

Polls Parade Sri Lankan Democracy

Gamini Navaratne writes from Colombo

Sri Lanka's local government elections have been reactivated after several years, apparently in an attempt to persuade donor countries that democracy is alive and well in the island state. The event is described as a mini general election and an adverse result could be disastrous for the government.

The election fever that has gripped Sri Lanka will come down tomorrow with the holding of the local government polls in seven of the island's nine provinces, and the major parties concluding their campaign.

Excluded from this exercise are the northern and eastern provinces, where the insurgency led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighting for a separate homeland for the Tamil minority, continues unabated.

The occasion has been described by political analysts as a mini-general election. More than 8.5 million of Sri Lanka's 17 million people are eligible to vote.

President Ranasinghe Premadasa's rightwing United National Party (UNP) faces a strong challenge from Sirima Bandaranaike's centrist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its leftwing allies.

Failure to make a clean sweep of the elections to 236 local bodies — municipal, urban and rural councils — could be disastrous for the government.

Recognising this, the government is using all the resources at its disposal, mainly the state-controlled radio, television and newspapers, to highlight the achievements of Premadasa's two-year-old administration in the fight against poverty and providing a better life for its people.

The government's propaganda also asserts that the security forces are waging the fight against the Tigers in the north-east. In fact, they have suffered serious reverses since the rebels launched a new offensive in June last year after one-and-a-half years' talks seeking political settlement collapsed.

The opposition is stressing the fact that despite 14 years of UNP rule, the first 12 under former president J.R. Jayewardene, the country's economic situation remains precarious. High living costs and unemployment remain a plague, and the north-east situation is a continuous worry which exacerbates the economic problems.

The decision of the government to reactivate local government institutions, which have been moribund for several years, has been welcomed by most political parties.

The main objective of the move, independent political analysts note, is to convince the world, especially Western aid-giving nations, that democ-

cracy is prevalent in Sri Lanka. To make the government's decision more convincing, a team from the SAARC nations — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan — has been invited to monitor the election.

The team arrived in March to monitor the closing of nominations, which passed off without incident. It will be

back in early May to complete its task.

Members of the team include Justice Dorab Patel from Pakistan, former acting Chief Justice and acting Election Commissioner who had served as an observer at the 1988 Presidential and 1989 Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka; Mr Gurbachan Singh, former Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka; and Mr Fakhruddin Ahmed, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

At the 1988 presidential poll, Premadasa secured 50.43 per cent of the total votes cast. The poll turnout was down to half of those eligible to vote. Mrs Bandaranaike received 44.95 per cent of the votes.

At the general election three months later UNP secured 50.71 per cent of the votes cast. Bandaranaike's party received 31.82 per cent of the votes.

The opposition has alleged that both these elections were rigged. On a petition filed by Mrs Bandaranaike, the supreme court is now inquiring into the Presidential election.

The monitoring committee in reference to the presidential election, had commented: "There were many incidents of violence, threats and other acts against the election officials and voters, the problem of general intimidation was unprecedented. This climate had reduced voter turnout in rural areas of the north-eastern,

southern and some parts of the central province."

Mrs Bandaranaike, who met the latest monitoring team, told the press that allegations of rigging at the recent UNP primary poll gave rise to her fears that the same thing could happen at the local government elections.

She also alleged that some police officers were partial and had intimidated SLFP supporters. She cited an instance where cars carrying SLFP supporters with flags on nomination days were stopped and checked while UNP people were allowed to fly flags and even shout slogans.

Mrs Bandaranaike also said the SLFP had faced the problem of finding youth nominees, as their parents did not want them to contest. They feared the youths would "disappear" (apparently at the hands of pro-government "vigilantes", as has happened to other youths.)

There are altogether 15,065 candidates from 11 parties plus several independent groups contesting the election.

Of the candidates, 35 per cent are under 35 years of age. This reflects Premadasa's policy to give youth a bigger say in the management of affairs in their areas.

If the opposition wins in a majority or even a substantial number of local government bodies, its demand for a fresh parliamentary election will be strengthened.

— GEMINI NEWS

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Rush Medical Help to Cyclone Victims

The warning bells that have been ringing out loud from the cyclone affected areas for the last few days regarding the health and living conditions of the survivors are proving to be devastatingly accurate. What have been fearfully predicted are becoming the unavoidable facts. The precious lives that have been spared by the tidal wave and the cyclone are now being taken away by preventable diseases like cholera and diarrhoea. Minor wounds and small cuts are becoming infectious due to lack of medical help.

Much of the health problems are due to the non-availability of safe drinking water. In the best of times many remote parts of our countryside remain without adequate supply of pure drinking water. One can easily imagine the situation in the 'worst of times' — given that this cyclone was the worst for Bangladesh in this century. With most of the tubewells blown away and the open wells either filled with mud or with sea water, there is no other source of drinking water left. This is forcing people to drink the stagnant water, much or all of which is contaminated.

