

Agenda before BMA

The Bangladesh Medical Association goes to polls to elect a 32-member executive body tomorrow with a president only day after tomorrow. Feverish campaigning capping a years-long volatile role played by the BMA for professional gains — often sliding into strikes — has made the elections a matter of public interest rather than an in-house adjustment of the members of a respected and perhaps esoteric calling.

A doctor may or may not have lived up to his Hippocratic Oath, and served his or her fellow beings accordingly — the society comes gradually to take the community of medical practitioners on individual performances. BMA which symbolises that profession and renders to it a sense of community as well has so far done remarkably little to influence the performance of individual practitioners to the good of the people and improve the standing of the calling in the latter's eye, both in technical-scientific terms and in ethical service terms.

Now that BMA has actively brought themselves into national focus, people would be looking up to them for having a positive part in forging a nationally better-deal-to-patients role. BMA can no more keep itself confined to promoting only the interests of its members — the way trade unions do or the Free Masons did. The interest of the nation and of the members of the medical community coalesce only on that point of professionalism — which, unfortunately has not been the high point either of individual performances or of the performance of the community as a whole. BMA as such is thrust with an advance greatness of succeeding to usher in a new era of medical attention, personalised as a religion and yet efficient as a mechanical behemoth. So much remains for the BMA to throw their weight in and materialise a better medicare situation — the hospital services, rural health care, public hygiene, the specialist services. Service and technical-proficiency-wise Dhaka should be at par with at least, let us say, Bangkok within two BMA terms — that is a programme worth courting by the new leadership.

The list of expectations is tall, at its top is the supremely important one: the December 1 elections must be peaceful, pass it must without incidents of any kind and be followed by a dedicated and inspired leadership bent on transforming the profession into one of stupendous social relevance.

Fire at Secretariat

The Bangladesh Secretariat appears to have become specially vulnerable to fire, which it should never be. This time the cause of the fire, according to a fire service source, is a burning cigarette butt. Whether it was carelessly thrown away or deliberately flung to put to torch the room or rooms is however not known. In a similar incident this year fire gutted valuable papers and even files. This time the blaze fortunately could be brought under control before it consumed any important documents. At least the reports received so far said as much.

Accidental fire is a phenomenon against which no mechanism can ensure a failsafe protection. But the frequency of breaking out of fires is rather unusual and cannot be explained away in terms of accident. We have never been told that the prime administrative building of the country is overly under stress in terms of physical structure and utility services. Such establishments are expected to be least accident-prone. The building that is the seating place of the central administrative set-up of the government cannot afford to be so vulnerable to such avoidable hazards.

This time the fire could not cause any serious damage because of some unidentified persons' timely action. But it surely could be worse if the fire broke out at an odd time or nobody took notice of it. Considering the importance of the buildings of the secretariat complex, it is necessary to put in place a round-the-clock vigilance. At a time when there are sophisticated devices to warn in advance or set off the alarm bell at the time of any power mishap or other mechanical failure, the secretariat should not be left unguarded.

Since the incidents of fire at the secretariat are on the rise, there is perhaps no other alternative but to provide it with the maximum security against both accidental and deliberate damages. Advance technology has got answers to much of the problem.

Smoke-free Cigarette

When smoking is falling out of favour almost the world over, an American cigarette manufacturer is all set to appear with a bang or gimmick. Smokeless, odour-less and ashless, the cigarette looks to be the one for tomorrow. There is every likelihood that smoking is entering into a new phase of its history. Because it does concern not only a noticeable change in the habit of smokers but also the marketing empires of the big cigarette companies.

We stop short of calling it a smoking revolution. Not because it is less innovative but because we still do not know if the new variety will be free of the various harmful effects with the elimination of smoke, odour and stain. Appropriately called "Eclipse," the prototype has done away with 90 per cent of smoke. Further research and experiment may completely remove the smoke. In that case can cigarette puffing qualify to be smoking? Perhaps a new term will have to be introduced for the purpose. Singeing may be a fitting replacement.

