

Dangerous Ignorance

Never before did the Union Parishad (UP) chairmen, elected representatives of the lowest tier of the local government, bring such serious allegations against the ministers and members of the parliament as they have done this time.

Then it is not the chairmen and members alone who feel slighted by the concentration of power in the hands of ministers and MPs. Government-appointed secretaries and village police have found in the protest a common cause to align themselves with the elected representatives of the local bodies.

Their anger is understandable. For long two years a bill meant to make the local bodies workable and more efficient has been left in the cold storage. The cancellation of the upazila system created a great vacuum in the administration and development works at the local level but nothing was put in place to fill the gap.

So the ambivalence in the government policy and practice is quite clear. The rhetorics for taking development to people's door-steps never really came to significantly benefit the people at the grassroots level. This time the momentum created by the introduction of upazila system has once again received a serious setback.

True, many chairmen and members have unenviable records on the development of their respective areas and the use of government fund. This does not however disqualify the system as an effective means for reaching benefits of development to the people.

Earlier, resources were wasted no doubt. Irregularities and corruption robbed much of the shine of the upazila system. Yet its merits could not be denied. The need was to bring the whole system in order through a series of reforms, checks and balance, not to dismiss it altogether.

The liaison between the lowest tier of the local bodies must be maintained through an intermediary body. The more such tiers with effective co-ordinating and monitoring role the better. Now the government policy runs counter to this concept and this is dangerous. To ensure people's participation, they must be given responsibilities as well as a sense of confidence in their own ability to manage things.

End of a Statesman of Peace

Richard Milhous Nixon is dead. That the mention of barely the name is enough for the world to know who, is a tribute to the former President of the US. No doubt the Watergate scandal contributed much to make him familiar to millions around the globe. But his was never the picture of an unredeemed conniver specially to those that care for better understanding among the nations of the world.

Nixon opened gates to the East — venturing beyond both the bamboo and the iron curtains under the US's own invisible but nevertheless dark and impenetrable curtains of pathological suspicion imposed by the Dullesian worldview. He pioneered detente and spearheaded the end of the cold war that had started world growth over three long postwar decades.

Henry Kissinger has, on receipt of the news of Nixon's death, called his former superior 'a singular president.' True enough. But so was Jefferson and Lincoln and Roosevelt. Yet each of these and Nixon were singular in their own special ways. Most of the 42 presidents of US are nonentities in world history — quite irrelevant to the saga of man's development over the two hundred years that the United States has been in existence.

As these were components of what Nixon had set out to do avowedly when he embarked upon a political career. He dreamed to see the twenty-first as the century of peace — after a particularly volatile preceding one featuring both of mankind's two world wars. He dreamt of having a role in preparing the world for that century of peace — and we can now say to him, without any reservation — very very well done indeed.

Nixon was not a man of sterling qualities. But he knew what was good for the world and persevered with inordinate patience to rake in results. And here was a right measure for the man — that he did succeed and with such effect as we are benefiting from.

Barriers to Labour Migration should Come down

SOME developing countries played their cards with quite a bit of flourish at the plenary session of the Marrakesh conference for signing of the Uruguay Round treaty on global trade. Indeed, they sent the ball neatly into the opponents' court by raising the issue of international migration of labour.

Some 125 countries participated in the Uruguay Round and 109 of them were represented in the Marrakesh ministerial conference. The conference remained in plenary session for three days from April 12 to enable each delegation to make a statement. It took the ministers four hours on April 15 to put their signatures to the Final Act of the Uruguay Round, formalizing the new global trade accord reached after more than seven years of tortuous negotiations.

The package of agreements hammered out during the final round of talks in December last year — in all some 26,000 pages — has been billed as the boldest try yet to open world markets. Tariffs would be slashed, subsidies cut and protectionism abhorred to expand global merchandise trade. New set of rules would come into play to promote trade in services. Trading rights would be better protected through the introduction of stiff measures to safeguard intellectual property.

On the surface at least, the global accord would seem to promise a more orderly system in international trade. Trade policies would be more transparent, trading environment more secure and predictable.

By imposing its own labour codes on the third world, the West is really trying to blunt the competitive edge that accrues to the poorer nations naturally from their low living standards. Developing countries thus read in the West's move to link labour conditions to trade, merely an alibi for new forms of protectionism.

strengthen support for trade liberalisation in developed countries as they would then no longer be needed to compete with low-wage products. The advocates of trade-labour linkage contend that by denying their workers decent wages and appropriate working conditions, the developing countries are indulging in 'social dumping' of their low-cost products in the markets of the West.

They argue that differences in wage levels and working conditions really reflect income disparities between countries. It's not that they have deliberately created such conditions to cheat on the West. These disparities cannot be removed just by prescribing international labour standards and linking them to trade. Rather, such arbitrary measures would stifle their growth, developing countries add, worsening the working conditions.

The rich nations profess that linking trade to labour standards would improve workers' conditions worldwide. Labourers everywhere will then be assured of a globally acceptable level of wages and working conditions. They also argue that enforcement of global labour standards would

opened up possibilities for putting up additional new agenda items for the WTO preparatory committee. Most likely, freeing movement of labour across borders would come up as one such additional new agenda item, this time to be raised by the developing countries.

