

Campaign and Agenda for '95

What We Propose to Do and What We Expect from the Government

The Daily Star

Anniversary Special

January 14, 1995

The Daily Star Campaign Issues

- ★ Save Dhaka and Other Metropolitan Centres
- ★ Save Education
- ★ Ensure Public Health and Population Control

Like the AGENDA of the year, The Daily Star has decided to take up three issues for media and public campaigns for the year 1995. The issues selected were from numerous suggestions conveyed to us through letters and telephone calls. These were in response to our request conveyed in The Daily Star issues of January 6 and 7, 1995.

It is now acknowledged by all that Dhaka, which is to become one of the megalopolis of Asia, has the minimum infrastructure and civic amenities to do so. Already more than 7 million people live in greater Dhaka with some of the basic amenities not reaching the majority of its inhabitants. Urban slums are growing up all over the place, and the city's problems are multiplying by the minute. Yet we have noticed an incredible amount of negligence and ad hoc decision making in dealing with matters that concerns the future of our capital city, and that of the others, like Chittagong.

Through our campaign we intend to highlight every aspect of the city life, its problems and find ways to solve them. Law and order, extortion, illegal occupation, pollution, overcrowding, traffic problems, lack of civic amenities like water and electricity supply, schools, parks, unsafe construction, etc. will form the focus of our campaigns. We hope that as a result of our effort, Dhaka will become a better place to live.

Human resource development is the key to Bangladesh's future. And education lies at the very centre of that effort. We know that the government has launched a serious nationwide mass education initiative. Yet much remains to be done. Through the columns of this newspaper we intend to bring out our achievements and also the shortcomings. We want to highlight those efforts that are bringing success, and also those that are merely wasting our scarce resources. Above all, we want to participate in a national mobilising effort that will speed up our drive for mass education.

About public health we are extremely disturbed by the recent UN report that we are the only people in the world who are getting shorter in height due to continued malnutrition. The average lowering of IQ has also made us extremely concerned. We know that though we have achieved an impressive record in population control, yet the demographic bomb is waiting to burst. Obviously, much more needs to be done.

We are aware that a lot of resources are spent annually in public health and population control, yet nothing much appears to be happening. We have some success stories like the immunisation campaign which was able to bring most of our kids within its fold. This convinces us that given proper drive, commitment and leadership we can ensure a far better public health and population control programme than we have seen so far. The Daily Star, through its columns will highlight the problems, inadequacies, policy shortcomings and will assist in establishing a better public healthcare system and population control programme.

In the case of the three aforementioned campaign subjects The Daily Star hopes to publish reports, features, photo-stories, post-editorials and editorials, including letters, several times each week throughout the year. By so doing we intend to keep the authorities under constant surveillance and pressure. We also want to build up an informed public opinion which will create its own momentum and dynamism, becoming a force by itself to carry forward these tasks.

In our campaign efforts we invite an active participation of our readers. We urge you to help us with information, ideas and write-ups on any, or all three, of the above issues so that we can launch a really effective countrywide campaign to improve these things. Let us tell the government, our political leaders, our policy makers, our bureaucrats, and most importantly ourselves that WE WILL NOT TAKE THIS ANYMORE, and do everything possible to improve our country, and with it the lot of the common man.

For A Louder Voice of Voters and Taxpayers

by Mahfuz Anam

ELSEWHERE in this page we have outlined our decision to launch The Daily Star campaign on three critical areas affecting the lives of our people. Here we would like to mention another priority concern of this paper which we intend to highlight during the coming year. We strongly feel that identity of our citizens as voters and as taxpayers have not been properly established. To put it in other words, the real importance of a voter or a taxpayer in a democratic society have not been understood in the real sense.

There are historical reasons for this. For years elections have not been held. As and when they were held, it was usually under the direction of military or quasi-military leadership's supervision. These elections made the role of the voters almost perfunctory rather than central.

The first election of 1973, could have been an exception, but was not. It was swept by the euphoria of liberation, and it was hardly possible at that time to assert the rights and privileges of voters. The mass popularity of Bangabandhu and the total sway of Awami League did not permit, as AL leaders

themselves now admit, the holding of a free and fair election. It was case of coercion of the popularity wave. Everybody had to fall in line or were suspected of being unpatriotic. Peer pressure was at its height.

Subsequent elections were marked more by sham than by any level of sincerity. The military sponsored elections were as they usually are — perfect. That is, perfect for the person in power. The voters however have a different story to tell.