Yet the development does a great favour to the non-smokers. Those who have decided to damage their lungs by way of smoking, can do so on their own volition. Let them go to the other world sooner than they were expected to otherwise. But why make the non-smokers a party to the suicidal pact through indirect smoking? As new scientific revelations are made about the more harmful consequences of such involuntary smoking, non-smokers really have a strong case against cigarette addicts. The poisoning takes place so subtly that non-smokers are most of the time reluctant victims of the nicotine release.

It is exactly at this point that the new type of cigarette brings a hope for the non-smokers. The cigarette just heats up, not burns, and is not going to affect anyone sitting next to a smoker. In that case no-smoking zone may not be needed, nor even prohibition of this will have to be declared anywhere. A great relief indeed for it will save on so many accounts. Only let it be dear for its addicts. They alone should pay the price.

ONE must begin by clarifying the concept of a free and fair election. Rather than developing an abstract definition, the easiest approach is to concentrate on some of the most important characterisations of an election which would make it universally acceptable as free and fair. In my view, there are seven such characteristics, as listed below:

1. All eligible citizens are accurately enlisted as voters, ie there is no omission or duplication in the voters' list:

This will, on the one hand, fulfil, a necessary condition for exercising the fundamental human right of universal suffrage, and on the other, reduce the opportunity of false voting. The magnitude of the problem of an inaccurate voters' list is often not recognised in Bangladesh. According to the survey mentioned earlier, in 1991 about 4 per cent eligible voters (predominantly rural) remained unlisted while 7 per cent on the list were actually not eligible. Together, inaccuracy was of the order of at least 11 per cent. In metropolitan urban centres this percentage was likely to be much higher because of high mobility among urban people. If there were age-specific biases in voting, widely believed to be prevalent in Bangladesh, some results could have been altered had all eligible voters been enlisted. Particularly if the gap between the elected and second highest vote-getting candidates were less than the number of unlisted voters.

2. All voters are well informed about electoral procedures (including how to fill in a ballot paper correctly) as well as candidates and parties in terms of their past records and future promises:

Voters are generally poorly informed about their rights as voters, the electoral procedures and, most of all, about the background of candidates and their parties. In 1991 about 3 per cent of the votes cast were scrapped for wrong entry according to knowledgeable sources. The number of persons choosing a candidate on the basis of primordial sentiments (characteristic of political illiteracy), in 1991 MARC survey, was about 15 percent. There must have been many

A Caretaker Government is Neither Necessary Nor Sufficient for a Free and Fair Election

by Monowar Hossain

A free and fair election is a necessary step towards the establishment of a democratic process in a country. However, a caretaker government, as proposed by the opposition political parties in Bangladesh, seems neither necessary nor sufficient in ensuring a free and fair election. Given below is a simple proof of this hypothesis, based on logic and some empirical evidence derived from a 1991 study by Multidisciplinary Action Research Centre (MARC) on Voter Behaviour, covering about 16 thousand voters in 16 Thanas.

more uninformed voters. For instance, about half the candidates had done no visible development work in the area, about 40 per cent being non-residents in the constituency.

3. All voters have easy access to polling stations with alternative arrangements for voters who are ill, disabled or temporarily away:

During the 1991 election 8 percent voters could not cast their vote on account of sickness or absence from the constituency, while another 3 per cent did not go to cast their vote as the centre was too far. Together, it was nearly fifteen per cent voters who were deprived of their voting right for reasons which can easily be redressed through appropriate procedural measures backed up by law.

4. No voter is physically intimidated or financially coerced in choosing a candidate:

This is the worst form of electoral manipulation in which political parties believing in strong arm tactics engage. The form of intimidation and coercion are many and may range from simple verbal threats to demonstration killings. Even in 1991 over 3 per cent voters did not go out to cast their vote out of fear of physical violence. There may have been many more who went to vote under duress. And add to it those who were bought off financially. Altogether it would not be unrealistic to assume that at least 10, and possibly 20 per cent of the votes were manipulated through fear and money. It was observed that 24 of the 58 candidates in the survey area had far exceeded the budgetary limit set by the Election Commission.

5. All candidates/parties have equitable access to state owned publicity media and/or

other resources: This is one of the two main bones of contention which led to the clamour for a caretaker government. It has been seen in the past, particularly under autocratic regimes, that the party in power uses state resources, specially the radio and the TV, excessively to further its own election campaigns. It is debatable if such gross misuse, when it happens, has any positive impact on the voters. Nevertheless, such acts are highly unfair and should be enforceable by law. Unfortunately, the legal provisions are rather inadequate in this regard.

This is an area in which significant neutrality was achieved during the 1991 Election.

6. Polling is orderly and vote counting is done fairly, witnessed by the representatives of the contending candidates/parties:

In spite of the 1991 Parliamentary Election being regarded as one of the most free and fair elections held in this country, there were dissident voices. Leaving aside the allegation of subtle rigging by the defeated Opposition Leader, there were around 7 per cent voters, who did not feel confident in the electoral process and therefore, stayed away; and after the election, at least in five of 16 constituencies a significant proportion of voters decided not to testify to the fairness of the election.

7. All reported cases of unfairness or other anomalies from responsible quarters (eg candidates/parties, election monitors) are promptly and judiciously responded to by the Election Commission and if needed re-election held under strict supervision in polling centres where alleged anomalies

are proved to be true: This is the second bone of contention. It is generally believed that the legal framework does not give enough authority to the Election Commission and makes it vulnerable to the manipulations of a party in power. The experience however is that weaknesses in the legal framework can be exploited by any strong party, including those in opposition. This was the experience in Magura, the much publicised case of Election Commission failure, where one opposition party appeared not to be interested in allowing the Commission to operate democratically to the extent allowed within the existing law.

Proof of the Hypothesis

Let us now examine if for any of the seven points mentioned above, a caretaker government (CG) is either necessary or sufficient. It should be remembered that if a CG is necessary for any of the points then a CG is necessary for a free and fair election. On the other hand, if a CG is sufficient for all the points, then only it is sufficient for free and fair election. Therefore, the sufficiency condition will not be examined any further after it is proved unnecessary for any one or two points.

1. For an accurate voter list, what is necessary is to make it compulsory under law and make resources available to institute a full proof voters' (necessarily computerised and on-line) enlistment system with skilled manpower under adequate professional supervision, both available in the country. Since the last CG did not give any thought to it, while the Election Commission under the present government

has already initiated action on this, it is evident that a CG is neither necessary nor sufficient for an accurate voters' enlistment.

2. This entails a vigorous educational campaign for the voters which can be carried out by any organisation, political parties and private research bodies inclusive. The best bet is to have it covered by law under a broad constitutional provision on free flow of information on issues of national importance as a fundamental human right and deliberate distortion of information as a punishable crime. A CG is not necessary either to initiate such action nor a guarantee that it will be accomplished effectively and imaginatively. What would guarantee it is a consensus among political parties to follow a code of conduct designed to achieve national dignity and political maturity.

3. To achieve this, one needs changes in the electoral procedures and more polling stations. For neither is a CG necessary (and is certainly not sufficient).

4. Physical intimidation and financial coercion have to be sanctioned against in law in terms of a Political Code of Conduct. For this a CG is not necessary and may even be completely ineffectual. Elected representatives will have greater moral authority in bringing about the necessary changes in law.

5. 6 and 7: Here are the main bones of contention, which led to the clamour for a free and fair election. It has been seen in the past, particularly under autocratic regimes, that the party in power tend to use state resources, particularly the radio and the TV, ex-

cessively to further their own election campaigns.

This is an area in which significant neutrality was achieved during the 1991 election. This was primarily for two reasons. First, none of the contending political parties, particularly the two strongest ones at the time, were keen on exerting any undue pressure on the system for a variety of reasons, namely euphoria at bringing down an autocratic regime, keenness on maintaining a clean image, confidence about election victory, etc. In short, an unwritten code of conduct was followed by the political parties, even in the absence of a legal provision for the same. Secondly, there was a high level of alertness among the citizens with many election observers from home and abroad following the entire electoral process from the time it was started, culminating with literally thousands of them roaming around the polling stations of the country on the election day. It was virtually impossible to manipulate the electoral process under such intensive and extensive limelight without being identified.

Both the conditions following a code of conduct and allowing transparency of the procedures to the satisfaction of partisan or non-partisan observers, whether neutral or otherwise, can be achieved without a CG. (The point needs to be made very firmly that non-partisanship does not mean neutrality.)

It is evident that for none of the three points related to the functioning of a strong Election Commission deriving its authority from laws with reforms where necessary, is a Caretaker Government either necessary or sufficient.

Conclusion

The arguments above prove, the hypothesis, a caretaker government does not help to achieve a free and fair election. Patriotic citizens truly seeking a democratic political order in this country should give the matter some serious thought.

The writer is Managing Director, Multidisciplinary Action Research Centre (MARC) and former Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

SINGAPORE and Taipei are gearing up to take over from Hong Kong as a regional financial centre and international gateway to China after Hong Kong reverts to China in 1997, but it Shanghai that may finally steal the limelight.

Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew surprised some Asian financial analysts recently when he said Singapore was liberalising some of its policies to attract more investment banks and international fund managers.

"Several financial centres in the region are emerging to compete in financial services. We have to change and liberalise to stay ahead," Lee said, sending alarm bells ringing loudly in Hong Kong. Rising property prices, high inflation and a labour shortage, coupled with the realisation that Hong Kong is unlikely to remain the free-wheeling financial centre it is now has meant serious contenders are emerging to take on some of the international business that has preferred Hong Kong for decades.

Hong Kong has left that in the constant rivalry with Singapore it has been winning out by offering a more investment-friendly environment, but the tide may well be turning.

Taipei has also made noises that it would like to inherit some of Hong Kong's international and China-related business, political tensions with the Mainland notwithstanding.

But banking analysts in Hong Kong note that Taiwan is not considered a serious contender, with action falling far short of words. "Taipei has been left behind in the race to reform financial systems to take on more international business," says one Hong Kong-

After Hong Kong, Who?

Asian cities vie to take the place of Hong Kong as the region's financial centre. Yojana Sharma of Inter Press Service reports from Hong Kong

based banker. Not only Singapore, but Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and even Tokyo are gearing up to be more attractive to foreign financial investors, not merely in the hope of attracting business from Hong Kong in the run-up to 1997 but because the immense growth of the region needs financial services to match, say analysts here.

As they upgrade to meet their own regional needs they pose more of a threat Hong Kong. But what all of them lack is proximity to China, seen as the great engine of growth in the Asia.

Hong Kong has always been smug in the knowledge that for proximity and infrastructure links with China and the rest of the world no one can beat it as a conduit for China trade.

So, far. But even Hong Kong is now becoming more nervous about the emerging colossus that is the newly-modernising Shanghai with its Pudong New Zone under construction.

Daimler-Benz, Germany's largest car maker caused a considerable stir recently when it announced it would list on the Shanghai stockmarket rather than Hong Kong.

"If you want to go for China you have two alternatives, Hong Kong or Shanghai. These are two centres of competition," said Daimler Benz's chief

financial officer Gerhard Liener.

Despite restrictions, Shanghai is the fastest growing banking centre in the region attracting myriads of banks in an officially sanctioned bid to turn the city into a major financial centre. US companies complain about infrastructure bottlenecks in Shanghai. Unlike Hong Kong which sets aside 20 per cent of urban land for roads, Shanghai allocates only five percent. The city is also short of power, with only 85 per cent of demand being met, although economic zones and foreign enterprises, residential and office complexes are given priority.

Yet Japanese companies are flocking to the city making up almost 12 per cent of total foreign investment in Shanghai.

More telling, many Japanese companies that had originally set up retail and manufacturing outlets in Beijing are moving to Shanghai, which is considered to have a much larger consumer market and better education and managerial ability than Beijing.

Shanghai authorities with political backing from Beijing are developing a strategy to turn Shanghai into a regional, financial and trading powerhouse within 15 years — reversing the decline of the last 40 years since the Communists



took power. State of the art office towers, superb infrastructure and communications — more important — its own power generation plant characterise the Pudong New Zone, a satellite business city now being constructed across the river

from Shanghai, with billions of dollars in state funds and foreign money.

By the turn of the century, Pudong will be able to tempt companies away from Hong Kong with an increasing amount of top class commercial space, say analysts.

To the Editor...

