

Out from the Cold, Intellectuals Seek a Role in New Scenario

by S. M. Ali

Account of Campaign Funds

The Election Commission has adopted two excellent measures to curb corrupt practices in the coming polls. Two of these measures deserve to be emphasised at this point. First, the candidates will have to submit a statement of their assets and liabilities. Second, they will have to give an account of where their election expenses are coming from. This is the first time that such provisions have been introduced. A third provision regarding election expenses, which was in place on earlier occasions, deals with submitting a statement of expenses incurred, within fifteen days of the polls.

The deadline for submitting the two above statements expired on 28 January 1991. According to press reports a good number of candidates are yet to submit their statements. We urge the concerned candidates to do so forthwith. We also request the Election Commission to allow a few more days to the candidates for completing this formality. However, after the expiry of the second deadline, a very strong and uncompromising stand should be taken by the Election Commission. The poll regulating body has already declared that non-submission of the above documents will be treated as "corrupt election practice" and the election tribunal will set aside the results of such candidates. Let know one doubt the seriousness of this statement and the support of the general public behind any action the Commission will take to implement it.

Too often, in the past, public judgement as expressed in the form of election has been distorted by the influence of unaccounted for election expense. Fixing TK.3 lakh as the highest limit and enforcing strict financial rules to regulate campaign expenses will contribute in a seminal way in making this election a truly historic one.

Declaration of assets and liabilities will greatly strengthen the process of public accountability of the elected representatives. Undue accumulation of personal wealth can be checked and any discrepancy between known source of income and assets at the end of an elected term can be checked and if necessary, the corrupt can be punished through legal means. Tax clearance of the declared assets will ensure that the candidates are honest citizens. The provision of public declaration of the source of funds for campaigning, including the amount contributed by the party backing the candidate, can truly stop the use of black money for election purposes.

Cooperation of the political parties is an important prerequisite for successfully implementing these provisions. If the parties themselves take a strong position against violation of these rules, the candidates will think twice before doing any such thing. Those who own black money use opportunities such as an election to sanctify their ill-gotten wealth. They come to the political parties with huge donation, thereby putting the recipient parties into some sort of obligation and also using the opportunity to get rid of their black money. Political parties must resist the temptation of accepting such donations. As discredited and corrupt politicians should not find any place in any of the political parties contesting in this election, so also corrupt businessmen should not be allowed to make inroads into the political scene through the funding of political aspirants. The role of the political parties is very important in this particular area. They will set the tone. The candidates can only but follow it.

End of a Wonderful Couple

Shall we call it poetic justice? Mohammad Sabur of Sakhira Sadar upazila one day last week entreated his wife for a permission to marry a second time and bring into the house the new wife. The wife declined the request. Sabur, to scare her into acquiescence, put poison into his month. The wife did not yield. Sabur could not throw out the poison for, while he was pleading and threatening attenuately, it had got into stomach. A long and painful struggle followed with Sabur dangling between life and death. At the end of it Sabur was no more.

The wife wanted to keep Sabur all for herself. Sabur gave her the slip. Sabur wanted, evidently very badly, to have perhaps a particular girl as his wife but death intervened and both his desire and his life slipped past him. But it would supremely be in bad taste to talk of his tragic end or his wife's plight after the husband has abandoned her for good in mocking vein.

Instead let us appreciate that here was a wonderful couple, very unusually wonderful indeed. Sabur did not opt for what is the practice — putting the poison into his recalcitrant wife's mouth or kill her by any of the myriad ways husbands, specially the Bangladesh variety, despatch their spouses to the other world. And his wife, quite out of tune with the average Bangladeshi variety, did not fall on her knees or at his feet whichever appealing to her to be the more effective, and tell her 'master' and her 'life of life' to proceed the very moment and bring in a thousand wives if only he so-felt, but never, never again think of giving up his precious ghost. She evidently detested the idea of sharing a man, her man, to be sure, for isn't that what a marriage stands for? — with another woman. So progressive and modern!

All this could be fun only if Sabur could be revived. The razor's edge distinction between our best of contrived fictions and plays on the one hand and real-life undrama on the other lies in that the latter does not add up to anything intellectually or aesthetically satisfying. Reality somehow doesn't make sense most of the time. Isn't it because of that we want to escape it so often? And Houdini was but a child compared to humanity's great creative people—poets and painters, musicians and novelists — as escape artists.

THE March for Democracy which ended at a rally in Chittagong late last week was, on the face of it, a Bangladeshi adaptation of a moveable western rock concert. But it had several messages, gentle but firm, for the country's political leaders.

In effect, the March was at least three things rolled into one. It was a celebration; it was a reaffirmation; and, finally, it was a statement. In other words, if the March celebrated the fall of an authoritarian regime, it also reaffirmed the commitment to democracy and issued the statement, mainly for the benefit of political parties, that people would not put up with any betrayal.