At the plenary session of the Marrakesh conference, advocates for freer movement of workers internationally, from among the developing countries, argued that the relationship between immigration policies and global trade was direct and apparent. They made a strong plea for inclusion of the subject in the WTO's mandate.

It thus seems that the WTO's preparatory committee will have to address the subject of freer movement of workers across national boundaries. The issue should be of special interest to a labour-exporting country like Bangladesh, with a huge number of unskilled workers seeking employment. The services component of the global trade accord covers movement of labour. However, the specific issue of freeing the movement of unskilled workers was left out of the deal on the Uruguay Round, reached in Geneva last December. But, so was the matter of linking wages and working condition with trade.

Now that the preparatory committee for setting up the WTO would be taking up the issue of movement of labour internationally as an additional agenda item, a labour-surplus country like Bangladesh should strongly support the move for inclusion of the subject in the mandate of the new world organization. There should be globally standardized rules

governing immigration. The developing countries' move in this regard should not be seen just as a counter-point to the West's proposals for linking labour standards with trade. For a migrant-sending country such as Bangladesh, this is a substantive issue too. As it is, trade benefits accruing to the least developed countries from the global accord is of doubtful import. The benefits derived by them from special concessions hitherto extended to them by the developed countries, including the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) would face erosion. A GATT study released on the occasion of the Marrakesh conference shows that the least developed countries would gain only a 25 per cent reduction in tariffs on exports of industrial goods although the world's advanced economies would cut tariffs on their industrial imports by 38 per cent on average.

The oil-exporting developing countries have taken in hundreds of thousands of migrant unskilled workers. Most of the newly industrializing developing countries also are accepting migrant labourers. Immigrant professionals seem to have been able to carve a niche for themselves in the industrial countries in the West. Unskilled migrant workers, however, continue to face barriers in entering these countries. Nonetheless, some of them do get into the migrant-receiving industrial countries, albeit illegally, and find employment. The trend helps reckless trafficking in irregular migrant workers to flourish. Easing immigration rules globally could make movement of workers across borders freer, render the industrial nations' policies on economic migration more transparent and bring the labour-surplus least developed countries more solid gains from the global trade accord.

Can a democratic election be held in these circumstances? This is the question that will have to be answered by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Comprising 16 respected local and foreign members, the Commission's brief is to hold organise and monitor the election and then pronounce whether it has been 'substantially free and fair.'

The term 'substantially' is not defined and criteria for reaching its conclusion will include whether voting was peaceful and secret; freedom of access to polling stations; extensive voter education and a transparent procedure for counting ballots. The Commission's powers are extensive. In mid-April it fined the ANC 100,000 Rand for disrupting one of De Klerk's election tours in the Venda homeland. Its biggest sanction, however, is its ability to invalidate any poll result it deems not substantially free and fair. This could range from excluding the results of an individual polling station or region — such as KwaZulu/Natal — to nullifying the entire election.

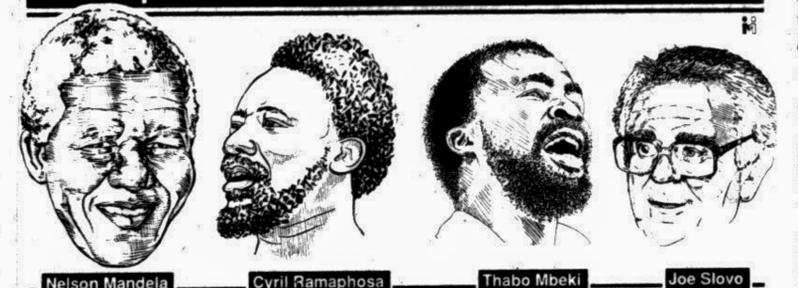
South Africa Bites the Ballot

Messy, Flawed — but Reasonably Accurate

Arlene Getz writes from Johannesburg

With murder and intimidation and voter ignorance taking their toll, says a South African professor of politics, "this is not going to be an election for democratic purists." Nevertheless, it will give a good indication of people's preferences.

The top four names on the ANC list



- Each party gets representatives in the National Assembly in proportion to its total number of votes.
The people representing those parties come from a list submitted before the poll, starting at the top of the list.
So, if a party wins one-third of total votes, it will get one-third of representatives in the Assembly, and those representatives will be the first one-third on the party's list of names.

eight million Zulus may take up arms to protest against the perceived insult to the Zulu King, others believe that even Inkatha supporters privately may welcome the opportunity to cast their ballots. One indication came in March when a survey by the independent Institute for Multiparty Democracy showed more than half of Inkatha's Natal/KwaZulu supporters planned to defy Buthelezi's election boycott by going to the polls.

The survey also showed Buthelezi had lost substantial support in his provincial stronghold, with only 21 per cent saying they were behind him. Nelson Mandela's ANC was the most popular party, scoring the projected backing of 36 per cent of the region. Any easing of the violence may, however, come too late for many of Natal's voters. The

Inkatha boycott still means that those seen at polling station have forfeited their right to secrecy by making it clear their vote is not for Buthelezi. And while a visible military presence may enable them to make their crosses, it will provide little protection when those residents have to return to their remote homes to face what many believe will be an effective death warrant. "Having a secret vote will not reassure someone who can't be a secret voter," warned the Institute for Multiparty Democracy.