It was only in 1991 that the voters felt empowered. It was the first election where the voters expressed their mind freely and fearlessly. But one election is not enough to establish the rights of the voters in true sense of the term. Even here it was cut short as a result of the boycott of the parliament. As to whether such a boycott was appropriate or not, will be dealt with at some other time. But the point needs to be made that because of it, the elected members could not represent their voters in the parliament, and as such, the voters were deprived of their

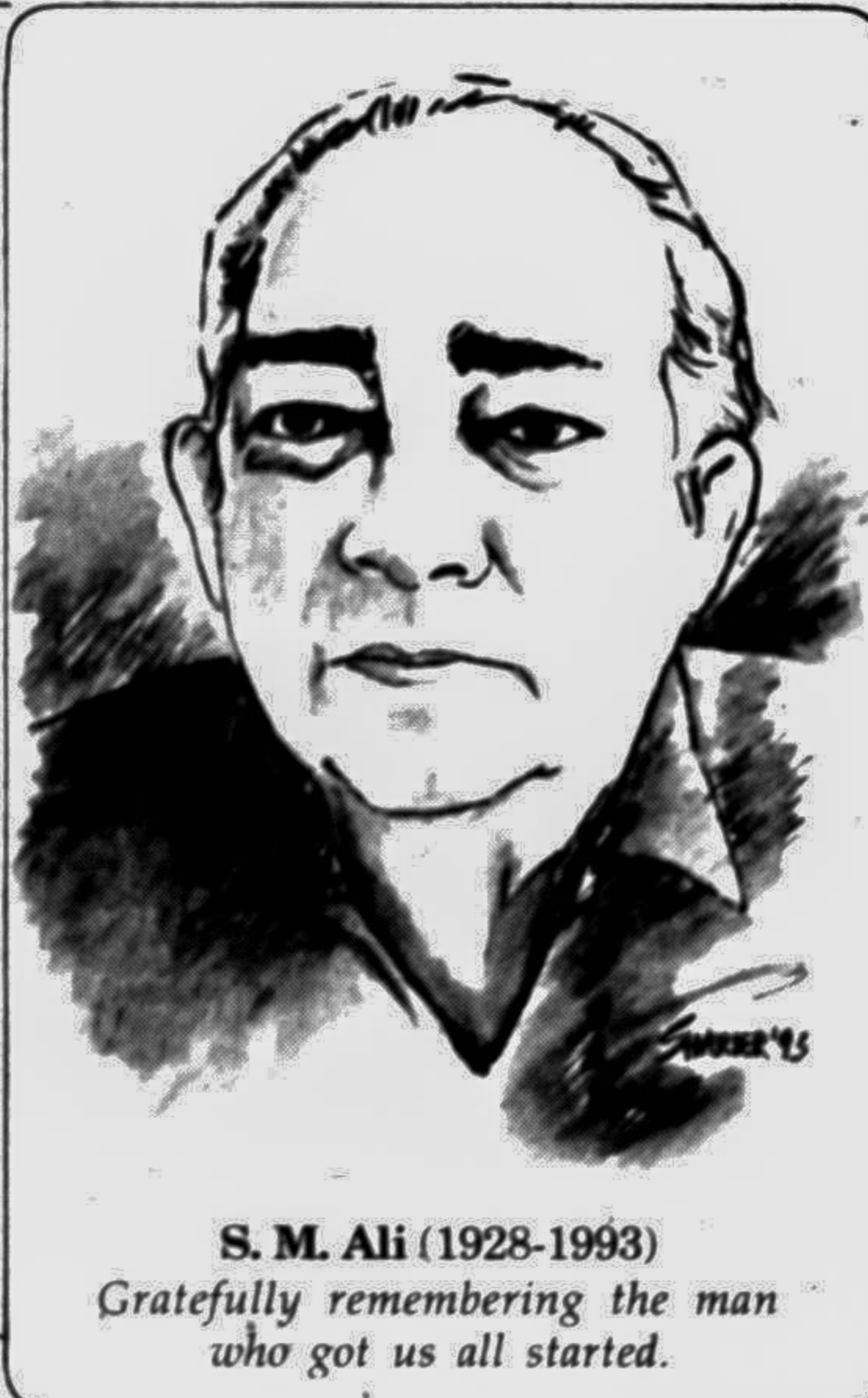
rights and privileges.

