

## BNP Consolidates Further

Now that the by-election results are out, what are we to make of it? The results are more or less as expected, with BNP consolidating further its hold on power. The ruling party was expected to retain its four seats which it did, and went one step further and got themselves an additional one. Winning the vacated seat in Bhola of veteran Awami League leader Tofael Ahmed was quite an achievement for BNP which is further enhanced by the fact that in the February polls the BNP candidate got slightly more than 8,000 votes compared to the 50,000 or so votes it got this time. The change of BNP's fortune in Bhola is nothing short of dramatic. The AL leader claimed that the minority community was forcibly prevented from casting their votes. We urge the Election Commission to look into the matter and set the record straight.

There appears to be an erosion of BNP's strength in capital city judged from the margin of victory in the two seats. In the February polls, Begum Zia got more than 70,000 and 55,000 votes in Dhaka-5 and Dhaka-9 seats, as compared to 52,000 and 38,000 respectively polled by the party candidates this time. One reason for this could be the low turnout of women voters who cast their ballots massively in favour of the ruling party last February.

The reduced BNP vote in Dhaka city however failed to change the Awami League's fortune of not having a single representative in the parliament from the capital. This is of particular importance in view of the fact that so much of the country's politics is determined by the events taking place here.

JP showed surprising resilience in being able to maintain its four seats. It is however clear that though the party got the seats, the vote was for Ershad. More than the JP, the victory in Rangpur will give a renewed lease of life to Ershad as a political figure. What good it will do him now that case after case is piling up against him, we are not sure. But definitely the results show that it is still too early to write him off as a political factor.

The reported violence in a number of polling stations in several areas of the country is a matter of great concern. We regret that the standard of tolerance and respect for election norms that we had set for ourselves in the February elections were not adhered to during the by-elections. In the city itself violence was reported from several centres. It has been alleged that an attempt was made on the life of the Leader of the Opposition. It is a serious allegation, and no effort should be spared to clear the air on this score. Without going into the veracity of claims and counter claims we have enough evidence to conclude that violation of election rules did occur in a large scale and it calls for an independent and impartial inquiry into the matter. The facts must be brought out and the culprits punished. The impartial and violence free February elections gave a significant moral boost to our fragile democracy. Violence during the by-elections revives doubt in many minds as to how sincere we are about respecting public opinion. We must take immediate steps to restore confidence in the public mind that no party — either the ruling or those in the opposition — will be allowed to vitiate the sacred institution of elections.

Violence aside, the by-election marks another step forward in our steady march towards institutionalising democracy.

## On to a Fish Revolution

A news report in The Daily Star on Thursday says that the fish yield in the Kaptai Lake has marked a significant rise. More than a welcome rise in the catching activity the report signifies more fishes for the dish and sweet-water ones at that which is in no way less than poor Ali Baba's landing the riches of the forty thieves for the already salivating fish-lover.

The volume of catches rose in the Kaptai Lake by 628 metric tons to 4391 over the last two years — an increase in money terms of Taka 59 lakh. Let us hope that the good tidings stand for a spurting fish population in the lake rather than a depleting reserve caused by an increase in catching.

There are welcome developments on the front of close-culture fish enterprises also. The catfish was touted for decades as an ideal species for rapid-growth incubator-style — better still broiler-type — breeding. The first good results of that are making a good showing in the capital city. One hopes that the 'Magur' spectacular would soon be followed by similar spurts in the breeding of the scaled fishes. The super high-yield Curpeu and Nilotica had their run, of course. But it proved a case of sprinting rather than endurance racing — getting lost in the midway of reaching the nation to a self-sufficiency in fish-protein. For reasons of taste Bengalees haven't taken much to these two species and that's enough to explain their failure to list a success.

Time is fast approaching for the best-sized small fishes of the wonderful-tasting range of Puntl to Kot to be available. Cannot these be broiler-produced in the fisheries of private entrepreneurs? Paradise then would have had come down to earth for the Bengalees, so to say. Fish is safest of all animal protein and marine fish oil eats up cholesterol even as sugar laps up protein.

