

A Big Role for Smaller Parties

The media coverage of the election so far has tended to concentrate mainly on the activities of the big parties. Important actors in the anti-Ershad movement, the smaller parties, have not received the media focus, and consequently the public attention, that we think they deserve. We consider them to represent important public interest groups. A greater dissemination of their positions on important national questions would help to create a better informed public opinion at this crucial point in our national life.

The smaller parties played a significant role in forging the national alliance that was so crucial in mobilizing the public behind the movement for democracy. Their subsequent call for a national government, though did not make any headway, reflected the sentiments of a sizeable section of the public. It was the smaller parties again that have kept the pressure on the two big parties not to deviate too much from the pledges they made to the people during the movement against autocracy.

The popular perception that the two leading parties are not likely to have too much edge over one another in the coming elections makes the future role of the smaller parties a matter of even greater public interest. It is our view that besides being of influence in the formation of any future government, the smaller parties are likely to play a critical role in the future parliament. The fact that the two leading parties have become polarised in their electoral stance and represent two very distinct options of a parliamentary or presidential form of government, gives added weightage of the votes of the smaller parties. It is to be noted that most of the smaller parties do not have a clear position on the form of government. But the more prominent ones among them have mostly opted in favour of a parliamentary form. However regardless of the form of government and irrespective of which of the two leading parties win majority, there should not be any doubt in anybody's mind as to the critical role which will be played by these parties.

It is to be mentioned here that so far the leading smaller parties have played a constructive role in national politics. First they played laudable role in bringing about and subsequently holding together the alliance against the Ershad government. Their role was also an important factor in creating the mass upsurge that swept away the nine-year-old autocratic rule. Subsequently it was again the smaller parties, working together with the Election Commission, helped to formulate the code of conduct for the election. So far they have more or less acted as a sobering influence in the over all political process. They have, through their manifestoes and election campaign, brought the urgent economic and social issues to public attention. It is our view that they will play the role of pressure groups or of lobbyists for various social and economic causes. Such a role for the smaller parties is not uncommon. In many of the leading democracies of the world it is the smaller parties, unencumbered by responsibility of running a government, or that of forming the major opposition, who take up issues of critical concern to the public such as education, health, environment, welfare of the disadvantaged groups, and by constantly keeping these issues in public focus help in the overall process of national development.

It is our hope that our smaller parties will play a similar role.

Key to Long Good Life

Long living politicians make good news. By dint of merely living long, if not anything else. Perhaps one does not live long 'merely'—it has to be done very eminently. It is very much a positive act and not just a passive dragging on in the absence of a power to die. But all that is unsubstantial speculation, for without living that long how do we know what it takes.

Napoleon was perhaps history's most celebrated man who stood shorter than nine-tenths of all members of humanity. The most colourful man of twentieth century global politics has beaten the Corsican on that count and at 86 and in retirement retains the power to attract all eyes — and ears — from all around the globe. The diminutive man in an agreedly oversize apparel of fame, Deng Xiaoping by name, is in the headlines again. No, he is not up to any miracle—working aimed to help, say, shore up the Soviets in their dire straits—which could of course be a sweet way to a revenge for the Altai-high outstanding problems between their two nations. Chinese newspapers perhaps finding no other better use for their space, have turned on Deng apparently for a recipe for carefree old-age. But this can have, one suspects, quite a hefty amount of political significance, shoring up Deng?

The Chinese journals waxing on the physical fitness of their aging leaders cannot but remind one of chairman Mao swimming nine miles across the Yang-Tse, his benign patriarchal smile as sweet as ever. If such memories tend to bring back associations of the cultural revolution, we should switch over to other topical things before it is too late.

Morarij, you remember, caused quite a flutter by becoming the Prime Minister of India at an age when Deng went into retirement. And what powerful legs he had — to kick up so many controversies and get kicked out himself at the end of it. For all one know he may still be harbouring ideas of driving again with his charpai to One Salfardj Road — as a gesture on his turning a centenarian. Even if he cannot gather himself to bring all that off, he will be remembered for his out-of-this-world recipe for keeping fit after eighty — Shivambu. You remember that, don't you? The world does.

Neither Napoleon, nor Morarij can approach Deng's achievement in one area. Four generations of his progeny — don't ask for numbers — live under one roof. His roof. He may have rivals in this in the mountain valleys of Daghestan and on the shore of Azerbaijanian lakes — where good old world is tarrying one day too long.

Deng has caused many a man much of a headache all his life. No one seems to have been able to give him as much as a botu. His unflappability may be the key to his success with age.

