

NAM's New Role

The Non-aligned Movement has evidently been placed in a vastly changed context today. But contrary to the skin-deep perception of things, this has hardly affected its *raison d'être*. The fiercely adversarial *realpolitik* between two blocs, each bent upon proving the merit of its system to the rest of the world, may have been left behind marking an end of the cold war era, as we knew it. Yet, for all practical purposes, we are far from establishing the *entente* we would have liked to see as the trend-setter for good things to come. Many tend to view the world being in a terribly mercurial state of flux. Threats of unwieldy multipolarity and emerging epicentres of power loom large replacing what used to be the image of balance of power or 'balance of terror' in the old order. The present US administration may have rushed to some trouble-spots but, by and large, it has been distraught with the high cost involved in playing the global policeman, a role that does not appeal to the tax-payer as much it had when international communism had to be checkmated.

On a general plane, the dangers being posed to world peace by the mastery over and the actual possession of the nuclear weapons technology and also by the small arms-based state and group terrorism are too real to be ignored anymore.

One would thus be too naive to suggest that the Non-aligned Movement has lost its relevance in the present-day world. The role of a neutraliser in world affairs, as was envisioned by the original architects of NAM in 1961, does seem warranted today. In fact, it faces its first crucial test of vindication at the moment. So, the NAM Foreign Minister's Conference that has got underway in Cairo, as the most significant non-aligned gathering, since the 1992 NAM Summit in Jakarta, can proceed to do its preparatory work for the next summit with a lot of self-esteem, sure-footed in the realisation of NAM's undiminished utility. It is a giant 109-member organisation now, with South Africa's historic entry, after her non-racial elections and the heralding of a government of reconciliation in due and exemplary deference to active pluralism in that society.

While South Africa's admission to NAM will enrich the organisation with the Mandela factor of superb statesmanship, there is this nostalgia of Tito at the other pole, coming from a bad name Serbia has given to former Yugoslavia by its excesses.

In the big world of NAM itself, the problems of trampling the sovereignty of majority ethnic groups, repudiation of human rights and fratricidal wars exacerbate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yemen and Rwanda in that order. The contradictions within the NAM have to be resolved first in the light of *Panch shila*, the five noble precepts that were originally adopted as the guiding principles for the conduct of inter-state or international relations. NAM has to set its own house in order particularly where the infractions are debilitating for the organisation to play its due role. After this modicum of internal success, which should not be difficult to achieve, given the potential wisdom in the NAM, the movement can go full steam ahead to make its contributions to the creation of a world order along democratic and economically equitable lines. The NAM leaders are obviously well-informed of the growing primacy of economy issues in the international affairs today almost reminding one of the days of maritime trade rivalries, in a manner of speaking.

Thus under active consideration of NAM should be both the new types of economic cooperation between the North and the South as envisaged by the Uruguay Round of GATT as well as the possible ways and means to expand South-South cooperation.

We Need More Fruits

Large-scale destruction of fruit-bearing trees in the 12 thanas of greater Kushtia District has been reported. A report carried in our national page is conclusive about the various ill effects of such depletion of trees. Not that fruit-bearing trees have been specially targeted for felling. The case may very well be that the villagers have already done away with most saleable trees. Now they are just turning to the fruit trees as a last resort. One may even say without running the risk of being incorrect, that Kushtia alone is not facing this problem. All fruit-producing belts of the country have more or less been absorbing the assaults on such trees.

For years the impacts have been felt — and felt rather acutely — by the fruit-consuming populace of the country. But amidst the fanfare of a well-orchestrated campaign for producing food — cereal (rice) to be precise — other produces have been relegated to the back stage. This however is in total contradiction with the people's newly acquired awareness of the value of fruits. Today we perhaps spend more on imported fruits than the total value of our home grown varieties. The problem here is not much different from the one we have invited by opting for imported milk powder to the neglect of our indigenous milk production.

