

Magura Poll Lessons

Unfortunately, it is not the result of the Magura by-poll that we are keeping glued to or are possessed by. Instead it is the whole range of unpalatable incidents surrounding the election which is dominating our thinking at the moment.

Election as the ultimate barometer of public opinion as to who should represent them has fallen on evil days. And this has happened with the last residual by-poll to Magura constituency-2 after we have been more or less smoothly through the 15 other by-elections that preceded it. Ever since the February 1991 general elections which heightened our consciousness of unfettered polls, the electoral process has been smooth and largely without incidents. Even the highly sensitive city corporation elections passed off well reinforcing our faith in the conduct of free and fair polls.

True, the stakes were high for the major political parties in the Magura poll. After its less-than-expected showing at the city corporation elections, BNP highly valued winning the seat which Awami League kept since as far back as 1954. Likewise Awami League was keen on keeping to its winning streak. What is however difficult to appreciate is why a single contest should have been so bristling an affair that it looked as if it was more than a litmus test. After all, it was not the end-of-the-world kind of a challenge. The 1991 elections, the string of by-polls and the city corporation polls were much bigger events, both in content and meaning.

The over-involvement reflects a state of mind that we have lately acquired, and that at the cost of decency, tolerance and patience which are of the essence if institutions are to be built to make democracy durable.

We should say all sides behaved irresponsibly insofar as maintaining a congenial atmosphere went. To be frank and, strictly speaking, it is the much talked-about code of conduct that was frantically least operational on the election day. The allegations and, on some points, counter-allegations of mob attacks on polling booths, kidnapping of MPs and stuffing of votes and raising of barricades prove that despite the presence of many ministers and political leaders in Magura the incidents of violence could not be averted.

A controversy raged over the departure of the Chief Election Commissioner from Magura where he had gone to see the election arrangements. It was touched off allegedly by lack of accommodation at the Circuit House and, according to some reports, by BNP's refusal to be a member of the proposed all-party committee to oversee the poll. If an all-party committee were formed it would have been a shared burden. The CEC as the head of the neutral statutory mechanism to hold elections needed to be allowed to work smoothly. Apparently a section of the media put words in the CEC's mouth. The CEC had better not been drawn into any controversy. The media cannot be a party, even unwittingly, to any poll, their job being to present all sides of the picture with objectivity and a sense of responsibility.

All these are lessons worth learning from. It is a sad commentary on our level of political maturity that such a small election was marked by infractions when we have many elections to go through along the path of democracy.

World Water in Danger

Today is the World Water Day. The 47th session of the United Nations General Assembly has in a decision enjoined the nations of the world to observe the day in order to promote public awareness of the problems and issues of conservation and development of water resources of the world.

In our own language water has a synonym — life. And that stands to sum up the importance of water — something very unique to all living things — animals and plants — and in all the 10-billion light-year known expanse of the universe occurring only in this speck of a mother earth. Not dust but water forms almost the whole of our bodies and it is mainly water that sustains them. Any danger to naturally occurring water — surface and underground — is a threat not only to man and civilisation but to the phenomenon of life as we know it.

And water is now in danger — grave danger if we do not wake up to it in any meaningful manner. We in the Third World have been over the past decades polluting and constricting bodies and movements of water out of mostly ignorance and socio-cultural backwardness. But water has been endangered more by the arrogance of the might of the industrially developed nations. World Water Day evidently proposes to address one aspect of the big global problem by making individual man and his family etc to be responsive to the dictates of a healthy water situation. This would be a tremendous job to perform. At the same time there will remain the equally urgent need to prevail on the nations and such conglomerations as industry and agriculture and activities and processes as urbanisation and rise in standard of living to keep strictly to internationally arrived at water norms — which are still to be come.

While ways of exploiting naturally available potable water has multiplied thousands of times over, man's ingenuity has not been seriously turned on striking a radical way of augmenting the total world body of such water by unlocking it or its ingredients — hydrogen and oxygen — from other substances. Desalination of sea water hasn't gone far in answering the present challenges to supply of pure water.