Let the bound-to-be here fish revolution hurry its way to Bangladesh before the Bengalees forget the taste of fish and take to meat as a protein mainstay for the nation. Meat is not very good for health, to be sure, but worse, it has to be, reportedly, smuggled from across the border to meet even a rather limited domestic demand. We have no choice but to remain a fish-eating race. In that case it is better to start liking it and do something effectively to ensure that every one of us get our healthful portion of it.

"THE universities must be saved if we wish to protect our future. But are the universities ready and capable of being saved, as they are now constituted and managed. The issue is a sensitive one and we have waited all these years for the moment when the question can be addressed, without risking the autonomy of the universities."

Whether I like it or not, I have to quote from myself. The lines are from the final paragraph of the first piece I wrote in this column and the date is June 6. Much water has flowed down the Ganges since that date. On the national plane, the Parliament has voiced a decisive yes in favour of a Parliamentary form of government. On the international plane, an astonished world has witnessed the incredible scene of the second world power — the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics — crumbling down. What has not changed is the spectre of terrorism threatening the very existence of our universities.

The question I had posed in June, rhetorical as it sounded then and as it sounds today, remains pertinent in September. Universities have reopened only to be closed again and, at this moment, most of them, with only two exceptions, are closed. Meanwhile, the authorities of Dhaka University have come out with a frank confession that campus terrorism is too big a problem for the univer-

## D U REOPENING

# Will the Gamble Pay Off?

to tackle. All the brave attempts of the past, bolstered by assurance of support by the government, have ended in failure. Massive and spontaneous support of students and faculty have proved useless in the face of a sudden eruption of violence. The political character of the clashes between student groups has been established beyond doubt. Appeals, fervent appeals, have been made, by individuals and groups, by guardians and alumni, to leaders of the political parties, to restrain the elements spearheading the troubles; and it is widely supposed that the elements enjoy the patronage of the parties.

The tragic drama being enacted on our campuses has taken many lives, young and promising lives; has all but ruined the career of many young men and men; has prompted many parents to send their children abroad; and has been the single major cause of the entire system of higher education facing the prospect of collapse.

What has the government been doing all this while? With or without the Parliament in session, there is an administrative machinery, presided over by political leadership.

Does the government realise the gravity of the situation? Why is this mystery of the police force stationed on the campus and refusing to move, remaining dumb and mute spectators, as armed violence takes place before their very eyes? How are we supposed to interpret their excuse: no instruction from above?

having been taken in desperation. Unease prevails on the campuses, and no body is too sure if the gamble will pay off.

My concluding words on June 6 amounted to a commitment. I had made a promise to return to the sensitive issue of our universities' ability to save themselves. On that date, I was thinking of

## PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

All these questions are being asked, shrilly and insistently, by people who feel concerned and who expect the government to say something, and better still, to do something. The government's handling of the continued crisis, of the perennial terrorism which hasn't loosened its grip on Chittagong University, has if anything mystified people. After having waited in vain for weeks for some positive action or assurance by the government, both Dhaka and Rajshahi have decided to reopen. The dates announced are after the by-elections due to be held on the 11th. This appears to be significant. Nonetheless, the decisions have all the signs of

internal weakness of our universities, especially in their administrative structure, deriving both from tradition and from the respective Acts. The two committees set up by the government — one on campus terrorism, and the other on session-jam — will neither of them address this basic issue, as it falls quite outside their terms of reference. I do not see the logic of isolating issues while they have all the appearance of being closely inter-related. And I do not see any reason why the all-enveloping question of the governance of our universities should be hanging in the void indefinitely.

This all important issue received its due attention only once during our existence as an independent nation. The result was the 1973 Acts. The two universities of a technical nature — the BUET and the BAU — were left out of a legislative exercise which covered the four general universities then in existence. We have lived with these Acts for eighteen years now. While framing Acts for the newer universities — Islamic, Shah Jalal and Khulna — the government of the day discreetly went back to some of the discarded ideas of the pre '71 days. There is a feeling that autocracy in close link with bureaucracy — always convinced of the wisdom of those who call the tune — put their heads together and produced these Acts. Our new Parliament, still busy with far more pressing problems, has had no time yet for the universities and the question of their governance.