With the unrestrained swelling of our population, the shortage of fruit supply is becoming acuter. But earlier, people here had a substantial share of fruits in their daily food intake. This they did without not so much knowing about the nutrient value of fruits. But in the changing situation without a comprehensive planning to cater to the need for food of the entire population, a balanced diet for them will continue to remain elusive as ever. The same is true of vegetables and other agricultural produces including pulse and oil seeds. True, most fruit trees in our country yield a crop once a year and overproduction of some varieties will prove uneconomic. That is why planning is even more essential.

At the same time, the whole concept has to be developed in terms of supporting the allied agro-industrial sector. Today, we are in the awkward position of growing some vegetables and fruits in some areas much in excess of what we can handle by way of their timely transportation. But this problem could be solved if fruit processing factories or industries were set up in the areas concerned. Perishable items, fruits in particular, with proven or prospective economic benefits — foreign exchange included — can thus be saved from the yearly price slump. Last but not the least, our tree plantation campaign suffers from a weakness in planning; in that stress on fruit-bearing ones is lacking. Let it be a point that certain percentage of trees planted across the country each year will be fruit trees.

The Daily Star Public Debate: What do Our Readers Think?

What is the Real Issue, Caretaker Government or Fair Elections?

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

A lot has so far been said for and against holding elections under the auspices of a caretaker government. As a citizen who is politically conscious and yet totally neutral in terms of party politics, I felt obliged to respond to The Daily Star's invitation to express my own views on such an important issue. When the last general election took place under the caretaker government the issue of holding the subsequent general elections under similar caretaker government was not before the people of Bangladesh. However, this does not mean that this can not be raised by any party at a later stage depending on the subsequent developments in the country's political situation.

The present demand for caretaker government has come up because of serious election irregularities repeatedly focused by the concerned political parties. (Although, as usual, these allegations were denied by the party in power).

As it seems, the most serious concern is whether free and fair election(s) can be held under the party in power. Recent happenings have raised doubts but is caretaker government the answer? If the people can vote a party to power for 5 years and trust it with the nation's fate for that long a period, it should also trust it with the subsequent election process. Today one party is in power, next time it may be another. Should the people take it for granted that

no party in power should be trusted with the task of holding any general elections? Does such a stance speak well of the nation, or for that matter, of the integrity of the political parties?

The idea of a caretaker government may create new complications with regard to the form of government. Will caretaker government have parliamentary form with someone designated as Acting Prime Minister or something of a presidential system? Could a prime minister be justified without the parliament and the party in power? How will the president stay in power when everyone of the government goes to make room for caretaker government? Keeping president in power would mean to compromise on the form of government. These issues are to be seriously looked into before taking a decision on this issue. The nation should not be asked to experience something which may have adverse fall-out effect on hard-earned democracy.

However, caretaker government can be introduced in the country's constitution if all parties agree, but will this ensure free and fair election? It is only the people who can ensure free and fair election provided they are left to themselves to make their judgments and decisions. It would not be wrong to say that the people of Bangladesh know how to vote and who to vote for. The country witnessed this in the last general election

where people voted freely and fairly and practically all, including political parties and bureaucracy, remained within their limits. The people did so not for the fear of the caretaker government which was in charge, but because of the spirit of another liberation on Ershad's departure. Then the question is if the general election could be held peacefully and in an acceptable manner why Mirpur and Magura elections could not be held in a similar way? Why such failures? The nation has the right to know this as it had to suffer a lot due to hartals on Magura election mess-up.

There is, however, no doubt that some people or groups of people cannot be influenced by the political parties in the matter of casting their votes. Past experiences also show that some serious irregularities took place after the votes were cast and hence the opposition's demand for a caretaker government. An answer to all these could be found in having a very strong, independent and high-powered Election Authority, one may speak of an "Election Government" within the government to take full charge of country's election administration. It must be provided with the full power and independence to run country's election administration without any party and government interferences whatsoever. Indeed, the demand raised by the opposition for a caretaker government based on past election irregularities must lead to, *inter alia*, the estab-

lishment of an appropriate independent Election Authority in the country that can hold free and fair election which is absolutely essential for consolidation of democracy in the country.