But, then, whom did the March represent? Is it the non-partisan silent majority which, with all its support for the movement that forced Hussein Mohammad Ershad out of office, is far from committed to any particular party? Is it the youth? The cultural front? Or the intellectuals? To varying degrees, the March for Democracy represented, in spirit, all these groups named here, in their shared commitments and beliefs. Above all, these groups overlap and merge all the time, as they did during the March. After all, a leading personality from the cultural front is as much an intellectual as a teacher from the University or a barrister from the Supreme Court.

What happens next? Optimists would probably say that organisers of the March for Democracy are capable of launching a moral crusade to ensure that political parties observe the Code of Conduct for the election. Others would be sceptical. When was the last time a moral crusade made any impact on the politics of Bangladesh?

No matter whether we have a moral crusade or not, there are issues which cannot be pushed aside. Some of these issues were articulated during the March for Democracy. We will face them during the polls and then, during the formation of the new government.

All the issues boil down to one single major question: What role would the new evolving democratic system assign to the non-partisan intellectual, a role that would be positive and not dictated by political parties?

One easy answer is, the intellectual would play the watchdog role, perhaps through the media, by setting up an independent lobby or by accepting a semi-in-

dependent position in an autonomous foundation or research organisation.

It is an easy answer which, unfortunately, does not work that easily.

In the first place, the watchdog role means different things to different people. Political parties, whether in power or in opposition, easily become first uncomfortable, then suspicious and finally hostile towards any individual or a group that takes up such a role. If the group functions as a public interest lobby—such groups are common in some Asian countries—and speaks out, perhaps critically, on issues which concern people, often with deep knowledge of the subject under discussion, the ruling party seldom hesitates to question its right to speak for the people, without an electoral mandate. Mandate or no mandate, it is the credibility of the public interest lobby that must remain above doubt. The dilemma facing such a lobby is that its comments and criticisms are more often than not directed against policies of the government. This often gives the mistaken impression to the government that instead of being independent, the lobby is only part of the opposition.

In Bangladesh, the non-partisan intellectual has always faced difficulties in working with political parties, during successive regimes. By virtue of the contribution independent experts made to the formulation of the Six-Point Programme and then to the liberation struggle, the rapport between the Awami League government and intellectuals was undoubtedly strong in the first years of the independence. But the scenario quickly changed, not just on this specific question but virtually on all broad issues affecting the future of the government and the destiny of the nation.

The two subsequent regimes, those of Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Mohammad Ershad treated the intellectual class with a mixture of shrewd calculations, studied aloofness and an attitude of patronage, but without giving it a real political role in the affairs of the nation. The two Presidents used the expertise of a few of our noted intellectuals even in the formulation of their socio-economic agenda, but they were kept out of the decision-making power structure. In a way, their treatment of the intellectual was quite similar to

that of the late President Ayub Khan. Interestingly enough, the late Pakistani leader had used a group of journalists within his administration to ghostwrite his autobiography, "Friends Not Masters" while the ousted president of Bangladesh received generous assistance from selected few writers to have his poetry translated into English. To varying degrees, both Ayub and Ershad desperately wanted to be regarded as "men of culture".

We may be critical of a sizable number of our writers and artists, teachers and academicians, the pillars of the intellectual class, for taking up what one may loosely describe as the pro-establishment positions during successive regimes, starting with the Ayub's rule when the "Pakistan Writers' Guild" set the pace. Those who were not obliged to make the choice, like this writer, would not know the circumstances which prompted authors like Shaheed Munier Chowdhury and the late Anis Chowdhury join the Writers' Guild or, some 30 years later, friends like Poet Shamsur Rahman and Ahmed Humayun serve government-owned newspapers. When we analyse the predicament of these writers-journalists, we should do so with both objectivity and sympathy.

Now, returning to the current scene, one wonders what kind of scenario is likely emerge between the political parties and the intellectual class in the post-Ershad period. Will the message from the March for Democracy make any impact on our politicians whether they belong to BNP or AL?

At this stage it is no good pretending that it is all going to work out well and that there will be bridges of understanding between what in the best of times often develop adversary relationship political party (especially one in power) and the intellectual class.

Here, we see two major problems on the horizon.

First, during these eight years of anti-Ershad movement, neither of the two major parties did anything to build up a tradition of interaction, based on dialogue and consultation, with the intellectual class.

In fact, there was a barrier separating

the top leadership of the two major parties from who might be called "independent experts." Since neither had a newspaper which served as the official mouthpiece, there has been an unhealthy tendency in both the alliances to identify their allies in the press, especially among reporters. Those who retained their independent positions were viewed with distrust. One suspects that the two political parties looked at the intellectual class with the same attitude.