Therefore the urgent step — and we know that so many other things are urgent too, (so much for our "adequate preparatory measures") — to take is to sink thousands of tubewells all over the cyclone affected area. We should fly in these tubewells if possible and have them installed on an emergency basis. Given the nature of the soil and the level of ground water it should not be a very difficult task to put the said tubewells in place in the shortest possible time. This single step can save thousands of lives. Those people who have not yet taken ill by diarrhoeal diseases will remain healthy and be able to start rebuilding their lives.

Setting up makeshift field hospitals is the other urgent task that the government needs to take in the area of health. After more than 10 days of the "Black Monday" there are still many affected areas where no medical help has reached. Our reporters have brought back eye witness accounts of small wounds and cuts becoming gangrenous due to constant exposure and contact with contaminated water. Reports continue to reach us that even where relief items, such as food and water, have reached, no medical help has yet arrived.

As this newspaper reported yesterday that whatever little medical facilities existed before in the cyclone affected areas, have now been totally destroyed. In the long run the whole medical infrastructure, built over decades will have to be rebuilt. But for now the Health Minister really has an uphill task before him and he should receive priority support of all other ministries and government bodies.

So far foreign assistance in the health sector has been rather slow in coming. Yet we have received reports that whatever little supply is reaching Bangladesh, is taking a long time to be cleared by the customs and reach the hands of the field workers. This experience is especially true for the non-governmental bodies working in Bangladesh.

It is hoped that government will spare no efforts to bring urgent medical help to the cyclone victims. The need at this stage is not of very sophisticated medical items but of the most simple ones. But we need them in large quantities and we need them in a hurry.

A Malaysian Tragedy

This seems like a season of disasters for this region.

Reports from Kuala Lumpur suggest that the death toll may cross 100 in the fire, the worst in the country's living memory, which destroyed a fireworks factory in a village near the capital last Tuesday.

Until the investigation is complete, we would not know what exactly caused the fire and how so many people died in the disaster. Explosions in fireworks factories are not particularly uncommon. Such accidents have happened in predominantly Chinese industrial centres in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, where firecrackers are in great demand. Despite their high profit level, most of these factories tend to be overcrowded with cheap labour; some also have inadequate fire exits. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and non-governmental agencies have repeatedly called for improvements in these factories. Over the years, experts say, nothing much has changed.

We would not suggest that the Malaysian factory in question belongs to the same category as firecracker-making plants in Hong Kong or Taiwan. However, we would not be particularly surprised if the investigation finally reveals that the factory lacked adequate fire exits or that workers had no training in coping with accidents. We would not know, not at this stage anyway, whether conditions in the factory were similar to those in the garment-making plants in Bangladesh, one of which suffered heavy human and material losses in a fire in December last year.

It is paradoxical that in affluent countries in Asia, such as Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea, the industrial labour continues to get what by international standards would be regarded as a raw deal, in terms of wages, hours of work, facilities for vacation and conditions in their workplaces. The tragedy in the Malaysian factory should prompt the authorities in Kuala Lumpur to take a good look at the whole situation and to undertake necessary reforms in this field.



PRESIDENT RANASINGHE PREMADASA Demonstrating democracy?



SIRIMA BANDARANAIKE Fears election rigging

Western Sahara Unites the Grand Maghreb

by Arshad-uz Zaman

Through patient diplomacy Arab Maghreb Union is a reality today. The birth of this entity has made it possible to bury the hatchet between Morocco and Algeria. The wind of democracy that has been blowing through the world has finally come to the sands of Sahara...

ON 29 April, the 15 members of the UN Security Council through an unanimous decision voted to form a Mission to organize a referendum on self-determination in the Western Sahara. Resolution 690 was adopted to bring an end to the more than fifteen years of conflict, which has pitted the Kingdom of Morocco and the POLISARIO front, who have carried on this long drawn out campaign due to all out support from Algeria.

This conflict started in 1975, with the withdrawal of the colonial power, Spain, from her African possessions. She left the fate of Western Sahara undecided. Morocco staked her claim, a claim which was contested by the other neighbour of Western Sahara-Algeria. This led to a protracted conflict, which remained a localised war, although at times quite bloody. A direct result of this conflict was high tension between two brotherly countries — Algeria and Morocco — ending up in the severance of diplomatic relations. The Organisation of African Unity has been the most important forum pitting Algerian diplomacy against Moroccan diplomacy. So long Morocco and Algeria continued this sterile pursuit, Western Sahara remained the divider rather than the unifier.