Bangladesh stands in a specially critical situation with regard to water. Once this nation was said to be hit by the problems of both an excess and a shortage of water occurring exactly when one or the other was not welcome to strike. Now one is contributing to the other and the two have joined to form one big nation-guzzling problem. That one ogre is making a desert of this verdure plain with the inexorability of death for a man on the block. While this is yet to be clear how our society or precisely our government wants to go about this challenge the NGO Forum for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation has been rendering yeoman service in improving what they call the WATSAN sector over there — something which is already resulting in more enlightened use of water specially for drinking and sanitation. It is the forum which is today holding a national seminar on the 'Challenges of Water and Sanitation' to observe the World Water Day. We wish the Forum godspeed in reaching potable water to 17 million of our compatriots who have no access to it.

THE last session of the Parliament has deeply disappointed the nation. Not only has it been unproductive in the extreme, it has also been counterproductive, in a sense. It has shaken the confidence of the people in our ability to frame laws wherewith to govern ourselves. Lawmaking which is the prime responsibility of the Parliament has apparently been relegated to a position of least concern. Other issues have cropped up, usurping most of the time. Somebody says something highly provocative which throws the House into a wordy turmoil. The frequency of such incidents points to a deep malaise afflicting our politics. That the Parliament is not just the treasury bench, that it is complete only with the opposition is a lesson some of us do not appear to have learnt yet. The latest incident is not the first of its kind. Time and again, parliamentary debate has been reduced to heated exchanges often sinking into mutual mud-slinging and worse. This time it led to a stalemate, the Opposition boycotted the sessions and failed to return when the House was prorogued. Such a pathetic end of a session which had so much work to do, had such a vitally important agenda before it, is nothing short of tragic.

When leaders failed to restore sanity, the Leader of the House had a role to play. But she chose to remain absent. The impression is gaining

The Larger Stage and the Smaller

ground that she underrates the Parliament and is not really interested in what goes on there. For the first really elected and balanced Parliament about which hopes were high, this persistent neglect of the House by the Leader of the House is difficult to explain. It is irreconcilable with the form of the government we have. The latest crisis which immobilised the Parliament could well be resolved to the satisfaction of both the parties with the right kind of intervention by the Leader of the House.

That the Parliament has been reduced to ineffectuality, both sides seem to agree but each side makes the other side responsible for it. I am not going to offer any opinion on this but when arrogance is challenged by defiance and in the absence of a mutually agreed code of reconciliation, there has to be a system of arbitration binding upon both the parties. The arbiter should have the last word.

Against this black chapter in the short and troubled record of our Parliament the recent Mayoral elections can be seen as something bright and hopeful. All the four Mayors have set an example of good sense and correct conduct which the watching public must have appreciated. Most heartening has been the promise made by them — I believe by all the four — that

once elected, they consider themselves more as city fathers than as party men. One wishes that the elections were not conducted so explicitly on party lines, but perhaps that was to expect too much in the present reality of our politics. Local government is still in a very nascent state. As it grows in strength, the bitter party feeling one notices now will mellow into something more civil. It is unfortunate that the present government abolished

many future votes from going to the other fellow.

All the Mayors of the four city corporations have made a promise in respect of the so-called mastans. I do not like the word but it has gained in currency. Like the other word 'street Romeo', it is a clear case of semantic change in a word, and it is a change where there has been a distortion, a degradation of sense. A 'mastan' used to mean a god-intoxicated man; to-day, in

will unclouded by other considerations.

The Mayors have already evinced that they know the limitations and constraints under which they will have to function. Some of these are a legacy of the past decades of autocracy. The concept of a city government has been missing for far too long a period. It has to be revived, and strengthened, and the relation of the city administration with the many authorities in charge of water, power, education etc. has to be redefined so that nothing is done in which the city administration has no hand.

Bureaucracy, which has had a free hand for so many years, has to come to terms with people chosen by the people, an experiment in working together in harmonious relationship is to begin at the city level, and if successful, it will have its salutary effect on the central government which is often torn by rivalry between elected leaders and bureaucracy. The city administrations in our four large cities have got a chance to demonstrate the true shape of a participatory government. The city corporations should ideally be our present day approximation of the classical city state, with limited but well-understood responsibility.

