate or that he had strong convictions or that he stood for much. He seemed to be the consummate clueless politician, saying what he thought would win him favour, but at the same time making mistake after mistake.

He wasn't great on the Iraq war -- he had voted to authorize it and was not in favour of withdrawal. On other issues close to progressive voters' hearts, such as welfare and health care, he was careful not to promise too much or to say anything much at all.

When it came to the issue of religion, Kerry made much of his pious Catholicism and the fact that he went to church every Sunday and tried to portray himself as eminently sympathetic to the church-going and the religious, which, for all I understand, he may actually be.

In short, as far as anyone progressive or liberal was concerned, he was a pretty poor candidate. But the main point was that as bad as he was, he was better than Bush. Most people seemed to get the fact that to be elected president in America that there are certain noises one has to make, and that there was a world of difference between Kerry and Bush.

Most also seemed to get the fact that he didn't really have a great deal of choice in terms of his vote for the war and that even if he

wasn't able to come out and say openly that he wanted out of the war, that there was a huge difference between him and George Bush.

You see, they had learned their lesson from 2000 when the conventional wisdom on the left had been that Al Gore was a chump and that there wasn't much difference between him and Bush. They might have been right about the first, but they were dead wrong about the second.

The darling of the left in 2000 was Ralph Nader who ran as an independent. In the end, the election was so close that it was possible to say that it was Nader voters who gave Bush the margin of his victory. The rest is history.

So what is a secularist who has supported the AL and believed in its commitment to secularism to do. Should one now vote for the BNP-led 4-party alliance or should one still give the AL-led grand alliance the benefit of the doubt or should one simply stay home and vote for no one at all. These are the questions that they are asking themselves right now. I guess it all depends on which one thinks is worse -- to be a sincere and genuine opponent of secularism or to just play one on television and have no sincerity at all.

Let me conclude by pointing out the obvious. Even though progressives mostly gave Kerry the benefit of the doubt, and voted for him, the right-wing weren't fooled in the slightest. Regardless of his efforts, they had him pegged as a bleeding heart, soft on defence, tax and spend Massachusetts liberal, and so he still lost.

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party and attached to another. And that is possible because all political parties have identical designs, where leaders are like interchangeable components which can be removed from one machine and fitted in another.

In all consideration, the outcome of the political upheavals has protected the status quo so that those who have plundered the country will slip the net. It is the same old trick when a desperate thief sets fire to the house so that he can slink away in the resulting chaos. Thieves on this side, thieves on that side, nothing will change for them, because what has prevailed in the senseless politics is the solidarity of the brotherhood of crooks.

There has been a conspiracy for sure, hatched by the leaders in this country to protect their keeps. Thus what is happening in the smokescreen for democracy is a class struggle, one that rallies like-minded looters to protect their class interest so that they and their families can thrive for generations. If not to fathers, the nominations have gone to their sons. Sister has come in lieu of the brother. Brother for brother, wife for husband, daughter for father were already there. No matter what, politics has to run and stay in the family.

The point is that the families of politicians together make a larger

family, and they agree to disagree so that the business does not go out of their hands. If one group demonstrates on the street and another sends the cops after them, still other groups cheering them up or down, all of it is division of labour that allows different members of the family to handle different parts of the business. Bengali nationalism, Bangladeshi nationalism, secularism, religious fundamentalism, communism, scientific socialism, unscientific socialism, these are but feigned denominations used to allocate responsibilities.

Mount Ida was the birthplace of Zeus. Likewise, Sudha Bhaban has been looked on as the cradle of liberal and liberation forces, since the daughter of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman lives in that house. That is why freedom-loving people were shocked when her party signed an agreement with a lesser known Islamic group taking a lenient view of the fatwa.

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Living with contradiction and anomaly



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

It looks like we in Bangladesh have to bear with, and adjust to, an increasing number of oddities, incongruities and contradictions. The discerning observers, who are really exasperated at the recent turn of events, feel that the hapless Bangladeshis are indeed the unfortunate audience in the theatre of absurd. The reference is principally to the partial implementation of the so-called package proposals of the council of advisers vis-a-vis the demands of 14 party alliance. Enforced temporary leave of one very controversial election commissioner, leaving the documentarily established partisan commissioner undisturbed,



STRAIGHT LINE

The point to note is that the Election Commission is constitutionally required to hold elections to the office of president and for members of Parliament, to delimit the constituencies for the purpose of elections to parliament, and to prepare electoral rolls for the purpose of elections to the office of president and to the Parliament.

and a minor readjustment of the time schedule regarding submission of nomination papers only has, apparently, been instrumental in bringing the 14 party alliance into the election fray.