Fortunately for the people in the Maghreb, all this is a thing of the past. The realisation has dawned on them that they have so much in common and they cannot afford to fritter away their energies and resources on this conflict, where there would be no winner. Through patient diplomacy Arab Maghreb Union is a reality today. The birth of this entity has made it possible to bury the hatchet between Morocco and Algeria. The wind of democracy that has been blowing through the world — and here in Bangladesh we have savoured its taste since December last — has finally

come to the sands of Sahara and it is heartening that through popular consultation the fate of this area will be decided.

For the future of the region far more important is the birth of this large entity Arab Maghreb Union. This Treaty was signed in Marrakesh, a beautiful city in the south of Morocco, on Friday, the tenth of Rajab 1409 (17 February, 1989). The signatories are King Hassan II of Morocco, Mr Zein El Abidin Ben Ali, President of the Republic of Tunisia, Mr. Shadli Ben Jedit, President of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Col. Muammar Gaddafi, of the Great Arab People's Socialist Libyan Jamahiriyah and Col. Muawiya Uld Sidi Ahmed Tayea, Chairman of the Military Committee for National Salvation and Head of State of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Through this Treaty the Arab Maghreb Union was created. The aims of the Treaty are to bring the people of this vast area closer together in every domain. Thus the Treaty aims at working gradually toward achieving free movement of persons and transfer of services, goods and capital among them. In the international field it aims at close diplomatic cooperation, in the cultural field preservation of the Arab cultural identity. The Union shall have a Presidential Council composed of the Heads of States, which will be the Supreme Authority of the Union, and will take unanimous decisions. The Treaty also states that any aggression directed against one of the member states shall be considered an aggression against the other member states. The member states also pledge not to permit on their

territory any activity liable to threaten the security, territorial integrity or the political system of any of them. They also pledge to abstain from joining any alliance or military or political bloc directed against the political independence or territorial integrity of the other member states.

Like the other successful entity, the European Community, conceived by that brilliant mind Monsieur Jean Monnet, the Arab Maghreb Union wisely lays the emphasis on the economic union and the other efforts will run parallel to them. I was fortunate to travel the entire region, which is now the Arab Maghreb Union. From one country to the next the landscape is remarkably similar, the people are really the same, so is the language and culture, as the treaty document correctly points out the strong ties "based on common history, religion and language". All the countries of the Union have important natural resources, they are sparsely populated and have by and large used those resources wisely. It is true that the colonial history of the member states are different from each other and the present regimes are not similar at all. The leaders have wisely decided not to allow these differences stand in the way to their Union and the Arab Maghreb Union is a reality today. The potentiality of this entity stretching from one end of the Mediterranean to the other is truly immense.

From the beginning of the conflict of Western Sahara, back in 1975, UN is the only international organisation that has been actively engaged in finding a solution to this problem. The leaders of Algeria and Morocco deserve to be felicitated for not allowing any outside power to meddle in their affairs. The rule of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia has been a discreet and brotherly one. The

referendum that is due to be held under the UN auspices in the beginning of 1992 will decide whether Western Sahara will remain an integral part of

Morocco or become independent. What is certain is that Western Sahara has ceased to be a bone of contention and has amazingly triggered the process for the birth of that great entity — the Grand Maghreb.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Assistant Secretary General, OIC.

OPINION

Service to Humanity

The unprecedented havoc resulted out of the recent cyclone and tidal surge in the coastal areas is yet to be conceived by many of us because the actual quantum of damage to life and property is yet to be assessed, due to difficulties in the communication system. This was the worst disaster in the living memory of Bangladesh and the country may have to pay heavily for the rehabilitation of millions of homeless and unfortunate survivors in the affected areas.

We have observed with great pain that there has not really been concerted effort so far by all the political parties along with government agencies for mobilizing available resources in a planned way to mitigate the sufferings of the people of the affected areas. We are aware of the constraints the country is facing in the shape of non-availability of adequate number of power boats, helicopters and other types of aircraft for reaching food and water to the millions who are on the verge of starvation-deaths. Whatever little efforts we have observed so far are unplanned and disjointed relief efforts from government and different political and social organizations.

This is a national calamity and in the name of Allah let us stop political bickerings among us. It is no use criticizing the government for its "failures" in reaching relief materials to the affected areas because as stated earlier we all know our limitations and constraints so far the equipment and materials are concerned. Let us not allow ourselves to be a laughing stock for outside world, and I appeal to the government and the opposition leaders to put their heads together immediately for phasewise planning for saving the unfortunate millions who desperately need drinking water and food.