Though it is up to the opposition to decide on the course of their actions on the issue, one may take the liberty to suggest that an independent Election Authority as suggested above may serve the purpose quite well. The opposition has forcefully projected the issue of fraud and irregularity and the people are expected to remain alert during the subsequent elections. This could be an interim solution with the understanding among political parties that despite such Election Authority if free and fair election cannot be held (which seems unlikely), caretaker government will have to be introduced despite its drawbacks and other political ramifications.

The Election Authority may take the following form: Chief Election Commissioner must be a person of very high integrity with strong administrative capability. He must be a person acceptable to both government and opposition parties. The Chief Election Commissioner will in turn choose other Election Commissioners who will be totally independent and again should be acceptable to both the groups. Similar exercise was done while establishing the last caretaker government and it has to be done along the same

line. As election is the prime concern, let such Election Commission Authority indeed be the "caretaker election government" for holding the coming elections. It will run elections strictly within the norms, rules and regulations set by the present parliament.

The Commission may have its offices in all districts and other administrative units in the country. One or two officers, say ADC's in each district and necessary staff, will be placed under the Election Authority for dealing with all law and order issues relating to the election and those ADC(s) will take orders from Election Authority and not from DCs. Similar arrangements will have to be made in other lower administrative units of the country. Separate arrangements will also have to be made in placing police and other security forces under the Election Authority for a specific period and they will take orders only from the Election Authority. No officer connected with the election will be transferred during that period and in case of emergency, transfers may be done with the written approval of the Election Authority. Ministers should not use government transports and other government facilities for election campaigning. In the three months' preceding the election, ministers may not visit their constituencies on official duty. They may do so only for campaigning. In case of an emergency, secretaries and other officers may perform the

official work. Candidates who violate election rules and procedures will be immediately barred from contesting the election. Fortnightly or at least monthly reports of candidates' election expenditures will have to be submitted to the Election Commission. Anyone exceeding fund limit will be declared disqualified. All election campaigns must be totally stopped say a week before the polling. Moreover, all election banners, festoons, etc. must be removed before that. Adequate electronic media coverage must be made available to the opposition; indeed, election campaign coverage in TV and radio should be equitably distributed among parties. There must be more such restrictions and policies to ensure free and fair election.

Once again, the country will be highly benefited by the present demand of the opposition parties for a caretaker government if this leads to the establishment of an election mechanism that will ensure free and fair election for all the time to come. Let all parties sit together and discuss this issue. Let the Daily Star which has taken the lead in the matter organize Round Table conference to help crystallize ideas that will lead to an amicable solution. Let treasury bench and opposition work together and institutionalise and ensure democracy for which the country has sacrificed so much.

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Caretaker Government is Necessary, but Not Sufficient

by Farook Rasheed Chowdhury

It was interesting to read the interviews of the General Secretary of Awami League and Secretary-general of Bangladesh Nationalist Party published in your esteemed paper recently. The Daily Star deserves praise for launching a public discussion on the important topic of electoral fairness under neutral caretaker government currently agitating the minds of the politically-conscious citizens of the country.

Mr Zillur Rahman has expressed himself fairly eloquently in favour of the demand for holding the next general elections of the country under neutral caretaker governments. His party is serving the greater interest of the country by coming round to supporting this demand originally initiated by Jamaat and others.

Mr Rahman was justified to condemn the excesses and wrongdoings experienced in the past general elections and referenda held under BNP and JP administrations, but conveniently ignored similar ex-

cesses and wrongdoings experienced in the one and only post-liberation general election held under the administration of his own party. If the top party leadership is to be made responsible, and I personally think that it should be, for the stupidity and misguided actions of the lower-ranking party functionaries and local election managers, then one cannot condone the top leadership of the party of Mr Rahman as well.

The top leaders of JP have admitted many of their mistakes and sought people's condonation of the same. Similar admissions from the top leadership of AL and BNP will contribute to the development of a healthy political atmosphere in the country.