All this resulted in a loss for both the parties. In the absence of an interaction with independent experts, the intellectual content of the programmes offered by the two parties, not just the election manifestoes, continued to be low which were often based on only one single consideration: how would the programme sound to the average voter?

The second problem we see on the horizon relates to the position that intellectuals themselves would like to hold on the national scene after the election. Since they do not represent a cohesive force, one cannot expect them to adopt a unified line of action. This is not necessary either. The diversity of views, often confused for divisiveness, would certainly be a source of strength for a resurgent intellectual life in the country. However since the number of intellectuals, such as economists, university teachers, journalists/editors and jurists, who are likely to be in the new parliament is only a few, one wonders what kind of influence they can exercise on the decision-making process of the new assembly. So, how are they going to help in raising the quality of out political life?

Right now, no political party has the time or the inclination to look at the evolving situation in all its complexities. It is also unlikely to moan over the danger of our intellectuals being marginalised or left out in the cold.

It is the non-partisan educated elite which has so far stayed outside the mainstream politics, sometimes shunned and sometimes feared by professional politicians, that must continually monitor the trends and remain ready to speak out in the best interest of the country, no matter who is in power.

This column, a commentary on national and regional affairs, will appear once a week.

THIS meeting at what used to be the old town hall, Rotesrahus, in east Berlin, is open to the public, unlike the old days, when faceless bureaucrats ruled.

The officials are now dutifully answering questions from the public they serve.

All would seem to be well. With the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the rush to unification, democracy has seemingly returned to Germany.

However, as advertising fills the once empty walls of east German cities and buskers return to the streets, democracy has brought its own problems. One of them is racism.

The Germans no longer have a guilty conscience. With re-unification a new nationalism has returned—they think it is okay to attack black people now," says Annetta Kahane, former East German minister for "foreigners" — a post now redundant because of unification.

According to Kahane, the question of race did not enter into unification discussions, as did abortion and the economy. But the anti-racist laws which protected minorities in the old East Germany are no longer in existence.

Says Yonas Endrias, spokesperson for the community group BAZ: "I entered into a cafe a few days ago. The owner said he did not need to serve me anymore and told us to leave."

Endrias' experiences are mild compared to those of

A New Racism Rises from the Debris of the Wall

by Heenan Bhatti

As the dust of the celebrations of unification and democracy settles in Germany, many black people are worried the restructuring of Germany has unleashed a new racism.

others. Recently, Mahmoud Azhar, 40, who is studying for a biochemistry doctorate, was beaten to death.

The killer, who has not been found despite the presence of eye witnesses, used a fire extinguisher to hit his victim over the head continuously. The killer screamed "Germany for the Germans" (Deutschland den Deutschen).

In another case, skinheads beat a young woman to death with stones. Her parents declined to go on record despite their anger. They were too frightened to talk about the murder for fear of reprisal. They asked that they and their daughter not be named.

Fear is sweeping the black community, fuelled by the frightening increase in the number of skinheads and of the organised, Right in the form of the Republican party.

A recent public opinion poll showed that one-third of Germans feared there were "too

many foreigners" in their country.

No one would accompany me to Lichtensberg, the place where the skinheads usually meet. "How fast can you run?" one person asked.

Recently, the BAZ offices were firebombed. A week before the attack, a note was delivered saying "Your days are numbered. Germany for the Germans" (Auch Eure Tage Sind Gezählt. Deutschland Den Deutschen).

With the increase in racism has come such phenomena as "Nigger Hunting" (neger aufkletschen) according to Endrias. "Gangs of skinheads meet up and go out specifically to beat up black people."

Guest workers are one of the main targets, invited by the former East German government and now resident in the east. Many are frightened to go to the police because they believe it will jeopardise their position in the country.

There is also open hostility to blacks. "I went back with my girlfriend of two years to her parents' house. They threw me out calling me a monkey," said Baytista Jugazana, 21, a Mozambican and former factory worker.

Said his colleague, Rogue Mangana, 25: "What have we done to deserve this. We have not harmed them."

Attacks are a daily occurrence in the east, according to teacher Mahoma Mwaungulu, a 30-year resident of East Germany, and president of the black organisation, Omaja. Omaja is seeking to unify opposition to the rise of the Right by organising self-defence classes.

"I remember when in the Sixties some academics objected to my studying in the University. They were all sent to the coal mines for six months as a punishment for being racist. "Now the situation has

changed 180 degrees. My son came to visit us in Berlin last week. Some skinheads in the train wanted to throw him off. Luckily the guard intervened. People are now stupidly free — they're openly racist."

Mwaungulu, who was beaten up during the celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall and lost all his front teeth, is now facing the splitting up of his family. They feel they cannot continue to live in the country.

His oldest son, Lusako, 29, is now to go to Italy. His daughter, Mnachona, 29, and his other son, Lutamyo, 19, are now unemployed and may have to move to get a job.