During the current year, it will be the effort of this paper to bring back into the central focus the important role of the voters. We will try to raise public consciousness as to the fact that our politicians come to us every few years, make all sorts of promises, spend a lot of money, play a most vulgar populist game, and after getting our votes, disappear. There were no doubt visits to constituencies, but they were more PR trips than ones meant to empower the voters. The election promises remained in the background. No attempt was made to consult the voters in such important issues as demolishing the Upazila system by the BNP, or introducing the caretaker idea in national politics by the combined opposition.

In other words political parties of both sides took their election to the parliament as a license to do whatever they felt like, and NOT AS A RESPONSIBILITY TO CARRY OUT ELECTION PLEDGES.

Since we do not have an authentic public opinion poll system, there is no way that voters can send signals to their elected representatives after

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S. M. Ali (1928-1993)

Gratefully remembering the man who got us all started.

BANGLADESH started its independent existence with heavy government interventions in all spheres of the economy. But soon a process of reversal of that stance began, with the government role reduced at a pace that was slow at first but accelerated as years rolled by. By the late 1980s a complete reversal of the policy had occurred, the basic tenets of which are stabilization, privatization, deregulation, and globalization. However, foreign aid has played an overwhelming role all along. Programmes and projects under the earlier planned approach were essentially dictated by availability of foreign aid. The influence of foreign aid has further increased in the current paradigm, so much so that policy specifics are given in detail by the donors by way of conditionalities. However, in the earlier approach, country realities could be taken into account in developing policies within the framework of the broad donor agendas, which

The Reform Agenda

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

was also facilitated by the then bipolarity of the world order. But the current reform agenda, in this post-cold-war era of a unipolar world order dominated by USA-led west, is a standard package for each and every adjusting poor country. There is little scope for taking into account the realities on the ground in particular countries. In fact, policies are all given and each adjusting country is required to reduce budget deficit, tightly control public spending, broadbase taxation programmes with low marginal rates; introduce price reforms aimed at positive but moderate real interest rates and a weak and stable exchange rate; liberalize trade and create a cordial environment for direct foreign investment; privatize state enterprises; deregulate markets,

particularly financial and labour markets; and introduce necessary changes in the institutional framework and administrative procedures and linkages to make them consistent with the liberalized economy. At the same time, it is also advised that social sectors (education, health, women development) be given appropriate emphasis aimed at human development and 'safety net' be established for the vulnerable section of the society. Some of these issues are indeed very pertinent and should be addressed by the government on its own, without having to be prodded by the donors. But the point is that government impotence in dealing with those issues led to a serious crisis in economic management and its consequent slide into the strait-

jacket of conditionalities. It is no longer possible for it to determine the pace and pattern of adjustment and, hence, development.

But, just as any other country, Bangladesh has its peculiar circumstances and faces realities which are its own. These cannot be ignored or standardized with those of other countries. Thus, in the case of Bangladesh, any realistic policy regime must address the following issues, among many others, directly: the country, with limited land resources, inhabited by a relatively very large population growing at a high rate; it is characterized by low level of technology, low savings rate and low human capability; it experiences too much water during the monsoon and too little water during the winter season; it has a

production structure made up of agriculture's contribution of 35 per cent and those of manufacturing at about 10 per cent and other productive activities at about 9 per cent while services account for about 54 per cent - a very unbalanced composition; and it suffers from an unemployment rate of between one-third and 40 per cent (in terms of available labour time), and low productivity in all sectors. It must also be recognized that within productive sectors, agriculture's share is 65 per cent and it absorbs about 75 per cent of the labour force. In other words, agriculture's importance in the national economy remains pre-eminent.

The reform agenda doesn't take these realities into direct consideration. Moreover, it has, for example, unleashed factors that constrain agricultural growth via inadequacy of investment in the sector and withdrawal of support to small and marginal farmers. The steep rise in the

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Editor's Note...

Last year, on the occasion of our fourth founding day, The Daily Star put forward a reader's AGENDA for the year 1994. The idea was to make the government aware, what our readers felt, should be some of the priority concerns during the year. We did the exercise with a view to empowering the people in giving direction as to how their elected representatives should work to serve the needs of the people. We felt that there were no mechanism through which the public could ventilate their wish about the things and issues that they wanted immediately attended to. Except in the formulation of the national annual budget, there appeared to be no other mechanism of establishing any priority for social and governmental action.

While our agenda aimed at focusing the attention of the authorities, it was also intended to mobilise public opinion in favour of certain actions. We felt that through the process of fixing our own agenda, perhaps we can bring the public to take initiatives on their own, to solve some of the problems that plagued our life.