Dignity of Labour

Sir, The crimes and frustration situation is getting bad to worse day by day, especially with the youths. Many have made a lot of suggestions and have expressed various opinions on the same but will all that do any good. As we are aware, economic hardship, just for money, unemployment and idleness are the main causes of crime and frustration prevailing among the youths. In my opinion, dignity of labour and acceptance of all kinds of odd jobs or in other words 'jobs with less status', can pave the way for solving or at least minimising the crisis the country is besieged with.

Rather unfortunately, dignity of labour is yet to win a place in our society; that is why no one really wants to come forward to take up odd jobs and therefore indulge in unfair means.

Those who are finding it tough to get so called white-collar jobs at offices or works at mills and factories have to come forward to take up odd

jobs. Forget what the society and others have to say; forget the cheap egos of the family background or the past status we foolishly brag about. Like those in the western countries we must also broaden our minds and accept odd jobs.

Many Bangladeshis are doing odd jobs abroad, why can't we do it here. We in other fields have come forward to keep pace with modern times, why not we broaden our minds and give due respect to dignity of labour and accept odd jobs.

If dish washing, taxi driving, car cleaning, working in departmental stores and other odd jobs, are and boldly accepted abroad why not here? Hell with the so called superiority or inferiority complex we suffer from; will the privileged ones ever come forward to mitigate the sufferings of the under-privileged thousands?

In the beginning, many may not accept and feel shy, but in course of time 'odd jobs' as it may sound or called will gradually be something natural or may even prove progressive

and thus help curtail crimes and frustrations — at least forceful snatching from others' will ease to a great extent.

Giving due respect to dignity of labour and acceptance of 'odd jobs' will surely help ease unemployment situation and erase out the backward ego and false pride many in the nation have been suffering from for so long.

Islam also stresses greatly on dignity of labour to teach all to be equal.

Khawaja Viqar Moinuddin Dhaka

Burt Lancaster and our days

Sir, I thank Mr Towheed Feroze of Dhaka University for his tributes to late Burt Lancaster, the immortal actor of Hollywood, published in The Daily Star's letters column on November 9, 1994.

Mr Feroze may be a young man and fortunate enough to have seen so many movies of Burt Lancaster. Referring to the list of movies he men-

tioned I add two more names — the last one I saw more than a decade back, namely Cassandra Crossing, and the other movie, Veracruz, which I saw about 37-38 years ago while I was a resident student of the Salimullah Muslim Hall of Dhaka University. I had seen this movie together with a class friend and hall mate of mine. We were so much obsessed by this movie and the roles played by Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper, fighting with each other during their long journey... that from the next morning I was transformed into Burt Lancaster and my friend, into Gary Cooper and each time we met anywhere (except in public places) we used to grin at each other, take out our belts and lash at each other and engage ourselves in a sort of mock fight like the fights between Burt and Gary. Once during such a mock fight in the veranda of SM Hall, one of our simple-hearted friends was passing by from the dining hall to his room with a glass of water and my belt hit the glass accident-

tally. The glass fell down and broke into pieces, the water splashed around on the floor as he stood still with surprise. Then both of us suddenly grinned at him with the flying belts in our hands and he walked away quickly without a word, presuming that our fight was real since he knew nothing about the movie and the lace fights.

Long 37-38 years have passed by since I saw this movie first time. BTW showed this movie once few years back. I am still Burt Lancaster at heart and my dear friend is still Gary Cooper and we still grin at each other at times though we happen to meet rarely these days since we live in different cities.

Thanks again to Mr Feroze for his tributes to late Burt Lancaster, my most favourite actor of the mid-fifties and the unforgettable hero of Hollywood.

Shahadat Hussain M Shaikat Ali Road, Chittagong

"Educational Lapses"

Sir, Thanks a lot for your editorial "Educational Lapses" published on 23rd November. I came to know a new consequence of students' crime.

Taking the registers out of the office is more than a crime. Students are the conscience of the nation. But how the nation will keep their faith in them in such state of affairs? Many of the students think that they are the kings of the society. Once I met some students who were arguing on the fare with the bus conductor stressing that they were students. So, they would not give the fare sought. It's really painful.

Sometimes students belonging to political wings show their power over general students. They perhaps think that their respective political parties will save them from any situation. Is it educational lapses or something more?

Emladur Rahman Ruman Department of English Chittagong University