All knowledgeable persons agree with Barrister Abdus Salam Talukdar that no neutral caretaker government, on its own, can guarantee electoral fairness in the country but most people accept the fact that the general election of 1991 held under the caretaker Government of Justice Sha-

habuddin Ahmed, although not totally free from any unfairness and blemish, was a great deal fairer than the general elections held under the administrations of AL, BNP and JP. The last general election held in Pakistan, under the caretaker Government headed by the retired international banker-bureaucrat Moyeen Qureshi, has also earned the praise of informed circles within and outside the South Asian sub-continent.

In the Bangladesh context, the success of any neutral caretaker government or independent election commission to ensure electoral fairness will depend upon the co-operation of the politically conscious citizens of the country as well as the major political parties and their electoral managers in addition to the support and assistance of the civil administration, law enforcing authorities and the armed forces.

The recently concluded Dapunia model is worth examining in depth to identify practical measures that can be

adopted to enhance electoral fairness. The cost of the proposed voters' identity cards will be worth incurring if simultaneous additional measures, such as, stricter control over local mastans and misguided party zealots, adequate security of polling stations and effective monitoring of electoral expenses and activities are ensured.

Political parties still have divergent views about the composition, functions and powers of the proposed neutral caretaker government.

The emerging consensus in favour of leaving the office of the President of the country undisturbed at the time of general parliamentary elections can be regarded as healthy although there may be misgivings about any incumbent.

Selection of the holder of any particular office like that of the Speaker of the Parliament or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to head the neutral caretaker government is debatable and may not be in the best interest of either the

country or the office or officeholder concerned. Consideration may be given to new alternative ideas like nomination of the executive head of the neutral caretaker government and his cabinet colleagues from among eminent non-partisan citizens of the country by the President subject to confirmation by three-fourth majority of the retiring Parliament.

The neutral caretaker government, in my opinion, must have full authority to exercise all executive powers of an elected government, with a few carefully-selected exceptions, for the limited non-extendible duration of its tenure because of the dangers inherent in an administrative limbo even for a limited period in a rapidly changing world and time.

Barrister Talukdar's attempt to bring in the question of election of local bodies is irrelevant to the present debate because the opposition has not put forward any demand for holding these elections under the neutral caretaker government which is proposed with

general parliamentary elections overwhelmingly under contemplation. If, however, some local body election is found desirable to be held along with the general parliamentary election to enhance the scope of electoral fairness or to save time or money, the proposed neutral caretaker government may very well take care of the same as well.

The next Parliament, in all likelihood, will have to play a crucial role in the consolidation of democratic institutions in the country and may have to deal with major constitutional, political, economic and administrative issues of far-reaching consequences for the future of the country and its citizens. All leaders, intellectuals and politically-conscious citizens of the country should come forward, with as much sincerity as they can, to find the right answers to the various questions emerging in the great debate on electoral fairness under neutral caretaker governments.

(The author is a Star reader who sent us this piece)

DATELINE TOKYO

Debate over Constitution

Monzurul Huq writes from Tokyo

Defence Force. At the centre of the debate was the question whether the creation of Self Defence Force was open violation of the constitutional principle or not.

With the passage of time, Japan's Self Defence Force has become an accepted factor to most of the people and few questioned the legitimacy of this *de-facto* armed forces. Taking the opportunity of this indifferent attitude of the general public, every subsequent government in Japan kept on increasing the defence budget, which in 1993 surpassed the amount of 4.5 trillion yen.

Even so, it is not the massive amount of money spent for defence purpose that triggered the resurfacing of the old debate concerning article 9 of the constitution. But it was precisely the US led attack against Iraq and Japan's position on that particular issue played the vital role to restart the old debate both in the media and among the politicians.

Although Japan was an active supporter of US led military retaliation against Iraq, Tokyo could not send its military personnel to the region due to the constitutional bindings.

After the war was over in the Gulf, the government of Japan, however, tried to fulfil her commitment towards the allied forces by sending a mine sweeper to the region and contributing financially, which so far amounted to the colossal sum of 13 billion US dollar. At the same time, those politicians, who have a long cherished desire to see Japan as a military power parallel to her economic might, openly started calling for a revision of article 9 of the constitution.