And, finally, if the experiment is successful, the local

governments, city corporations to begin with, can correct the balance of mismanagement, mistrust and mismatch which has persisted to our utter frustration at the national level. Mutual accommodation in that House has been conspicuous by its absence. So far it has proved itself a house of discord. We have seen too much of politics of a low order, and too little of statesmanship.

The quality of leadership so far seen leaves much to be desired. Members have fought like wild cats, and have drawn blood all too often, thereby generating a sense of despondency across the nation. One does not know whether they are at all aware of this. Pat appears a new stage, albeit a smaller one, and a set of new actors, with a friendly smile on their faces and a promise to play the game according to rules. Our eyes are now fixed on this other stage, and on the new cast of players. If they can give us a good play, the nation will take heart, will wait and see if the Parliament, touched by a sense of remorse, changes its ways and takes up its real business when it is reconvened.

The Parliament should have longer sessions and shorter intervals. The nation's business demands a more active, a more productive, and a more motivated Parliament, and, above all, a Leader of the House, who actually leads. If the Parliament is to perform, it must have a performing leader.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

the upazilla system by a fiat. It has not been a popular step and, despite every thing, the system has remained a credit point for the fallen man, President Ershad. Many people I have had an occasion to talk to strongly believe that there cannot be a meaningful structure of local government of which upazilla is not a pillar. One remembers that there was a committee to advise the government on the future structure of local government. An elected government should have had the good sense to wait for the advice before pulling down a standing pillar of the structure. But since the structure is still in the making, the government has time to realise the mistake and save

Bangladesh. It means something quite different.

Yes, they have all of them recognised two enemies to be dealt with urgently, — mastans and mosquitoes. Which of the two has precedence over the other, I leave it to my readers; but I believe most of us will agree that both have proved intractable enemies of our civic life and the popularly elected Mayors have endorsed this opinion. Since the central government has failed to put the enemies down, and since the much vaunted and much hated Anti Terrorism Act has failed in curbing terrorism, the Mayors will have to put their heads together. More important than a new strategy will be a new realisation, — a political

After the NATO Strike

Alliance Turns from a Shield into a Sword

Daya Kishan Thussu writes from London

When NATO attacked four Serbian planes on February 28, it was the first-ever offensive action by the West's main military alliance. The move oversteps the organisation's original mandate, argues this Gemini News Service report, effectively turning it into the military wing of the United Nations. This spells danger for the developing world, where Western intervention could be justified on the pretext of UN peacekeeping.

NATO's big spenders



to the Security Council for peacekeeping and collective security. This has never been implemented. It looks as though NATO could be used to fill the role.

Although the air strike came under the 'Deny Flight' plan agreed with the Secretary-General and the UN force in former Yugoslavia in early 1993, it was a US 'denial' of further coordination was required prior to an engagement," said a UN spokesperson.

Washington is keen to promote a greater global role for NATO, of which it contributes 60 per cent of the budget. It is equally keen to avoid putting its forces under non-US command.

With NATO as the military wing of the UN, the US as the dominant member of the Security Council would then have even greater control over UN peacekeeping policy — despite continuing arrears in its

dues to the world body.

Not long ago the very existence of NATO was being questioned, especially in the wake of the dissolution of the Warsaw pact and the Soviet Union. Then, to the delight of the military-industrial complex, came the Gulf War, and the appearance in the Western media of "Third world threats" to Western "security."

The war showed that an effective, mobile force was required to safeguard the West's strategic and economic interests. And NATO seized on the Gulf War to care out a new role.

During NATO's Rome summit in 1991 a "new strategic concept" replace the old reliance on "forward defence" with an emphasis on preventive diplomacy. A rapid reaction force was created for "flexible and effective deployment of allied forces."

In addition, eastern European countries were clamouring to be allowed into NATO

to protect themselves against any revival of Russian expansionism.