I will not blame the government for this. The issue is no doubt grave. Besides it is both complicated and sensitive. In this respect, it resembles the question of turning some of our corporations into holding companies. There is a

Fortunately, there is now a general appreciation of the fact that '91 is twenty years away from '71. During the past two decades, we have had our experience of growth, of violence, of aberration both academic and administrative, of stagnation both academic and administrative, of corruption not only at the fringe but at the heart of the system. And we have been no better and no worse than the rest of the nation. The 73 Acts have possibly saved us from some of the intended encroachments into our autonomy. But we have also had our bitter realisation that autonomy, good in itself, has not taken us far towards our goal. For autocrats it always tasted like gall. Where they failed to undo what was done under a democratic dispensation, they did their best to vitiate and corrupt the system. And all the while the gap widened between the government and the universities. If the police simply stand and stare while the university burns, and if this happens even to-day, well then, the attitude is a legacy of the past. A carefully cultivated cynicism in certain quarters, not excluding the higher bureaucracy, is going to be one of the obstacles the present government will face as and when it decides to turn its serious attention to the ailing universities. And the moment must not be delayed too long.

# Referendum: An Occasion for Massive Participation

by AZM Haider

THE referendum due to be held on the 15th of this month is not a new phenomenon in this country. But the ensuing referendum is quite different in its content from the ones held earlier. Such referendum under the constitutional dispensation is being held for the first time in the country.

A heated controversy has been raging round the suitability or otherwise of the form of government ever since the Parliamentary system was hurriedly abandoned in favour of the Presidential form of government in January 1975. People's repulsion against the Presidential system, which degenerated into a one-man dictatorship during the last autocratic rule, persisted over the last few years until it culmi-

nated into a mass upsurge in 1990. In due deference to popular sentiments, the three political alliances committed themselves to the renunciation of the existing Presidential dispensation and to the restoration of Parliamentary democracy. In pursuance of that solemn commitment enshrined in the Joint Declaration of the Three Alliances, their representatives in the Parliament passed the Constitution 12th Amendment Bill for transition to an accountable government and a sovereign Parliament which, in effect, meant Parliamentary form of government.

The Constitution 12th Amendment Bill, passed by the Parliament, seeking to change the form of government cannot be assented to by the Acting

President before the people give their stamp of approval on it through duly held referendum. The referendum is, therefore, a constitutional requirement designed to elicit sovereign will of the people, which takes precedence over everything and all institutions including the Parliament.

Realising immense importance of this referendum, there is no lack of enthusiasm, as it appears through waves of campaign all over the country. Already political parties and leaders including those of the two main parties have been urging people to cast 'yes' votes in the referendum. The Acting President has called upon the people for massive

participation in it. The Chief Election Commissioner has been holding meetings with officials and other cross section of opinion leaders in different parts of the country asking them to motivate people to cast their votes in the referendum. The mass media like radio, television as well as PTD, DFP, MC and newspapers have mounted a publicity campaign to create awareness and inducement among the voters.

The significance and importance of this referendum hardly requires any elucidation. The Parliament formed through election held with international acclaim for its fairness has unanimously voted for the Parliamentary form of gov-

ernment. But this calls for basic change in the Constitution which according to Clause 142 of the Constitution has to be endorsed by the people through direct voting in referendum before the same is finally incorporated as part of the Constitution.

It is true that the people have elected their representatives for making legislation in the Parliament. But in certain matters the Members of the Parliament cannot exercise absolute authority which always rests with the people. Amendment to the basic character of the Constitution is one such area where the people's verdict has to be obtained as the final seal of approval or otherwise.

The people of the country has never failed the cause of

democracy. They have demonstrated that spirit time and again and made sacrifices to uphold and establish the values of democracy. The country has been freed from the autocratic rule which came handy under the Presidential system of government. The Parliamentary system of government ensures accountability of the government to the Parliament which functions as the sovereign body under the Constitution. Now it is for the people to say which of the systems would be suitable for them. The referendum that is being held on September 15 will crystallise such opinion. It is the sacred duty and responsibility of the people to make it a grand success following the democratic tradition created by them.

WHEN the secretive religious body Iglesia Ni Cristo announced in July that its members would take to the streets to demand a rollback in oil prices, Manila was abuzz with varying rim scenarios.

At best, the announcement sent jitters that street protests — including those of leftist groups — could create monstrous traffic jams. At worst, it could topple President Corazon Aquino's five-and-a-half-year-old government.

There was a strong reason to take seriously the threat of the Iglesia Ni Cristo, which literally means Church of Christ. Its members, estimated by some observers at around four million, follow whatever decisions the church hierarchy makes.

Two days before the announced street protests on July 22, there was a sigh of relief when the Iglesia leader, Erano Manalo, called off his Church's support of the rally — but only after the government announced it would cut oil prices by mid-August.

Militant groups, led by the leftist May First Movement trade union, went ahead with their demonstration, but that turned out to be a dud.

What made a more significant impact instead was the obvious clout wielded by the Iglesia Ni Cristo which, by its last-minute restraint, averted what could have been a wide-

## Sect Shows it Packs a Political Punch

Casiano Mayor writes from Manila

A doctrinally odd religious body in the Philippines, which enjoyed friendly relations with the Marcos regime, has shown it may be a force to be reckoned with in next year's national elections

the countryside. Meanwhile, Iglesia Ni Cristo was busy expanding its membership.

The Iglesia's support was Marcos's political dividend for his recognition of the little known religious sect. Marcos gave it some privileges and favours, including the appointment of some of its members to key government positions.

Since the "People Power" uprising, supported by the Catholic Church, which in February 1986 drove Marcos into exile in Hawaii and installed Mrs Aquino in the presidency, the Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) has found itself on the sidelines.

Mrs Aquino, a devout Catholic, has ignored the Iglesia and forged closer relations with the Catholic Church. She has put many of those recommended by the Church into important government positions and has listened to its counsel.

In addition to Catholic priests, she has invited Protestant pastors to take part in ecumenical services at official functions, but no one from the Iglesia got such an invitation.

While the Catholic and Protestant churches have moved towards ecumenism, both tend to ignore the Iglesia and have not tried to reach out to it, mainly because of sharp doctrinal differences.

The Iglesia established in 1914, claims it is the true Church of Christ predicted in the Bible to rise in the Far East. It does not recognise Jesus Christ as the Son of God but as a prophet like the Iglesia's founder, Felix Manalo, the father of its current leader.

Some commentators have seen the Iglesia's recent initiatives as a way of sending signals, particularly with the national elections coming in May next year, that it remains an influential voting block to

reckon with — a suggestion it has rejected.

An article issued by Manila Newsfeatures and Commentaries, and published by several leading newspapers, stated: "Despite its conservatism, the INC could have discovered the inter-relationship between the electorate and pressure politics. The aborted protest action could be viewed as its way to compete with the Roman Catholic Church."

With the national elections looming, astute politicians are expected to woo — if they haven't started yet — the Iglesia Ni Cristo, fully aware that its members vote as one solid block for any candidate picked by their leaders. Local Iglesia leaders also chose local candidates.

In the December 1985 presidential election Mrs. Aquino lost out to Marcos in polling places where Iglesia votes were concentrated, even in the canvassing carried out by Catholic-backed pollsters.

The Iglesia — whose spired churches, not unlike fairy tale castles, are familiar landmarks across the country — keeps mum on how many members it has. Its official rarely agree to give interviews but independent estimates put the Iglesia's number between two million

and six million. The figure represents roughly 10 per cent, at most, of the country's 62 million population, 80 per cent of whom are Catholics. The rest are Protestants, Muslims and members of other independent churches, including born-again Christians.

With next year's elections in mind, the Catholic Church has announced it is preparing election "guidelines" to help people choose the right candidates, an announcement which has revived an old debate on whether the Church should get involved in politics.

In May 1992, Filipinos will elect a new president to replace Mrs Aquino (who has publicly declared she is not seeking re-election), a vice president, 24 senators, 200 congressmen, 76 provincial governors and thousands of city and town mayors as well as other local officials.

The Catholic Church says it is not endorsing any particular candidate; it only wish to help people make the right choice. It claims that this does not violate the constitutional provision for the separation of the Church and the State.

Says Bishop Teodoro Bacani: "The Church knows that so much of the misery of our people is due to bad politics. The separation of Church and state does not mean allowing a crook into office."

— Depthnews Asia

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.

## Indemnity Ordinance (Repeal) Bill

Sir, Our attention has been drawn to the opinion expressed by advocate M A Mutalib in your daily of September 7, on the captioned subject. The writer concluded as follows: "Awami League is a big political party. It should not have committed the mistake. It should have consulted legal experts before submitting the Bill. Such consultations economise public time and money."

In this connection our opinion is that Awami League made no mistake. In fact, they did deliberately present the Bill in that form. They knew full well that it would not sail in parliament. Then the question arises as to why the Bill has at all been presented? Our thinking is that either the

Awami League is half-hearted or they are only playing into the gallery for party prop-up. Another intention may perhaps be to create crisis situation for the nation in order to have a rich catch out of it while the proposal is being used as a ploy.

Gias Uddin, Moghbazar, Dhaka.

## Jamuna Bridge

Sir, It appears that the government has not yet received any clearance from World Bank to complete the formalities of floating international tender in matters of Jamuna Bridge. Thus resulting delay may cause enhanced expenditure. A group of experts evaluated the project and found it viable both economically and technically. The northern zone of the country which is away from

capital and the port city could not be developed for want of an easy communication system. Despite its potentialities it could not establish industrial units due to non-availability of easy transportation system for raw materials and finished goods. There is no gas available in the northern districts neither it could be carried to there to help the entrepreneurs in their fuel cost.

Quality coal has been found in Bara Pukuria, Dinajpur. The extraction of the deposit has also been found to be economically viable. Government has even declared that extraction may take place within the span of two years. But for want of easy transportation coal will be costly in other parts of the country.

A large number of youths just remain unemployed in the northern zone. They will be engaged in industries when established in northern districts. The construction of Jamuna Bridge is a national demand. All political parties have supported the demand for the sake of even development in all parts of the country. And it's for the sake of construction

of the bridge that people of all walks of life are making contribution by way of Jamuna surcharge and about Tk. 300 crore so far has been accumulated.

We therefore request the present government to motivate the World Bank officials towards early receipt of clearance, so that the project can reach the implementation stage as early as possible.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury DGM, Sonali Bank, Barisal.

## Corruption

Sir, Many among us speak a great deal against corruption. Some even demonstrate their hatred against corruption through public behaviour. I greatly appreciate and respect these people. But in some cases, it is found that not all these people are fair in their dealings. Many of them are even highly corrupt. And they do it in collaboration with 'big shots' who can protect their skin. When a common man approaches them even for a slight undue benefit, they usually say — "How on earth can I do this injustice? You see, this

may lead to losing my job... moreover there is Allah, I can bluff people but how can I cheat the Lord..."

I would urge upon the public as well as government agencies to strictly guard against these hypocrites — they are actually the roots of corruption!

M. Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka-1207.

## Charity needs support

Sir, I thank you for publishing article on "Surovi" and it's founder Ma Banu in your issue of September 4, 1991. But for this the commendable activities of Ms Banu would have remained unknown to many like myself.

In a society like ours where there is so much of poverty and hunger and at the same time neglect for the poor and the unfortunate, every deed of charity such as that of the founder of "Surovi" ought to get maximum publicity in our media so that it may encourage

others to come forward to do similar acts of charity.

An organisation such as "Surovi" should get adequate aid and assistance from all government and non-government aid agencies. I strongly appeal to all local and international aid giving agencies to help and support organisations like "Surovi" in their praiseworthy activities.

A M Chaudhury, Uttara, Dhaka.

## Wrongly deported

Sir, It is not a surprise that hundreds of unqualified op-I winners formed an association and held a meeting in front of Press Club for their claims. This is really a bad luck to lose such hopes and dreams.

But it is immoral that nothing is done about others who were wrongly deported from different countries. And no initiative has been taken for their reinstatement considering the wrong accusations against them as well as their remedies.

Z Amem Gulshan, Dhaka