An added problem is the lack of time before the poll. Buthelezi's refusal to participate has left many rural dwellers — particularly those in areas controlled by pro-Inkatha chiefs — afraid or unable to obtain the identity documents needed to vote. There also has been a se-

vere shortage of the voter education so vital for illiterate or semi-educated first-time voters. Buthelezi's control of his fiefdom has left some ignorant of even such basic matters as the election date. Voter education programmes are also under threat following the murder of a number education workers in recent months.

In one incident earlier this year, several teenage ANC supporters were massacred shortly before a planned training seminar and in another, on 12 April, eight printing employees were hacked to death as they handed out pamphlets in the township of Ndwedwe. Such difficulties are not confined to KwaZulu/Natal or the country's other persistent trouble spot on the East Rand, outside Johannesburg. Apart from various reported incidents of fake identity doc-

uments issued to people under the voting age of 18, fieldworkers report persistent difficulties in obtaining access to the 1.5 million farmworkers living on white-owned farms across the country. Although some farmers have allowed voter education seminars to take place on their property, many conservative landowners openly defy the law by refusing to allow ANC or Pan Africanist Congress canvassers on their properties. Restrictions on this vulnerable group — thousands of whom work in archaic conditions of near slavery — are likely to be aggravated on the election days, when farm workers will be totally dependent on their employer's goodwill for transport to polling stations.

Continuing political intolerance is another problem for citizens trying to keep informed of their voting options. If traditionally black parties find it hard to gain access to farms, the once-white parties are experiencing difficulties canvassing in black townships. De Klerk and even Mandela have been stoned by opponents on electioneering roadshows and some of De Klerk's township rallies have had to be cancelled because of protesters. The Liberal Democratic Party also has been chased off the mostly 'coloured' (mixed-race) University of the Western Cape and several members have been assaulted. In the Transkei, a nominally independent homeland run by ANC ally Bantu Holomisa, De Klerk's National Party only recently received Holomisa's permission to open up an office to reach the millions of voters resident in the territory.

consider morsel of relief food in the squalid, crammed, make-shift shelters. The reply to any candid query as to why they refuse to return is they would be devoured by blood thirsty, profane hyenas lying in wait. Our headache is social, political, economical, ecological and environmental. Signed treaties and MOU for them are Juke Boxes of Las Vegas.

Politics with 'dead bodies'

Sir, Whom are we fooling! First we behave arrogantly or/and in a callous manner, kill our young ones and then go for politics with 'dead bodies'. The newspaper headlines of 9 April read, 'Paran Org Secy of Lalbagh BCL, 'Paran Jt Convener of Lalbagh Thana JCD'. That was not enough. One party goes for gayabi janaza and the other removes the body by helicopter as alleged. AL leaders earlier had gone to the hospital to see the worker may the leader and the father of the other was interviewed at Sugandha by the BNP leaders, seemingly in a race for grabbing the ownership of the dead bodies.

It seems that the political parties are engaged in referring any casualty as their

Arakan — a horrible inferno?

Sir, The repatriation of Rohingya refugees is now very slow due to the persecution of the Rohingyas in Arakan by the Nasaka Forces. Their horrible atrocities make the refugees fearful to go back to their beloved home. They see Arakan as a horrible inferno and prefer to be thrown into the Bay of Bengal than to be there. Brute Nasaka forces have been empowered by the SLORC to carry out anything for cleansing the Rohingyas from Arakan. On 24 March, 1994 the Nasaka abducted eight fishermen from the Naf river. On finding that they were inmates of the Rohingya refugees camps, the Nasaka fired them after weeklong torture of all kinds including plucking of their teeth. On 2 March, two youngmen from Nafitardil of

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Maungdaw township were taken away by Nasaka, beaten severely and asked to climb a tree and were shot. Another two are floating in the Naf river. That is within a week the brute Nasaka killed 12 Muslims while there are three UNHCR members staying at Maungdaw. Many religious scholars are subjected to severe punishment for their disapproval of Nasaka's activities against Islam. Many Ulemas in Arakan were arrested, tortured and jailed by the Nasaka. Severe kind of punishments are applied to the Rohingya women too. They have to lose their dear hairs for their refusal to abandon Islamic heritage. Rohingya girls have been collected in army barracks under the pretext of vocational training. Muslims in Arakan are not allowed to marry freely. They have to take prior per-

A truth on Rohingyas

Sir, Many heard or read about Hitler's Dachau, Auschwitz, Ravenscraft death camps and SS and Gestapo but few know of Burma's secret police, SLORC, death camp Frangfru, Nasaka death camp in Arakan where the returned refugees are tortured, and shot — with ditches to bury them dug by themselves before death. It's a failure of AL, US, UNHCR. An Asian giant equips and ditto its atrocity. It's wrong to think that refugees

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