The year 1990 has been a significant year for the world's children. Seventy one Heads of State came together for the first World Summit for Children in United Nations Headquarters in New York on 30 September 1990. It was the largest gathering of heads of state and government in history. The outcome was an extraordinary new commitment: to reduce child deaths and child malnutrition by the year 2000; to provide basic protection for the normal physical and mental development of all the world's children; to dramatically reduce maternal mortality; a one-third reduction in child deaths; halving of child malnutrition; primary schooling for at least 80% of the poor world's children; and several detailed aims such as ending night blindness caused by the lack of vitamin-A. In all, it adopted more than 20 specific new goals for the year 2000.

The year 1990 saw the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20, 1989. Since then, the Convention has been signed by 150 nations and ratified by 70 — by far the most rapid ratification of any international Convention in history. Bangladesh was one of the first signatories of the Convention in January 1990. The Government ratified the Convention on 3 August 1990 and on 2 September it became international law for ratifying countries. As well as setting standards for the health and education of children, the Convention also addresses the estimated 80 million children who are exploited in the workplace, the 30 million who are left to fend for themselves on city streets, the uncounted millions whose development is disrupted by war, and the rising numbers of children in the industrialized world who are living in poverty and abuse.

What do these political commitments mean to the world's children? How can these ambitious goals for the year 2000 become a reality? The last few years' experiences indicate that it is indeed possible. Despite all the difficulties of the last decade, the goal of immunizing 80% of the children in the developing world seems to have been achieved. The extraordinary effort of immunization has saved over 12 million young

Child Survival and Development Goals for the 1990s

by Cole P. Dodge

Today, 40,000 children die each day around the world from ordinary malnutrition and common diseases. One hundred fifty million children live on, with ill health and poor growth.

lives and prevented over one and a half million children from being crippled by polio. It has also given the world new hope by showing what can be achieved when the international community commits itself to a great endeavor. Today, 40,000 children die each day around the world from ordinary malnutrition and common diseases. One hundred fifty million children live on, with ill health and poor growth. The means of ending these child deaths are now available and affordable. The question, therefore, is whether or not morality would keep step with capacity, whether or not what can be done will now be done.

Let us look at Bangladesh. More than one third of the 4 million children born each year weigh below 2.5 kgs (which is considered low birth weight) putting these babies at risk from their first breath of life. Most are born at home delivered by untrained birth attendants or family members or by mothers themselves. About 500,000 of newborns do not survive their first year and another 300,000 die before the age of five. The infant mortality rate has been declining but at a very slow rate for the past 75 years. The large majority of those who survive face recurrent bouts of diarrhoea, infections and malnutrition, with 20% or fewer of the original group reaching their true growth potential.

The levels of maternal morbidity and mortality in Bangladesh are also extremely high. The number of mothers who die in child birth are 6 per 1000 live births as compared to less than one per 1000 live births in Sri Lanka. This represents approximately 23,000 maternal deaths per year.

Despite this unfavorable picture, Bangladesh has made outstanding achievements in some important programme areas. One good example is

immunization. In Bangladesh, about 20% or one out of every five child deaths are due to vaccine-preventable disease: tetanus, polio, diphtheria, whooping cough, measles and tuberculosis. Starting from 2% coverage in 1985, Bangladesh reached close to the level of UCI (Universal Child Immunization) by the end of 1990. This remarkable achievement was possible because not only the health professionals and political leaders but also all sectors of society were mobilized. Politicians, teachers, students, religious leaders, mass media, folk media, professional organizations, voluntary groups, the business community, and many ordinary people joined together to inform the public about the importance of immunizing all children. The network of

journalists established through CFSD's (Center for Sustainable Development) activities is another excellent example of this partnership.

A number of positive commitments have been undertaken by Bangladesh. In many ways they reflect a growing and genuine desire to give importance to child survival and development. The impact of these decisions will be significant.

— Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 3 August, 1990.
— Parliament approved legislation aimed at banning, by 1993, importation and sale of non-iodized salt as a measure to control iodine deficiency disorders.
— Similarly, legislation has been enacted to ban the advertisement of breast milk substitutes on TV and

radio and to require companies who import and market milk, products to register and follow an international code.

— The 1990s were declared the "SAARC Decade of the Girl Child" during the SAARC Summit held in the Maldives in November, 1990. During the 1990s various advocacy, promotional and developmental activities on the Girl Child will be undertaken.

Now it is up to us to advocate for the implementation of all of these initiatives with whoever comes into power.

However, if Bangladesh is to achieve the goals for the year 2000, more has to be done.