Unwilling to antagonise Russia, the West instead palmed them off with membership of the North Atlantic Co-operation Council (NACC) — a new 38-nation security forum with the ex-communist countries — and of the unwieldy 52-nation Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

As the military arm of both the CSCE and NACC, NATO is no longer limited to the area defined by the North Atlantic Treaty for mutual defence; for instance, troops could be sent into the enclave of Nagorno Karabakh disputed by Armenia and Azerbaijan.

This right could be used in future to justify NATO's intervention in strategically vital areas such as the Middle East.

While hoping to prevent former Warsaw pact allies from joining Russia is keen to see NATO merge with the CSCE —

perhaps because it would then be so large as to be meaningless.

During their January summit, NATO heads of government proposed a "Partnership for Peace," a case-by-case, limited military cooperation with the former communist countries.

The West realised that extending NATO to the Russian frontier would be seen as a security threat by Moscow. This was especially delicate with the surge of support for nationalists in the December elections to the Russian parliament.

Anxiety over President Boris Yeltsin's future was another reason for the West's keenness in allowing Russia a role in peacekeeping in Bosnia — before the NATO strikes

against Russia's old ally, Serbia. Just days after the shooting down of Serbian planes, and to NATO's great relief, Russia decided to join 10 other countries in the "Partnership for Peace." The West also sees this as a sign that Moscow is prepared to cooperate with NATO in future peacekeeping initiatives.

Russia's "defection" to the West further undermines the interests of the developing world in the Security Council. Significantly, China was the only country that abstained from Resolution 816 authorising the use of force in Bosnia.

The biggest worry for developing countries is how NATO's more flexible "Allied Rapid Reaction Corp" will affect them. The Gulf War showed that the West will go to any length to safeguard its strategic and economic interests.

As Western investment increases in the developing world, it is possible that the UN and NATO will be used by the powerful nations to deal with new definitions of "security." The precedent for that was set by NATO's air strike in the early hours of February 28.

DAYA KISHAN THUSSU is Associate Editor of Gemini News Service.

OPINION

Parliament and Parliamentarians

S H Khondker

A parliament is a law-making body with supreme authority. The law that it enacts goes unchallenged if it does not contravene any article of the constitution. The parliament is, therefore, sovereign and, perhaps, it is for this reason that law has been defined by Austin as the "command of the sovereign". The members of a parliament should, therefore, be unmistakably aware of the high responsibility they are entrusted with.

The parliament of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has 330 members of which 300 are directly elected by the people and these 300 members elect the remaining 30 female members. No matter whether elected directly or indirectly, they are highly respectable and responsible. Quite naturally, therefore, they are expected to speak and behave at the highest law-making forum with sanity and a high degree of responsibility. They must not act or speak in a manner that may be described as "unparliamentary". Even amongst those who are placed in not-so-high a position in the society, use of bad and unsavoury language is contemptuously branded as "unparliamentary". There is absolutely no reason to think that the honourable members of our parliament who hold so high a position in the society are not aware of this responsibility and this awareness stands in the way of their being "unparliamentary" in action or utterance. Yet, since man is not infallible, there may, perhaps, be occasions, albeit very rare, on which one may, due to inadvertence or emotional disturbance, say a thing which may be deemed "unparliamentary". In such a case it would be a good and welcome gesture if the person who says so, expresses sorrow for and readily withdraws the "unparliamentary" utterance when his attention is drawn to it.

As an independent nation we are still young and the democracy that we now have in its infancy. Democracy is not merely a political doctrine; it is also a way of life in a civilised society. Since we have had very short-lived democracy in Pakistan as well as in Bangladesh and for many years we have lived under martial law and military rule in the garb of so-called democracy, for us, it may take years to have unalloyed democracy and parliamentary way of behaving. But nevertheless no time should be wasted unnecessarily to acquire the desired knowledge. In our efforts in this respect, those whom we elect to the parliament to lead and guide us may, by their character and conduct, show us the way.