It was with such an intention that we drew up a 50-point action agenda for 1994, divided into 9 areas of immediate concern. In selecting the items we made sure that each item included could either be achieved during the year, or at least a significant start could be made in that direction. For the benefit of the public we reproduce our last year's agenda.

A cursory reading of it will convince readers that nothing much was achieved in any of the areas of concern that we identified. In fact instead of improving, we have definitely taken a plunge in some of the areas. For example, in the area of politics and parliament, we are worse off in the beginning of 1995, than we were last year. Similarly, in law and order, in civic amenities, in education we have fallen behind compared to last year. However regrettable, we have to admit that our agenda remains mostly ignored.

Given the urgency and importance of the points we raised last year, and motivated by the fact that these issues touch our readers daily life in a profound manner, the editorial board of The Daily Star has decided to name the same items as the AGENDA 95. We hope that the government will perform better this year, in responding to the needs and wishes of the people, compared to the year before.

AGENDA '95 — a Programme for Us All

The following Agenda was formulated last year. However having fully examined it, our editorial writers have concluded that the Agenda remains as valid and as relevant to the lives of our people, as it did last year. Consequently we reiterate our demand that the government takes immediate note of these tasks and does a far better job in meeting these challenges than it did last year.

I Governance

1. Independence of judiciary must be ensured immediately
2. Under-trial prisoners should be reduced by 50%
3. Improved local government bodies must be put in place immediately
4. More accountability and transparency of government must be put into practice immediately
5. Government decisions must be effectively implemented

II Law and Order

1. Toll collection and extortions of all kinds must be stamped out
2. Mugging and other street crimes must be dealt with harsh penalties
3. Police violence and extortion must be rooted out with stiff penalties
4. Quick legal relief for complaints of criminal nature must be ensured
5. Registering complaints with police must be prompt, efficient and unhindered

III Politics and Parliament

1. Leader of the House and Opposition should attend the Sangsad at least for 60 per cent of session-time
2. Opposition should work as shadow government, reinforcing their criticism with counter-proposals
3. All student, labour and other wings of political parties should be banned
4. All government appointment should be made free of partisanship
5. Radio and television should be made fully autonomous

IV Human Rights

1. Freedom of speech and expression must be guaranteed. No persecution for political views
2. Violation of Constitutional provisions especially by organised groups must be prevented. If violated, the perpetrators must be punished
3. Right to religious faiths and practices, as provided for in the Constitution, must be ensured by the government
4. All black laws including SPA and ATA must be annulled
5. Repression of domestic servants must be stopped

V Civic Amenities

1. Increase clean water supply for city dwellers
2. Measures to stop fake or over-charging water, telephone and electricity bills
3. Timely and proper collection of garbage
4. Better co-ordination between city bodies, related to road digging
5. Effective mosquito control and sufficient street light
6. City taxi service must be introduced
7. Better and cheaper public transport, more double-decker buses
8. More public bath houses and toilets on reasonable payment
9. More play grounds and parks
10. Public awareness movement to inculcate civic behaviour

VI Social

1. Policy initiation to tackle the problems of city beggars
2. Policy to rehabilitate prostitutes and punish the pimps
3. Public awareness campaign against the practice of graft, bribery, etc
4. Campaign against drug abuse and exemplary punishment of the drug smugglers and sellers. Setting up drug rehabilitation centre.
5. The traditional social value of philanthropy should be revived

VII Education

1. All schools, colleges, medical colleges, universities must strictly adhere their academic calendar and all examination must be held in time
2. Campus violence must be eliminated. Arm carrying student(s) must be expelled immediately without fear of favour
3. Primary School-enrolment and retention must be kept on target
4. Text books must be mistake free and published in whiteprint.
5. School hours increased, vacation reduced and supervision of teachers must be ensured

VIII Environment and Health

1. Laws against emission of black smoke from motorised vehicles should be enforced stringently
2. No polythene bags in Bangladesh after 1995
3. Clean Buriganga should be achieved by year end
4. Stricter enforcement of order against burning wood in brickfield kilns
5. Garbage recycling plants should be set up

IX Women's Rights

1. Changes in Family Law and Inheritance Laws
2. Death penalty for acid throwing at women, and kidnapping and rape crimes and severe punishment for women trafficking
3. Political parties should make women's issues a part of their agenda
4. Fatwa, gram shalshi against women should be declared illegal, and as such, a crime
5. More high level appointment of women in decision making level, and more active participation of women parliamentarians