— First, the level of immunization coverage needs to be expanded and sustained. Our attempt to reduce any disparities in coverage within the country, as well as to eradicate polio by 2000 and eliminate measles and tetanus by 1995, has to be accelerated.

— Despite the success and popularity of tubewells for drinking water, only 12% of the rural population use tubewell water for all domestic purposes. This must change.

— Only an estimated 6% of the 15 million rural household have a sanitary latrine. Over one half of the household have no latrine at all and people defecate wherever tradition dictates. Lack of sanitation and poor personal hygiene in an environment where the population density is the highest in the world puts every one at risk from infection from fecal overload in the environment.

— The high proportion of malnourished children and the perpetual cycle of infection and further nutritional wasting finally leading to far too many child deaths. The

GOALS FOR THE YEAR 2000 IN BANGLADESH

- Reduction in infant mortality to 70 per thousand livebirths.
- Reduction in child (1-4) mortality to 15 per 1000 live births.
- Reduction in maternal mortality rate to 4 per 1000 live births.
- Elimination of neo-natal tetanus by 1995 and polio by year 2000; maintenance of 85% immunization coverage among infants against DPT, tuberculosis, measles, polio; and TT vaccination for 85% women of child bearing age.
- Elimination of iodine deficiency disorders and nutritional blindness.
- Universalization of primary education and eradication of illiteracy.
- Improved quality and relevance of education to overcome low enrolment, high desertion and overall inefficiency of educational system.
- A tubewell in every para.
- A latrine in every household.
- Access by all couples, and especially women, to information and services for child spacing 36 months between children.
- Special attention to the health and nutrition of pregnant and lactating mothers.

goal for the year 2000 in Bangladesh should be a tubewell in every para and a sanitary latrine in every household.

Conclusion

The goals set for the year 2000 are undoubtedly ambitious. While recognizing the difficulties, it is also important to have confidence that these goals are achievable. After all, the knowledge and technology already exist and can be harnessed at minimum financial cost and maximum political benefit.

In fact, the global cost of achieving all the goals for children by the year 2000 is estimated at around \$20 billion a year — about as much as the world now spends on the military every 10 days. In practice, the \$20 billion a year might be found through:

- a small reduction in military spending
- by debt relief linked to investments in children
- or, by re-directing existing budgets from high-cost services for the few to low-cost services for the many.

However, political will and the availability of the low-cost technologies and strategies — including vaccines, oral rehydration salts, antibiotics, growth charts, iron tablets, vitamin-A supplements, and family planning services — are not enough. Equally important is a country's capacity to put new knowledge at people's disposal. In the drive towards Universal Child Immunization it was the partnership with media such as newspapers, radio, television, cinema, and traditional folk media and with communities such as religious leaders, artists, entertainers, sports organizations, non-governmental and voluntary bodies, professional societies, service clubs, youth organizations, which transformed the capacity of Bangladesh to communicate with the majority of its people. The question of whether or not the agenda for the 1990s can be achieved, whether or not the World Summit for Children commitments can be kept, is a question not just for whoever comes to power on February 27th. It's a question for society as a whole, including you and me. It is the task of all of us, and particularly of media to ensure that our children are the first to benefit from human advances and the last to suffer from our failures.

The author is the Representative of UNICEF in Bangladesh.

Eritrea's Peace Hopes Hinge on Addis Ababa

Jeremy Harding writes from Afabet, Eritrea

Around two million Eritreans are threatened by famine. Drought and war have wiped out agriculture and with Addis Ababa enjoying air supremacy, even major EPLF victories on the ground are unlikely to resolve the 30-year conflict over the region.

gramme. There seems little hope of a military solution to the war given that even of the EPLF seizes Asmara, Ethiopian jets are likely to continue bombing the main Eritrean towns and targets visible in daylight in the rural areas.

President Mengistu Haile Mariam has been reluctant to abandon attempts at pursuing military solution, despite last year's liberalisation in Ethiopia proper. Apparently taking a lead from Eastern Europe, Mengistu took the first steps towards dismantling the monolithic Marxist-Leninist state which made some genuine efforts to improve the lot of rural people.

Now, however, Ethiopia is in a state of revolt and the consequences for Addis Ababa are all too apparent.

To the north of Addis the Tigray People's Liberation Front (EPLF) has effective control of the entire province of Tigray. It also operates further south, in tandem with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front—a movement comprising disaffected groups in Wollo and Gondar.

Meanwhile, in the central and western provinces, the Oromo Liberation Front is on the move and a new Oromo

grouping, encouraged by the TPLF, has added to the swelling anti-government ranks.