They argue that article 9 is creating obstacle in fulfilling Japan's necessary obligations towards United Nations peace-keeping operations in different regions of the world. Among the most enthusiastic patrons of this view are the leaders of the largest group of Japan's

present coalition government, Shinseito. Shinseito leader Ichiro Ozawa does not hide his intention to make Japan a "respectable" partner in conflict resolution activities of the world body. Since the present minority government is absolutely dominated by Shinseito, both in policy questions and in terms of holding the key government positions, Ozawa's view has recently been reflected in the opinion of a number of cabinet ministers, who are now openly calling for a revision of constitutional arrangements to allow Japan play her due international role.

Obviously, not everyone here share this view of turning Japan once again to a military power capable of playing certain role in other parts of the world. Those who strongly oppose such position consider article 9 of the constitution as the guarantor of Japan's peace initiatives. In various meetings and symposiums organized to mark this year's Constitution Day, they did not hesitate to express their deep suspicion towards the intention of the present government. Speaking at a symposium organized by the National Federation for Protection of the Constitution, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Japan, Tomiichi Murayama denounced the coalition government's move to revise the constitution and warned that any such move itself will be regarded unconstitutional. In some other meetings, speakers even questioned the peace-keeping efforts under the initiative of the United Nations, which they termed 'military action taken under the name of protecting human rights to settle international conflicts'. They think Japan should contribute to the international community at a different level and not by giving military assistance.

Let us have a close look at article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, which is creating so much controversy both in Japan and outside. The full text of the article says:

"Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce

war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

"In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph,

land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

The article composed of only three sentences rightfully reflected the aspiration of Japanese people, who have seen the total destruction of their country during the period of World War II. At the same time, it also beautifully illustrates the dream of many millions of people outside Japan. If the message of the article was true in 1947, it should be considered equally true now in 1994, when we are facing the reality of new outbreak of conflicts in different regions, is denouncing war already being considered an outdated idea? If so, we are bound to experience soon much more devastation, much more destruction than in 1945. It should, therefore, be considered duty of Japan's Asian neighbours, not only to convince those in Japan, who intend to drop the peace clause from the constitution, about the benefits of such an article, but at the same time to create public opinion within their own countries so that such a clause can also be incorporated in their respective constitutions. Only then we can create a situation where we would be able to give peace a real chance.

To the Editor

Water sharing

Sir, For want of irrigation facilities, fields in the northern region of Bangladesh have almost dried up and, as a result, the standing crops in this area face the risk of being spoiled. Almost all the rivers of northern Bangladesh are without the minimum water to facilitate irrigation. It is alleged that Farakka barrage in India is responsible for such a situation in the northern parts of our country. Also true is our government's failure in finding out an immediate solution to this acute problem.

We once again urge our gov-

ernment to raise this vital water issue in various international fora, including the UNO to find out a solution that would be acceptable to both India and Bangladesh and would finally bring an end to this long standing dispute over water-sharing.

Therefore, it is high time that the top most officials of the respective nations sit together in all earnestness to settle their disputes over the issue and help the suffering millions in the drought infested areas of our country.

M A Mobin Majumder
Tejgaon, Dhaka

Victims and criminals

Sir, We have observed rather with dismay that most newspapers publish news of rape, arson, loot and torture on women etc. with photographs of the victims. They never seem to find and publish the photographs, bio-data and other particulars of the culprits. It looks as though they are doing just the reverse of what they should.

In order to bring the culprits, the doers of the wrong to book, there must be efforts,

by all means, to find out their whereabouts, particulars, photographs etc. This would not only deter crime but also make possible the identification of the criminals and their social condemnation. On the other hand, printing the particulars/photographs of the victims of rape, acid throwing, tortures etc. would only add fuel to the fire and humiliate and belittle them in still prejudicial public eye. We hope the journalists would kindly give a new thought to the problem.

F Ahmed
Dhaka