

BY-ELECTIONS

Early Test for Government and Opposition

by Sabir Mustafa

Uncertainty on the Campus

Dhaka University is set to re-open on September 17, even though no guarantee has been received about security on the campus once students return and classes resume.

The month and a half closure, which has compounded an already serious log-jam in course study and examinations schedules, has conclusively proven that there is a direct link between campus violence and session jams.

The government set up a committee soon after its assumption of office to deal with the question of session jams. We are yet to learn of any progress made by that committee or what the ministry of education has done to facilitate its work.

Now, what is the general public to make of the government's and parliament's failure to address the issue in a constructive manner (as distinct from just making self-righteous speeches)?

Meanwhile, Chittagong University is nearing its anniversary of effective closure. It is difficult to imagine how a developing nation, which needs all the talent it can produce, can simply allow a university to spend a whole year without having any classes.

At the very least, prime minister Khaleda Zia's BNP needs to retain all the four seats its leader vacated in order to substantiate its claim that it still enjoys the kind of public confidence which propelled it to power six months ago.

But, because of repeated claims made by BNP leaders about fulfilling its election promises and the favourable circumstances the party enjoys by virtue of being in government, it would also be necessary for the BNP to actually gain a seat or two to fully establish its credibility.

Furthermore, a parliamentary committee was supposed to be set up to look for ways to find a solution to campus violence on the basis of an all-party consensus. Incredible though it may seem, that too has not come about.

In the real world things just don't happen like that, the writer would have been told. There's nothing wrong with the story of a coup by hard-liners backed by the KGB.

As astonishing as the events themselves, notably the overnight emergence of Russian President Boris Yeltsin as a fairy-tale hero, was the speed with which they developed. The world's political commentators were left literally breathless.

A good example of this breathlessness was provided by a daily 15-minute radio news programme, 'Dateline East Asia,' put out by the BBC World Service from London. In most parts of the region it is heard late in the evening.

On the night of August 20 the programme paraded a succession of respected commentators to assess the likely impact of the upheaval in Moscow on this and that Asian nation.

TOMORROW'S by-elections will not cause a change of government. That much is certain, even in the unlikely event of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) failing to win a single seat.

The spread of the constituencies — five in the north, two in the south and four in the centre of the country, including two in the nerve-centre of Dhaka — gives tomorrow's polls a fairly representative character.

This is slightly marred by the fact that four of the northern constituencies are bunched together in one district, Rangpur, where the single issue of Ershad set it apart from the rest of the country in the general elections of February 27.

Still, it is rare to have such a nice spread, and the results should provide electoral analysts with a good deal of raw materials with which to build scenarios for the future.

At the very least, prime minister Khaleda Zia's BNP needs to retain all the four seats its leader vacated in order to substantiate its claim that it still enjoys the kind of public confidence which propelled it to power six months ago.

But, because of repeated claims made by BNP leaders about fulfilling its election promises and the favourable circumstances the party enjoys by virtue of being in government, it would also be necessary for the BNP to actually gain a seat or two to fully establish its credibility.

Khaleda Zia currently has a vital advantage over her main rival, and that is constant and favourable exposure on the state-owned mass media.

However, another major advantage the prime minister has is the fact that six months may not be long enough a period to judge any government's worth. Mistakes can easily be excused as "early-day jitters", while success can be trumpeted as signs of a fast-maturing government.

But, failure to gain any seats would leave a question mark hanging uneasily over the popularity of Zia's government, given all the advantages of incumbency. On the other hand, loss of any single one of the

four seats she vacated would be a major setback. Most alarming, from the BNP's organisational point of view, would be defeat in any one of the two Dhaka seats. The capital, which revealed itself to be as robustly pro-BNP on Feb. 27 as Rangpur was pro-Ershad, is now considered to be an invincible fortress of the ruling party.

There is no shortage of political analysts in this country who saw the 30 per cent share of votes the AL's 284 candidates polled on Feb. 27 as the performance of a party in irreversible decline. The AL needs to seize this chance to confound its critics and put itself on an upwardly-sloping curve.

This would require the party improving its share of votes right across the 13 constituencies, and especially Dhaka. Defeat of party leader Sheikh Hasina in two Dhaka constituencies on Feb. 27 to a couple of pretty light-weight

electorate that it is worthwhile to vote for a party that has already lost the battle for power. Many people in this country consider it a "wasted vote" if it does not produce a winner, and the AL is already a "loser" by being in opposition.

Naturally, the AL's first task would be to hold the three seats it won on Feb. 27. But that is the absolute minimum required by a party struggling to regain its position as a party of government. It is vital that it gains seats — whether at BNP's expense or the Jatiya Party (JP)'s — in order to pro-

opponents left the AL with more eggs on its face than it probably deserved. A good performance in the capital is, therefore, as much necessary to redress hurt pride as to regain lost political ground.

Judging by the more business-like campaigning by AL cadres and the large number of people attending its rallies, a revival in the party's fortune in the capital has been discernible for some weeks. However, it remains to be seen whether that revival is strong enough to overturn Khaleda Zia's formidable 25,000-vote majorities in the two city seats.

For its part, the JP has concentrated all its heavy artillery

in the Rangpur sector, in the hope of riding on the crest of party chairman Hussain Muhammad Ershad's personal standing in the district.

The presence of such old campaigners as Shah Moazzem Hossain, who withdrew from his Munshiganj constituency in the general elections, and Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury who lost in his Chandpur area for the first time in his life on Feb. 27, has made Rangpur the focus of curiosity.

The JP needs to hold on to all four seats to demoralise its strength as a party, rather than as a mere reflection of Ershad's past glory. But both the BNP and AL are putting in determined efforts, apparently sensing a disintegration in Ershad's personal block of votes.

As far as the latter two parties are concerned, the Rangpur Four are there for the taking. The question for the JP is, how widespread, and even or uneven, the disintegration and re-distribution of the "Ershad votes" will be.

For the general public, a major question or two needs to be answered through the conduct of these by-elections. After the euphoria of a free and fair polls held in a perfectly neutral manner by a non-party government on Feb 27, we are now faced with the more sobering reality of a partisan government at the control of the election mechanism.

Another question exercising the public mind appears to have been largely answered, which, unfortunately, has not been to the satisfaction of a great many people's expectations.

This relates to the use of government facilities and media during polls. It was expected, as a result of an enhanced sense of fair play in the wake of the Feb. 27 experience, that state-owned media would not be used for party political ends as in the pre-Shahabuddin days.

It has not taken Bangladesh Television (BTV) much time to revert to its bad old days of projection of government leaders through news bulletins and other programmes.

Coverage of ministers performing important official tasks is one thing, but when slot after slot goes to ministers engaged in election campaigning with party symbols shown in close-ups, the question naturally arises as to whether BTV is trying to influence voters.

It is obviously too late to do anything about BTV, for the purpose of these by-elections anyway. But the experience clearly shows that whether the party in power is an "autocratic and unrepresentative" one, or a "democratic and accountable" one, the desire to control and use the electronic media for party purposes is prevalent in all.

Perhaps it is a reflection of our lack of a democratic culture. After these elections, it will become all the more necessary to make BTV and radio (both financed by tax-payers of all political views) autonomous and politically neutral, in order to nurture a tolerant political culture that is receptive to a plurality of views.

For the general public, a major question or two needs to be answered through the conduct of these by-elections.

After the euphoria of a free and fair polls held in a perfectly neutral manner by a non-party government on Feb 27, we are now faced with the more sobering reality of a partisan government at the control of the election mechanism.

The Coup that Failed, and the Moral for Asia

Quentin Lee writes from Manila

The dramatic upheavals in Moscow have put a premium on cautious political decision-making in East Asian states

Further twists and turns have to be expected. As regards political and security issues, the failure of the attempted plot will have a far less traumatic effect on Asian policy-makers than if it had succeeded.

On the following night, August 21, when it was apparent that the coup was rapidly falling apart, another team of commentators was assembled who had the task of radically revising — in some cases, totally up-ending — the opinions aired 24 hours previously. Now, for instance, it was reformist and pro-democracy movements that would feel satisfaction; and displeasure and unease would be the reaction of authoritarian regimes.