Ours is a country which due partly to exploitation for long by alien forces and partly to lack of beneficial development by those who were at the helm of governmental affairs is languishing in abject poverty. The independence that has been earned over a sea of blood has, no doubt, provided us with an opportunity to make unimpeded economic and socio-cultural development. The country has, no doubt, natural resources and vast manpower. It can be developed to our expectation if only there is consensus among our leaders to play a positive role in this regard. They should avoid squabbling on trifles and recriminating. Instead, they should pool their wisdom to identify the major problems that have burdened the nation and bar development, and suggest strategies by which these can be removed and the path of development is paved. The plans and proposals of the treasury bench, if found good for the nation after meaningful exchange of views, should be accepted and similarly, good suggestions from the opposition should be welcome. There should be no criticism just for the sake of criticism. It must not be forgotten that all the members of the parliament — be they on the treasury bench or on the opposition — are our representatives. History will not spare them if they fail in their responsibility to lead the nation in the proper way because history is very unkind.

To the Editor...

BBC
Sir, Let us congratulate ourselves. We now have a pretty accurate estimate of the price of "truth" in Bangladesh. It costs a lovely sum of British Pounds 8 (Tk.500/=) per hour.

Yes, that is what the Government is going to earn from BBC for using our broadcasting equipment for disseminating in a louder and clearer voice its half-truths and disinformation — its Bosnias, its Oplow Wars and its very own Owens.

Even the Australian owner of Star TV is seriously thinking of dropping BBC World News from his broadcast. The rest of the world has seen through their games. About time we did. Doesn't such a thing merit discussion in the Jatiyo Sangshad.

Asif Ahmed
Purana Pallan, Dhaka.

BTv presents

Sir, A number of special entertaining programmes were presented to the viewers on the occasion of the holy Eid-ul-Fitr. I especially like the presentation of Eid attires to 500

tokais through the courtesy of the Annada Mela sponsor. I think a good instance has been set by the programme. It is expected that the sponsors as well as BTv will continue to practice this trend in the future. I feel that in a country where majority of the people cannot afford basic needs, costly presentations should not be given to the well-to-do people who participate in these magazine programmes. Instead, the money should be saved and spent for the welfare of the poor children and destitutes.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof, BAI, Dhaka

Card Phone woes

Sir, The introduction of the card phone at various points of Dhaka city was certainly welcome although many more phones are required, not only in Dhaka, but in other cities as well; but because the pace of progress is slow, the citizens are denied of a much needed facility. Unfortunately, the card phones are not devoid of the unscrupulous trader. On a Friday, recently, I happened to go to the card phone booth at

Banani but the booth was locked and I was informed that the T & T does not operate on Fridays. Friday is our weekly holiday and call rates are low, therefore why should the citizens be denied of making calls at a reduced rate? Will the T & T please clarify?

Of course the drama did not end here. I was given a choice by the attendant that I could use another booth nearby on payment of a premium of Tk.20.00 for an ITT call, Tk.10.00 for a NWD call and Tk.5.00 for a local call! On further enquiry, I was informed that this booth was procured privately and since T & T was closed, the premium was necessary. Will the T & T kindly clarify this as well?

The story continues. My brother on a visit from Chittagong went to the same booth the following day to make a call to Chittagong. Since he did not have a card the attendant generously helped him with a card and inserting it showed him that there were 61 units available. He talked to Chittagong for less than 3 minutes and the line was disconnected. To his utter surprise he found that all 61 units had been used up and was told that he had to pay as

per the readings of the card! Will the T & T please explain to the public the modus operandi of the system and why the public should be held hostage by a system for which they are paying?

A. Ahmed
Shantinagar, Dhaka.

Advantage of canals

Sir, I closely observed the advantage of a canal on a road side where I take a stroll quite often. The six to eight km long canal was almost dead due to blockages at many places. Last year the canal was dug and as a result a high volume of water had been naturally stored in the canal, and the local farmers took the right advantage of it. They borrowed irrigation pumps and cultivated a large area this year for the first time in dry season.

It proves that if water can be made available, we can get an extra crop in dry season. So more and more canals need to be there to get more crop from our existing cultivable land.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet.