

## Election in Cambodia

Cambodia goes to the six-day UN-supervised election, beginning today, under ominous clouds of in-fighting and threats of violence. The uncertainties are so pronounced that the United Nations authorities in Phnom Penh would have plenty of justification to put it off. But, despite all the risks involved, they have done well in going ahead with the exercise — at the time of writing — to give the strife-torn country its first multiparty elections in two decades.

As the international community, especially the UN agencies, have known for past several months, the threat to the election stems from the Khmer Rouge, one of the four factions which had signed the accord in 1991 to end the 13-year war and to put the country on the road to stability and peace. Despite moderation exercised by China on this militant faction, responsible for the genocide in the seventies, the bonafides of guerrillas had never been established. Hence, the plea was heard again and again from various quarters that the Khmer Rouge should be first banned and militarily crushed before the accord for the election was put into effect. The plea was rejected partly at the prompting of Beijing which had always backed the Khmer Rouge and partly because it seemed better to involve the faction in an open multiparty poll than to drive it underground as a threat to a constitutional government in Phnom Penh.

The expectations of the United Nations have been dashed by the events of the past weeks. Khmer Rouge forces have launched attacks on several government posts, communication links and civilian homes. Ordinary citizens have been buying arms for their protection and hoarding food. It is said that even UN personnel who have sent their families out of the country have been purchasing all kinds of weapons for their personal safety.

At this stage, it would be absurd to talk of Cambodia having a peaceful election, when even the UN officials have been predicting possible attacks on polling stations. Then, one may ask, what can the strife-torn country gain out of this exercise?

The real hope lies in the election producing some kind of a constitutionally democratically-elected government in Phnom Penh. Whether any single faction will win a workable majority to set up a viable administration remains to be seen. However, there are prospects that the Vietnam-backed Hun Sen group could well come out the winner, but without the necessary strength to fight the threat posed by Khmer Rouge from its armed bases. Ideally, all three anti-Khmer Rouge groupings should co-operate among themselves to ensure stability to the country. Meanwhile, the international community, especially China, should put pressure on Khmer Rouge to discard its militant tactics as well as its out-dated socialist notions and join other factions in the reconstruction of the country.

Countries in Southeast Asia and several traditional donor countries, especially Japan, are set for providing all possible assistance to Cambodia to stand on its own feet again. A country with a relatively small population but vast natural resources, this former Indo-China state has all the potential to reemerge as a moderately prosperous nation, taking care of the basic needs of its impoverished people. Cambodia cannot let this opportunity fall by the wayside and go by default.

The election beginning today offers Cambodia this unique chance of starting a new journey. However difficult it may be, it is still opening a fresh chapter, one of some hope and promise, in the turbulent history of the country.

## A Reprieve for Our Scholars Abroad

The disintegration of the Soviet Union meant many things to so many people. To the west the fall of such a rival, embodying the greatest ever threat to the acquisitive competitive western way of life as it did, — without needing a single shot to be fired, was verily a miracle. But to foreign students studying in Russia and the other states that now constitute the CIS, the event proved somewhat less ecstatic. All of them, particularly the hundreds of Bangladeshi ones, were suddenly marooned in more ways than one.

At the end of unsparing efforts made by Bangladesh during the past many months Russia has agreed to care for the Bangladeshi students now studying there. And a philanthropic outfit of the OIC has also come forward to fend for the other scholars from our country studying in the CIS states other than Russia. There hasn't been a comparable success in Bangladesh's diplomatic performance for a long time. We congratulate those that persevered with the initiative to such a satisfactory end and also the scholars for their turn of good luck.

We have reasons to compliment the government over this otherwise normal conduct of routine affairs. Bangladeshi nationals living abroad and our diplomatic missions there are, as a rule, an anathema to each other. It is very difficult to appreciate why at all there are these hyper-expensive missions in those costliest cities of London, Washington, Tokyo etc if they do not care for our citizens working there. But the indifference, if not outright hatred, is mutual and is returned measure for measure by the Bangladeshi nationals living abroad. The CIS students episode strongly shows that both the sides should cultivate each other more to the benefit of both.

But then the missions should do a little bit more, especially when it involves students. Our experience of students' behaviour studying at the expense of host countries, specially of the former Soviet Union, hasn't been quite delightful. It was long felt that our students were badly in need of good monitoring at the level of our missions there.

In the changed circumstances, once our students in CIS have got such a miracle of a reprieve, the two points should always be taken care of. The missions and the students must come closer and the students' conduct must be monitored more closely. Otherwise the lease of life could very well prove undeserved and meaningless.

# Defining the Agenda for Human Rights in Bangladesh

by Hameeda Hossain

THE UN Conference on Human Rights is to be held in Vienna this June. Coming 25 years after the first meeting in Tehran, this conference is likely to become a battlefield, both between states and between governments and people, to determine minimum human rights standards. It is crucial, today, to recognise the indivisibility of human rights so that individually and collectively we can work against encroaching violations in our lives.

The two International Human Rights Covenants, one on Civil and Political Rights and the other on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, have yet to be ratified by all states. Divisions will in all probability revolve around differing priorities regarding sets of rights and the means for their protection and promotion. Any controversies over the principles of human rights and the means for their promotion and protection in terms of North South dichotomies would be an invalid interpretation. Torture is torture no matter in which part of the globe, which system of government or under which culture it is perpetrated.

### Setting Standards for Human Rights

Minimum standards for civil and political rights are essential for popular participation in democratic governance. In essence these rights protect freedom of individuals and groups to free expression and association. They are seen as essential for a responsive and open system of governance, just as they are for people's unfettered participation in the political process.

Some states argue that in developing societies the protection of civil and political

rights is secondary to the attainment of economic, social and cultural rights. In the Asian Regional Meeting held in Bangkok in March, several states questioned the universality of human rights, arguing instead for differential standards based on "cultural specificity and religious tradition". This would imply the perpetuation of inequalities on grounds of past inheritance, and could only serve to legitimise discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, gender, religion. For instance it could justify or condone punishments involving physical mutilation, such as amputation of a man's hands or stoning a woman.

This argument could justify a negation of basic individual freedoms of expression or association in the interest of economic development. Thus state violations through for example, preventive detention, on grounds of sovereignty, national unity, economic growth or structural adjustment policies. Understandably this position has created an apprehension amongst the peoples of Asia of the likely use of authoritarian and coercive action.

It should be remembered that many of these countries, claiming immunity against application of human rights standards, justified their struggle against colonial subordination by these abiding principles. The move towards democratisation in most parts of the world should raise the level of consensus, rather than limit it.

In their statement the Asian states supported the right to development. They gave guarantees for the equal participation of women in the political, social, economic and cultural concerns of society, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination and of gender based violence. They also af-

firmed the rights of children, indigenous communities, religious minorities and migrants. These rights cannot be subject to revisions and any other grounds.

### Implementation of Rights

The second controversy is likely to rage over the means of protection and promotion of human rights. The state's responsibility to maintain standards within its own territory cannot be denied; but in the absence of agreed standards, where governments have yet to become truly accountable and transparent, their impartiality cannot be ensured in monitoring their own transgressions. Sovereignty cannot be used as an excuse to impose controls which can undermine both the practice of human rights and democratic values.

Therefore international mediatory instruments become necessary in cases of state violations. The North would like to enforce compliance through an aid conditionality. Although in principle this leverage is suggested to moderate authoritarian actions of the state, there is a fear that it could become a weapon to be used selectively against those who resist conformity with the "New World Order". To prevent arbitrary action by powerful states, a stronger system for UN monitoring of human rights needs to be put into place and the UN itself requires democratisation. In this respect the recommendations for a UN Commissioner for Human Rights, (including particular terms to monitor gender violations), would be in order. But to ensure freedom of action, inequalities within the UN system need to be eliminated by the removal of veto powers. This would ensure the compliance with minimum standards, irrespec-

tive of how rich or powerful a state may be.

### The Case for Bangladesh

To create a climate for the practice of human rights in Bangladesh, it is necessary to move beyond a notional affirmation of principle. Positive actions need to be taken to remove obstacles to the promotion of human rights. Particular practices and institutions which may threaten the upholding of human rights and democratic process need to be recognised.

1. Political rights derive from the primacy of civil society. Erosion of fundamental rights by the appropriation of extra-constitutional powers in the last 46 years has made the people of Bangladesh all too aware of the processes which subvert democratic procedures. A key threat comes from militarisation, and its potential for disrupting institutions. Not only is this done by the direct seizure of power, but by budgetary diversion of resources for defence, which deprive the people of their right to enjoy their own resources. The military has been propped up by increasing injections of budgetary and aid outlays from Tk 2.70 billion in 1980/81 to Tk 12.79 billion in 1989/90 (this is exclusive of funds funnelled through subsidised for sales, education, health and other ministries). None of this is subject to public scrutiny, and yet it is an obvious case for an unbalanced development and unjust distribution of resources.

The imposition of national security laws which have eroded human rights, such as the Special Powers Act (1974) and the Suppression of Terrorism Act (1992), as mechanisms of state control have again eroded basic political rights essential to a plural system of government.

2. Economic rights, fundamental to the well being of the whole society, cannot be selective. A fundamental right to life, which subsumes the right to shelter, work and food, embedded in the fundamental principles of the constitution, has yet to be exercised or even recognised in our Plans. Instead, economic growth, exacerbated by the demands of the structural adjustment programme places an unequal burden on the poor and on women. World Bank and IMF conditionalities restrict the rights of workers guaranteed by the ILO Conventions and by our own Constitution.

3. Cultural rights are constrained by encroachments upon the freedom of expression. Thus control over the public media and financial manipulation of the press are familiar methods used to enforce conformity in the media. Controls can also be imposed by homogenising the education system in such a way that rights of all communities are not equally recognised. Ethnic communities are particularly threatened by the non-recognition of their separate cultures and languages.

4. Women's rights are denied by customary practices and religious laws. Resulting discrimination deprives them of economic benefits and social recognition. Increasing violence against women, encouraged both within the public and the domestic sphere, by wars, trafficking, prostitution and religious discrimination, is a glaring violation of human rights.

It is not in the interest of democracy or for that matter in the interest of a popularly elected government to perpetuate inherited powers of aggrandizement to control the people, or to justify denial of human rights on grounds of national interest or cultural

specificity. There is understandably a concern that the Government may formulate a bureaucratic position for the conference ignoring the demands for equality and freedom of the people. Since the question of human rights is central to the mode of democratic government, it is imperative to formulate a position through consultation with the parliament and the people to recognise a common commitment to the protection of human rights, to ensure that violations by both state machinery and powerful groups can be subject to censure and appropriate action.

The Human Rights Charter and its Covenants are important for standard setting. As we emerge from a long night of military rule, it is particularly important for the Government of Bangladesh to manifest its commitment by signing the two covenants. In so doing, we, as a national can assert our belief in the indivisibility of our rights, to life and livelihood, to freedom of expression and association, to the equality of women and men, and of ethnic and religious groups. This can be the basis for evolving a democratic process.

In compliance with this commitment it should withdraw its reservations to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, implement constitutional guarantees of gender equality in both the public and private sphere; other instruments for the protection of religious and ethnic minorities (where they do not conflict with individual rights), for worker's and children's rights need to be translated from the statute books into direct, positive action. Only a genuine adherence to the spirit of the charter can ensure the basis of an equitable and non-coercive social system.

## Parliament Roundup

# Do the Politicians have the Right to Mislead Future Generations?

by Nurul Kabir

NANDITA Kripalani, a grand daughter of Rabin-dranath Tagore and relation of well known Indian politician Acharya J B Kripalani, once in a letter to her father in 1949, expressed surprise over one of her interesting observations that some parliamentarians had developed the habit of snoring while they went to bed at night.

Had Nandita been in the city in the second week of this month, she would certainly have written another letter to somebody expressing her sheer shock over the fact that some members of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad (JS) had developed the tendency of exchanging abuses on the floor.

Yes, we are talking about the last session of the country's fifth parliament which was prorogued on May 13, five days after its opening on 9th this month.

During the five-day session, the Treasury benchers and the members of the Awami League

(AL) led Opposition bench exchanged filthy words, accused each other of undermining parliament by making false statement in the House, blamed each other for showing indifference towards the problems of common people and had unscheduled debates for hours on whether the Treasury bench or the Opposition was more keen to discuss issues affecting national interests.

Both the benches, however, did not raise any issue that involves practical life of the people in the House.

So debates — we should rather say quarrels — were there, but remedies to real problems remained elusive.

To be more precise, the first three sittings of the five-day session were spent mostly on the unscheduled debate over the Nirmul Committee movement.

The Nirmul Committee have been struggling for the trial of Golam Azam, chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami

Bangladesh, as a war criminal. Golam Azam, along with some other politicians, actively opposed the nation's war of independence in 1971 and took side of the Pakistani occupation army which had engaged in a genocide against freedom loving people of the country.

The Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party were now debating over the ways of trying Golam Azam, but surprisingly none of them had so far gone to the court of law to lodge a specific charge of crime against the Jamaat chief.

If some one links the AL-BNP reluctance to go to the court on the issue with the fact that the former party allowed the collaborators of the Pak-occupation army to go virtually untried immediately after the country's independence and the latter eventually paved the way for their political revival, he/she is left with no option but to consider the three-day

debate a mere political rhetoric.

None of the AL and BNP then appeared to be serious about the trial of Golam Azam and their frequent show on the issue seemed only to be strategic gestures to appease the younger generation willing to try the local cronies of the Pakistan army that conducted the genocide in the country in 1971.

The last show of the politicians on the Golam Azam issue, however, cost about Tk 30 lac of the public exchequer. According to a statistics provided in the House by its deputy leader Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury, every sitting of parliament costs about Tk 10 lac.

During the three-day quarrels on the Nirmul Committee issue, the House could not pick up any legislative business for consideration although the 'order of the day' of all the three sittings included law making on its agenda.

However, four bills which were promulgated in the form of ordinances earlier could somehow managed to get introduced in the House on the fourth day.

Failing to attract attention

of the legislators, all the four bills are now waiting to be discussed about in the next session of parliament.

The members of both benches — Treasury and Opposition — spent the last two sittings of the session on accusing each other of ignoring people's interests but, ironically, they did not pay heed to the problems of the industrial workers who were on a countrywide 72-hour general strike during the session to press implementation of an accord signed with the government much earlier.

The last session, however, was an exceptional one in the sense that for the first time in Bangladesh a parliament could succeed to meet for the ninth time. No parliament in the past could survive up to more than eight sessions, mostly for the military intervention. But members of parliament, however, failed to behave exceptionally, especially in terms of going by the rules of procedure of parliament.

MPs who submitted notices, according to rules, for discussions on different issues in the House did not get chance to deliberate on the problems as some 'influential' MPs discussed many issues without giving prior notices.

When legislators fail to show honour to the rule made by themselves, they can neither expect nor preach others to uphold their 'rule of law' in the country.

The MPs violated rules by not only indulging in unscheduled debates, a scuffle-like situation also erupted in a corner of the House when two members of the Jatiya Party and the BNP were engaged in a dispute and later an AL member rushed to the spot to interfere, during the session.

Nandita Devi was not in the city to pass a comment on the incident, but Arani Anirban, a five year old baby who witnessed the scenario on the television screen, remarked: "They quarrel, they are bad people."

Arani, however, does not know that the last session of parliament also witnessed the politicians accusing each other of falsehood and of killing own party activists for the sake of 'political benefits'.

If the baby comes to know about this in future, we cannot expect him to have conviction for the saying: Politics is the highest form of art.

Now the question remains, do the politicians of the day have any right to mislead our future generations?

## To the Editor...

### Fire in Thai factory and our relevance

Sir, Various news and commentaries concerning the recent devastating fire in a Thai factory should worry our local authorities. They better take measures now on the basis of lesson learned from that tragedy. A news item in your paper of 16th May reveals that the chief of AFL-CIO (US labour organization) is demanding the US buyers of that Thai manufacturer to share the liabilities. It will not be surprising if a Senator comes up with a proposal for restricting import from countries with poor industrial safety record.

Condition in the garment industries in our country is no better than that in similar Thai establishments. There are legal compulsions and law-enforcing authorities here as they are in that country. I can imagine a factory inspector visiting a factory in Bangkok, exchanging pleasantries with the owner and lining his pocket to ignore "minor irregularities". And if a simpleton official feels like doing his bit of job, he is possibly suggested by a "high-up" to forget about it. Are things much different here?

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### Noor Jahans and Shabe Mehers

Sir, "Government is a trust and the officers of the Government are trustees; and both the trust and the trustees are created for the benefit of the people," said Henry Clay, the American statesman.

A couple of days back, once more a blood curdling event had taken place in a remote village in Faridpur. A couple of months ago, Noor Jahan of Sylhet was stoned to death, on a false charge of adultery. At that time there was a hue and cry. This time there was hardly

a ripple. In the first case, the Bangladesh Mohila Parishad went to the site of the incident; this time it was limited to the passing of a resolution.

Is it not the very first duty of the Government, as trustee, to safeguard the life of its citizens, as enjoined in the covenant?

The heavily armed Serbs of Bosnia are murdering thousands of unarmed Muslims and it has attracted our compassion. Barbaric killings are taking place in many parts of the country — men, women and children; but the women are brutalized the most. Cannot the trustees rise to the occasion, and call a spade, a spade? All other duties of the Government come later, after providing safety and security to all its citizens. The situation as stated here cannot be changed unless we ourselves change.

The other shame that we face now is the 'export' of our young daughters to neighbouring countries/the Middle East.

The salvation of our womenfolk lies on their empowerment through education and employment in real terms as also in our policy thrusts and its true implementation. The rate of literacy of women is less than half of that of men. Special efforts are needed for raising the educational level of women. The best investment, and the highest return, according to the many social thinkers, is the empowerment of our womenfolk, through education and employment.

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### Technology confined in Ganabhaban

Sir, Lot is spoken in meetings and seminars on the ways and means of improving the fate of the downtrodden masses by the application of local technology but, unfortu-

nately, very little patronage is available for the implementation of locally innovated technology to benefit the people.

With a view to increasing the productivity in the handloom sector and per capita income of the weavers, I innovated a 'Multi-Bobbin Charka' in 1984. At first I approached the Bangladesh Handloom Board for transfer of technology. The then authority of the Board appreciated the innovation but did not come forward for its implementation.

I finally donated the Charka for the welfare of the handloom weavers through the then Prime Minister of the government on 4 November, 1989.

Unfortunately, after a long gap of two years, on 19 November '91, I came to know that the "Multi-Bobbin Charka" was kept packed-up in a room in Ganabhaban.

On 4th December 1991, I appealed to the government to hand over the Multi-Bobbin Charka to Bangladesh Handloom Board which is closely associated with the handloom industry. The Principal Secretary asked for some information which I accordingly submitted on 7.7.92.

In August '92, on my query about the fate of the "Multi-Bobbin Charka" to Mr Shawkat Ali, the relevant Director of the Office of the Honourable Prime Minister, I was told that the matter was forwarded to the Ministry of Textile and I would be informed as soon as a response came from the aforesaid ministry.

Will some one please tell me when this response will reach me and for how many more years will my hard-won "Multi-Bobbin Charka" be kept confined in that small room of Ganabhaban?

M Hedayet Ullah  
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## OPINION

### Talents

(eighty-four lac) people having superior intelligence. They are the first group of our talents. (In Bangla we can call them 'Medhab').

5. About three per cent of any population possess IQ between 130 and 140. This means that we have, in Bangladesh, about 36,00,000 (thirty-six lac) people having very superior intelligence. They are the second group of our talents higher in ranks (in Bangla we can call them 'Protibhaban').

6. While calculating the number of intelligent people in our country we can go one more step high. According to the specialists, only 0.5 per cent (i.e. only one in two hundred) of any population possess IQ of 140 and above. These people certainly have intelligence, but usually are not considered as intelligent by other people. They are the third group of our talents. They are the most significant group. The people belonging to this group, if nursed well, can take a country to any level of development. (Albert Einstein is an example of a genius).

From the above estimates, it can be said that in Bangladesh we have about 3,00,00,000 (three crore) intelligent persons, out of which 1,20,00,000 (one crore and twenty lac) can be considered as general talents and 6,00,000 (six lac) as geniuses. These figures can well be compared to the total population of many developed countries. But, despite such a big wealth of talents and geniuses, the most unfortunate fact is that ours is the poorest country of the world! Why this is so? Let us think over it. Actually this may be because we have miserably failed in several respects. We have failed to identify our potentially talented people, and we have also failed to develop them as working talents. Mere identification is not enough. Persons who are potential talents must be nursed and developed. Here we are to say that another unfortunate fact is that our education system is such that it cannot convert our potential talents into working talents. Our so-called examination system can only show some students as making good results. But it is a fact that our good students are not necessarily good talents, and our best students are not necessarily best talents. Unfortunately, many of our talents remain unknown and bluish unseen. And of course, a few fortunate ones manage to escape to the lands of affluence. Because of this, we find in our society that in many cases the pseudo-talents are making plans and taking decisions in many significant national issues. The result is a sad failure in our national development.

It is high time that we should identify our potential talents and try to develop them as creative ones. There is less significance in feeling complacency by saying that we do have talents.

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