In view of the startling transformations and reversals which have occurred so rapidly, any further assessment of the likely spin-off effects on Asia has to be tentative and provisional. It is worth bearing in mind, also, that the curtain may not yet have fallen on this

ically transformed Mr Gorbachev's chances of winning immediate substantial aid from the West, for all President Bush's assertions that there will be the same pre-requisites (including a root-and-branch overhaul of the Soviet economy) as before.

Indeed, so magical has the change been that some American correspondents have raised the possibility — promptly discounted by Mr Bush — that there may have been an element of charade in the whole Moscow drama, with Mr Gorbachev taking a privy part in a contrived crisis.

The key question, therefore, for many industrialised and industrialising countries in Asia is: "Will any new surge of Western aid and investment for the USSR and for Eastern Europe be at the expense of trade with Asia and investment in Asia?"

In one word, the answer has to be no. Even more than politicians and defence planners, industrialists and bankers have reason not to let idealism cloud their perceptions of reality. Caution is certainly their watchword.

Indigenous Medicine: the Jakartan Lesson

Jamu is big business in Indonesia. And Jakarta is helping Jamu people to promote the native medicine into becoming a rage throughout the world — something that has happened with the Chinese Ginseng. Jamu is not just some particular concoction but is an extensive herbal pharmacopeia.

We in Bangladesh should find much of interest in the Indonesian preoccupation with indigenous medicine. Folk medicine is native medicine in all the societies in the world — arrived at empirically through tens of centuries of the village people's fight against diseases and for health.

The government has an apology of a support to it in the form of having a Homeopathic and Ayurvedic Board. Beyond this there's nothing for our indigenous wholly herbal medicine.

If we compare our national treatment of the herbal system with that of Indonesia's — we will get a clue to the decline of our own. The Indonesian government's mainstay of medicines in its public medicare programme is Jamu or the native herbal things. Our government would not possibly ever come even to think of such a thing.

Lately there has been a wave of setting herbal medicare centres in the city evidently not only aimed at health but also at keeping the figure and fashion. One has nothing against such developments taking place in the absence of more organised and nation-sized endeavours in the matter.

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.

Check anarchy

Sir, We heaved a sigh of relief when the chapter of autocratic rule of Ershad's regime came to an end. But our sigh of relief seems to be short lived. The reasons are not far to seek because when we look around we see the over-all condition of the country has deteriorated to the extent of anarchy.

(i) Mass education can play a definite role for all round development. Education is key to success, it signifies civilisation. No nation can prosper without education. Education must be made compulsory and free up to a utility level and all steps must be taken to make education modern and job oriented.

(ii) Boosting moral values through mass media like newspaper, TV, Radio will check erosion of humanity in the society. We have to find out the causes of moral erosion and degradation and nip them in the bud.

Random thoughts

- 1) Power plus authority plus implementation equals stability.
2) Power minus authority equals impotence.
3) Power minus authority minus implementation equals chaos.
4) The shortest-lived solution to any problem is appeasement.
5) If one negotiates on one's knees on Tuesday, one will have to negotiate prostrate on Friday.
6) Bureaucracy nourishes itself on its own inefficiency.

For 200 years, a maximum of 50,000 Britishers (helped by another 25,000 British Indians) administered 1.5 million sq. miles and 400 million diverse people. We call them "imperialists, colonialists and exploiters".

Naushad Rahman, Naya Pallan, Dhaka

Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) has been in a state of suspended animation for well over two months. If it is allowed to remain so any longer, it will be impossible to prevent its otherwise preventable collapse, which is exactly what the global Jewish press is determined to hasten.

OPINION An Avoidable Human Tragedy

Nafisul Haq

Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) has been in a state of suspended animation for well over two months. If it is allowed to remain so any longer, it will be impossible to prevent its otherwise preventable collapse, which is exactly what the global Jewish press is determined to hasten.

Speaking about the BCCI Bangladesh, thousands of its innocent clients and employees are passing their distressing days like sacrificial animals waiting to be mercilessly slaughtered. With their present and future frozen, they are, in fact, more dead than alive.

Among its depositors and other clients there are some who wield considerable influence and power. They have raised their strong voice to protest against any violation of their rights and they can make their voice heard.

Quazi Akhlaque uz-Azeem, Anderkilla, Chittagong