The TPLF, which for years pursued a strident "scientific Marxist" line, and which once had dramatic differences with the EPLF, renewed its ties with the Eritreans in 1988.

This alliance has left Addis

in a logistical quagmire, for the war with the TPLF and its allies has drawn closer to the capital while, in Eritrea, the EPLF has recently fought its most successful campaigns since the mid-Seventies.

The Ethiopian armed forces are thus stretched to capacity and, since the government's defeat at Afabet,

there are far fewer officers left to conduct a counter-offensive in Ethiopia or Eritrea.

According to Brigadier General Ali Hajj Abdellahi, who was taken prisoner by the EPLF during the battle for Massawa, the Ethiopian officer corps has shrunk by about 500. This figure, says Ali Hajj, includes at least 12 generals executed after the failed coup attempt against Mengistu in 1989 and another 27 jailed. Some reports put Ethiopian troop losses during the battle for Asmara as high as 20,000.

Ali Hajj, a senior military instructor trained in the US and the Soviet Union, is pessimistic about a government recovery. "We could have built a counter-offensive by securing a foothold on the Red Sea coast," he says. "Troops might even have been deployed from Asmara if the Ethiopian navy were still strong."

"But we have lost the naval facility at Massawa and our airborne units are deployed against the TPLF." Without superpower support, Ali Hajj argues, holding Eritrea is "out of the question."

Despite the EPLF's tactical alliance with other fronts inside Ethiopia, the Eritreans argue that their case is a distinct one and, while they may accept federation or increased

autonomy as a short-term solution, the ultimate goal is independence. The EPLF argues that Eritrea's annexation by Haile Selassie in 1962 was illegal and that their country has never been a part of Ethiopia.

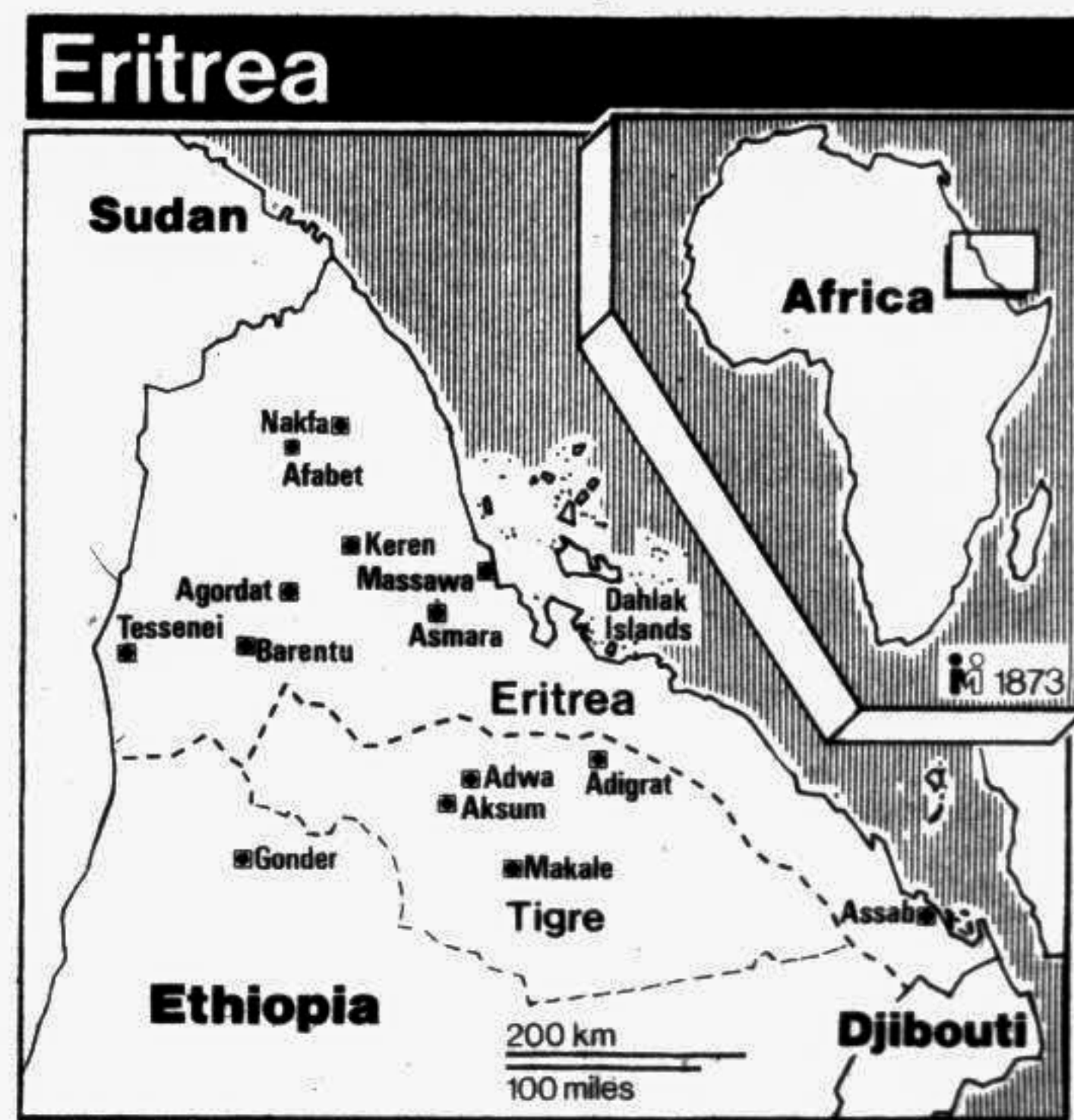
Other movements, such as the TPLF, are battling for greater autonomy — in terms of language, education and resources within the boundaries of Ethiopia. They complain of a highly centralised administration in Addis, dominated by Amharic speakers, which has sought to impose Amharic hegemony without bestowing any local benefits in return.