In my humble way may I suggest following actions to be undertaken by the government and other political and social organizations for mobilizing relief operations:—

a) Government may requisition private passenger craft and self-propelled cargo boats on payment and utilise those immediately for reaching relief materials to far flung chars affected by the cyclone. This responsibility can be handled successfully by IWTC authorities who may establish control offices in Dhaka and Chittagong/Cox's Bazar for

mobilizing this traffic for relief. b) Once these are organised on an emergency basis the relief materials may be handed over to IWTC's authorities under strict supervision of the Ministry of Shipping and the Chairman, IWTC who will plan despatch of relief goods to different areas according to priorities.

c) Similarly, large and medium country boats may also be requisitioned and put under different authorities like Inland Water Carrier Association with active collaboration of senior government officials of Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation.

d) Dhaka people particularly university and college students as well as other social organizations as usual have already organised collection of food-stuff and clothes to be transported immediately, but due to transportation problem and lack of proper co-ordination, these items are not being despatched timely. We are sure our brethren and sisters all over the country are desperately trying to offer some help, but they are again facing similar transportation problem. To overcome such problem — the government may requisition some trucks (obviously on payment) in Dhaka, Comilla and other places, and arrange carriage of these relief materials to Chittagong IWTC Co-ordination Depot, which in its turn will despatch that to different destinations by sea-going and other river transports.

e) We understand government of Japan had donated about 300 FRP boats with diesel engines for relief operations in the recent past and all these boats are already in possession of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. Surely at least 100 boats out of these can be made operational immediately and in the event of non-availability of experienced operators, we may take help of the operators from Defence Services for carrying relief materials in these boats to the distant coastal areas.

f) We are grateful to our neighbouring country India for helping us with three helicopters and understand Pakistan may also help us with a few of those for relief operations. We must utilise these helicopters economically and in a planned way so that food and other relief materials can be reached to the affected people as early as possible. Airdropping of food materials so far carried out by BAF has

not been very successful in our opinion, because what we see through television considerable quantity of relief materials landed in water and thus rendered more or less unfit for consumption. With such experience let the helicopters try to drop food-stuff on dry land as far as possible, and if not, let bulk of food-stuff and other materials be carried by helicopters from Dhaka to Chittagong or other places nearby from where these materials can be conveyed, by powered or country boats to different destinations.

g) The central relief co-ordination committee of the government with representatives of political parties of the areas concerned be stationed at Chittagong and Cox's Bazar who will directly control and supervise relief operations through various means of communications as suggested above.

We appreciate Prime Minister's personal efforts in organizing relief operations despite all limitations as mentioned above, and government appeal to outside world for immediate help as the calamity cannot be handled with our limited resources alone. We are hopeful of substantial help from outside and we need an effective distribution system for reaching relief materials to the needy persons in the affected areas.

We do not enjoy unnecessary mud slinging in the National Assembly on avoidable issues at this critical juncture of the nation and therefore we strongly feel Jattia Sangsad may be prorogued immediately in view of the national calamity and let our able political representatives concentrate fully in rendering required assistance to the relief operation in the distress areas. We as an unfortunate nation are being put to severe test by Almighty Allah almost once in every decade and therefore it is worth-while to plan and organise an effective Permanent Relief Co-ordination System to face such national calamities successfully.

This is an absolute necessity, because in the event of such calamity we have always failed to organise our resources in time and in the process we have lost more lives due to starvation and epidemic diseases.

Fit. Lt. (Retd) A. F. L. Rahim Segun Bagicha, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Bank account and photograph

Sir, For sometime past, persons desirous of opening bank accounts have to furnish photograph, which is indeed a very good decision, specially when our present day society is very much infested by anti-social elements. Every change in system which aims at doing good to public interest is praiseworthy and welcome. But some banks quite arbitrarily demand two copies of photograph, which is perhaps not essential. As cost of photos is rather high now-a-days, banks should not insist upon the second copy, if one copy is sufficient to meet the requirement.

S.M. Hussain Motijheel C/A, Dhaka.

Garment industry

Sir, A news item says that loss in the garment industry could be as much as five hundred crore Taka. Now this is a very large figure by any standard, not to speak of a country like ours already on the fringes of economic impoverishment. It is furthermore reported that the foreign investors are having second thoughts about future investment in our country, in this sector. This is indeed a bad news for all of us. The reason they say is that they fear their goods may not be delivered in time.

If this actually happens it will be a major setback in the industrial sector of our country. The pace of industrialisation has been very

slow and in most cases almost nil since independence. We have turned into a nation of traders rather than trying to be industrialised. The reason for this is manifold.

We all agree that there were complaints about the working conditions in the garment industry. But we cannot deny the fact that it did provide employment to a considerable section of our population and that too appreciably to women. In a country already burdened with unemployment, this was no doubt a ray of hope.

We do hope that the foreign investors do give a thought and consideration before taking any final decision.

Rokeya Habib Maghbar, Dhaka.