The availability of an acceptable voters list in which the names of all eligible voters are enrolled has been left to chance, or to the less-than-credible good wishes of the Election Commission. The preparation of a near flawless voters list appears to be an uncertain proposition. The reality, as of now, according to media reports, is that the Election Commission is yet to make available a transparent voters list, and to ensure everyone's access to it in a draft form so that necessary corrections and modifications can be

made. Even though such essential prerequisites are not present the election schedule was hastily announced, thereby rendering comprehensive participation extremely difficult. How an incomplete voters list does not give rise to a law and order situation on election day, and post-polling altercations and subsequent non-acceptance of declared results, remains to be seen?

An admittedly queer and ludicrous dimension of the temporary truce regarding the disposition of election commissioners is that the head of a quasi-judicial constitutional body, along with his experienced colleague, are found untrustworthy to steer the ship during the most engaging and substantive event. Under the

unprecedented situation obtaining now some election commissioners have been temporarily sidelined or made ineffective, but there is no restriction to their performing the functions of superintendence, direction and control as envisaged in Article 119 of our constitution after the expiration of this sideling episode.

The point to note is that the Election Commission is constitutionally required to hold elections to the office of president and for members of Parliament, to delimit the constituencies for the purpose of elections to parliament, and to prepare electoral rolls for the purpose of elections to the office of president and to the Parliament. These functions, which are undoubtedly equally important as

the general election, can, however, be entrusted to the aforementioned controversial commissioners. That, definitely, is the understanding. Therefore, one may not be wrong in saying that such a patchwork solution would not be in the public interest, and that it exposes the hollowness of the establishment's declared stance to run the constitutional body in a solemn manner. The contradiction in precepts and practices is all too palpable.

The retention of the recently appointed, manifestly partisan Election Commissioner, instead of asking him to proceed on leave so as to keep him away from the entire electoral process as part of the now-lamented package deal, is disappointingly demonstrative of the partisan identity of the Election Commission. This step has not only tarnished the impartial image of the chief adviser, it has also very substantively destabilized the balance of power between the constitution and the government.

In fact, the tragedy is that we will now be hard-pressed to explain the so-called novelty or

uniqueness of our constitutionally incorporated caretaker dispensation because the non-partisan image has been badly bruised by silly pronouncements, legally and morally indefensible acts and stultifying actions. The difference between public propriety and narrow partisan gain has been so blurred that proper public servants are likely to be in short supply to oversee future national elections and perform other sensitive regulatory functions.

Let us imagine the probable evolving scenario with regard to government-Election Commission relations in the not-very-unlikely event of the Awami League led coalition coming to power. Without doubt, the government of such description would like to make things difficult for the alleged partisan election commissioners despite the acting CEC's bragging that he does not care much about the government. Ground reality tells us that in the absence of functional independence under the present circumstances the Election Commission relies heavily on the courtesy and favour of the gov-

ernment of the day. A political government would not relish the continuance of known partisan elements, favourably disposed to its opponents, in the Election Commission. Things will not improve either if BNP led coalition becomes victorious at the hustings.

We find ourselves in this deplorable political scenario because important state institutions, including constitutional ones, have betrayed the trust reposed in them by the nation. This has been so because in the last couple of years partisanship has been painfully dominant in the affairs of the state, where comprehensive politicization is viewed as a pragmatic strategy. To compound matters further, there is no formal selection process for appointing important functionaries in a supremely constitutional body like the Election Commission. As such, it is left to the discretion, or shall one say indiscretion, of the ruling political party to appoint whosoever they choose, without caring for the niceties of professional attainments or integrity of the

appointee. Recent events bear out such premonition.

For ensuring a truly effective democracy where pluralism will be a virtue, we have to strive hard to build supervisory institutions. The Election Commission should be accorded the highest priority in such a process so that this body does not become unacceptable and dysfunctional. We have to keep in view the other elections that would follow this general election, and also the 2012 election. A number of administrative measures have to be taken to ensure credible polls. These would relate to preparation of a stable voters list, electronic voting system and voter identification amongst others. The paramount accomplishment has to be the functional independence of the Election Commission through appropriate legislative and administrative intervention to the necessary extent. We may draw on the experience of neighbouring countries. Our prospective lawmakers need to be receptive and proactive.

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