The capture of Asmara would be a major step forward for the Eritrean cause, but even if the Soviet Union cuts off all military aid to the Ethiopian government, there remains the hurdle of winning international recognition for an independent state of Eritrea.

In the meantime, the people of Afabet will continue to make their daily trek to the mountains to escape the threat of air attacks, leaving the sick and elderly behind in home-made bunkers "answering useless questions" of visiting journalists as one woman put it.

And in rural areas the threat of bombing will restrict the prospects for planting and harvesting in a land already barren from drought. 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.

Health and smoking

Sir, It is common knowledge now that there is a definite relationship between smoking and lung cancer. Heavy smokers have been observed to have definitely got complaints of the lungs.

However, despite such severe hazard to health, we still find a considerable number of smokers among our younger generation, as well as the old. Once a person starts smoking, he or she gets almost addicted

to it, and it is very difficult then to shun the habit. Some with a very strong sense of determination only are able to give it up.

Therefore, as the saying goes — prevention is better than cure, one should try best not to develop this habit.

Those who need to be careful or careful about are the teenagers specially, who though may not individually want to smoke but indulge in the habit while in a group.

What, if you just give a damn

to it; when you are dying they won't be even near you. Not all people, famous or successful, around you are smokers!

Farhad Javel, Rangunia Chittagong.

SAARC Spirit

Sir, The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has great potentialities for promoting collaboration between the seven member countries in the fields of economic development and social welfare. One of the means to help achieve the aims of SAARC is to facilitate visits by citizens of one country to the other member countries. This will provide opportunities of sharing ideas and experiences in developmental fields, besides promoting understanding at the socio-cultural level. Above all, it will

promote an atmosphere of congeniality and mutual trust which is essential for the free play of mutually beneficial activities.

With these considerations in view, it would be quite pertinent that, as in the case of the European Economic Community states, the visa restrictions between the SAARC countries should be abolished. In fact, suggestions have already been made by several people, including Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar at the last SAARC conference, for the abolition of visa for intra-SAARC travel.

Moreover, it is anomalous for any SAARC country to require its own citizen to get his passport endorsed by the home government for travel to another SAARC country before seeking visa from the other

country. To my knowledge, there is at least one case of such an anomaly. In the Pakistan Passport, Indian is not included in the list of countries for which the Passport is valid. A Pakistani national has to get his passport especially endorsed by his own government for travel to India before applying for visa. This situation implies inter alia, contempt for and distrust of the country so discriminated against, which is inconsistent with the SAARC spirit.

Syed Akbar Ali, Dhaka.

Whither our boys

Sir, A remarkable achievement for our boys was to oust the autocrat and pave the way for establishment of democracy; where the experienced politicians and stalwarts failed, they delivered the goods. We

have so many odd jobs to do, so many jobs to eradicate evil, to check corrupt practices in almost all spheres of life in Bangladesh, to control price hike, eradicate hijacking and snatching, check rapes, arsons and murders, in short to establish law and order in our everyday life. I have firm belief and faith in our boys; in their honesty, sincerity and dedication, that if they really take up the issue firmly with help of law enforcing authorities they can certainly deliver the goods. By rendering this service to the nation they will get 100% vote in their favour. It will be their legitimate right to ask for a seat in the JS which they earn by dint of their service to the nation. They should go forward and take up this challenging job. A senior citizen.