Unemployment is another factor which has given rise to racism. With unification, unemployment is something east Germans are facing for the first time — having previously been guaranteed a job by the government.

"Foreigners are now regarded as competition in a shrinking job market," said an old communist chief, who wished to remain anonymous.

Many black people are now questioning the benefits of German unification. "Is it democracy when black people are getting beaten up and are living in fear," said Endrias. — GEMINI NEWS

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Environmental threat

Sir, The oil slick, the largest ever, which now swims the seas of the Gulf, may well prove to be the worst of fall out of the belligerence now taking place there. The rain of bombs on cities and towns, the thunder of the guns on homes and buildings would one day, we earnestly hope, cease; but the oil which flows on the expanse of water killing the fragile ecology of the region is a fatal triumph over nature. What the oil slick has destroyed is gone forever.

The actions that are taking place in the Gulf are being noticed by the world because people are watch-

ing the war. The anxiety is the result of attention being paid to the war and not necessarily the product of concern for the environment as a whole. And therein lies the tragedy.

In our own country we remain abysmally ignorant of the many environmental hazards we are exposed to. There is a terrible sense of complacency regarding the state of nature in Bangladesh. As if because we are not an industrialised country we are not generating hazards and threats to our eco-system.

But this is not true anymore. UN reports have remarked that Bangladesh is one of the most envi-

ronmentally fragile countries in the world and that even if we escape drowning by the seas due to the Greenhouse effect our pollution situation, real and potential, is so high that it will lead to a breakdown. We won't need to have bombs to assist us to destruction, unbridled defecation will be a fairly good substitute.

When will we start caring about how we treat nature? How many miles to meaningful action?

Ferdous Sinha, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Rickshaws and roads

Sir, Since rickshaws are, and will be, a part of our daily transport system, it is important that our roads be designed in such a way that there is a separate lane in the road for them to ply, just as the pavements are for the pedestrians.

It is needed, as rickshaws are the main means of travelling

particularly for those belonging to the middle class. Such an arrangement will save time, by way of avoiding traffic jam, and also prevent accidents, which is very important.

The main reason is that the rickshaw is a slow-moving transport whereas others are much more faster.

Firoz Rahman, Rangunia, Chittagong.

Bangladeshi politics

Sir, "History repeats itself" has apparently been justified as a universal truth with the countrywide scenario upon surrender of the autocratic administration to the opposition demands inflating the social sentiment up to the spirit of liberation celebration.

Bangalee history retrieves the characteristic "struggle for survival" ever since the fall of Nawab Sirajuddowla about two and a half centuries ago and the

sequel to the subsequent British colonial rule for about two hundred years reinforced the struggles during 24-year prejudicial governance by (West) Pakistan that eventually led to the emergence of Bangladesh.

The latest outburst of frustrations exposed the familiar strategies and tactics of pre-liberation movements and evidently repeated at considerable intensity from time to time during post-liberation governments. Unless this trend is well managed with

the futuristic vision, "time and tide wait for none" may be haunting this poor nation ever after should such unrests trespass the domain of the hard-earned identity; even regrets or correcting the course may not be affordable.

M.Rahman, Zilla School Road, Mymensingh.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

The Breaking of Glasnost

Glasnost was Mikhail Gorbachev's way to criticize the past in order to reform the present. But glasnost opened newspapers and airwaves to many voices he could not control, and apparently cannot abide. Now glasnost is the first casualty of Soviet repression. Perestroika, or reform, could be next.

It is no accident that unarmed Lithuanians died defending Vilnius' broadcast center. The objective of the Soviet tank assault was to seize and silence the independent voice of Lithuania.

Other independent voices in the Soviet Union are also being stifled. The Government Broadcast Ministry has intermittently blacked out "Vzglyad" ("View"), a highly popular satirical look at government foibles, ever since the program tried to air an interview with former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Now, instead of openness, Orwellian propaganda spews forth. A faceless Committee of National Salvation emerges from the shadows to denounce the elected government of Lithuania as servants of the interests of rich people, fraudulent people, corrupt elements.

It warns against "fratricide," the pretext used to justify the use of force in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in recent months.

The head of the KGB accused "outside forces" of trying to impose "doubtful ideas and plans to pull the country out of the difficult situation."

Economic reform, in his chilling view, is a plot by Westerners to strengthen "their own position in our country." Will the "plotters" now be purged and reform be reversed?

The attempt to shut the press down or shut it up is being resisted. When Interfax, an unofficial news agency that serves as an alternative source of news and insight on Soviet politics, was kicked out of its offices, Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Republic, and democratic insurgents on the Moscow City Council offered it new facilities.

A leadership that cannot face the truth about itself cannot reform itself. It cannot even adjust to what Mr. Gorbachev likes to call "real life." All it can do is shatter glasnost and, with it, hope. —The New York Times.