

Women's Cause

The observance of the International Women's Day yesterday hardly marked any departure from the usual beaten track. Indeed such occasions have become so repetitive — and therefore formal and uninteresting — that the purpose of the commemoration is virtually getting lost on the common people.

This is the hardest part of the job. But this is also how we can do justice to our commitment to any cause. As for the International Women's Day we have our own special problems relating to the women issues. Women's right groups here in Bangladesh have time and again brought those issues to the attention of all who matter.

Had there been many such legal provisions to protect women's property right, to ensure equal wage for their labour with that of men and to provide them with adequate social security against male oppressions and sexual crimes, we might have got a good cause to celebrate.

A Loathing Rejection

Mr Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is nobody's idea of a statesman come to cool the heat generated by the jostling of the nations of the world. He is a provincial politician bloated into an international somebody sheerly through uttering and acting out imbecilities beyond the powers of any political clown.

A kind of success such characters meet with is that people are ever so curious about their latest buffoonery. And in his latest act Mr Zhirinovskiy has tried to inspire India to annex Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The Russian political leader dreams of a new rise of the imperial Russian empire. This bad dream may assuage some of the imagined woes bedeviling the minds of many Russians played by a host of bad and very real challenges.

If Mr Zhirinovskiy is a pain in the neck of anyone, it is Russia's. And it is Russia that shall restrain and write him off in a matter of years. He is a mere passing show.

Does Mr Zhirinovskiy even merit a condemnation? If his unfortunate utterance constitutes anything diplomatic other than inanity, we reject it as loathingly as we are capable of.

The Grinding Juggernaut

This is bureaucracy at its funniest. But this manifestation of the worst in the system has been sapping the life out of scores of senior physicians on the government payroll — and their families.

Funny but not only funny. Unfair but not at all unique. This is rather the rule with our bureaucracy than an exception. And if this is a vindication of the Prokrichi claim that a generalist stranglehold on the administration of specialised services is at the root of such dereliction and dysfunction, one is not confident about how specialists calling the shots can effect a change in the scenario.

There were some technical points backing at the regularisation of the doctors manning some 140 posts under the BCS cadre. The way the points have been handled in the case of 73 specialists — as reported in Wednesday's Daily Star — and their employment regularised through promotion, could very well have been done at least half a decade ago, if not at the very outset.

Do Our Leaders Care about Development Issues?

ONE of my favourite stories about Grameen Bank and Prof Yunus and one which I repeat every time I get a chance, refers to the time when Bill Clinton just got elected as the President of the United States.

There was a leader (not yet President) of the most powerful country in the world, asking me about an experiment in a far away country, so that he could help his own people.

During last 18 months, senior ministers from Uganda, Kenya, Chad, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Ethiopia came to Bangladesh just to visit and learn from BRAC schools.

When leaders from other developing and developed countries are learning from our development experience, our leaders pay no attention to them.

I have been prompted by Hillary Clinton's remarks at the Social Summit on Grameen Bank last Tuesday, to write this piece. We are delighted that the American First Lady thought it fit to term our very own Grameen Bank as an appropriate global model for anti-poverty drive and for women's emancipation.

However successful we are, the world would still not take any notice of us, unless someone like Hillary Clinton (President Clinton himself is on record to have publicly spoken on Grameen Bank too) speaks on such achievements.

But how much more proud I would have felt if I knew that our leaders themselves speak on the same achievements — and with far more enthusiasm — when they go abroad.

I know of no occasion when our Prime Minister spoke about Grameen Bank in the same way as Hillary Clinton did last Tuesday. In fact she should be going around saying the same thing far more loudly and proudly. But then how can she. She has never bothered to see it for herself during her four years in power.

I hesitate to answer that question, because the obvious one would be NO. I neither want to question their patriotism nor their commitment towards the upliftment of our people. What I am perhaps questioning is the way they go about it.

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

it, where TV camera and photographers do not go with them?

Yes, lower down the line, the local leaders, or thana or district level political leaders do keep some contact with the local development workers.

There is another aspect of local politicians taking a keen interest in projects. Sometimes these leaders may, and do, descend upon such projects only to insist that they should be located in their constituency, or to get their supporters some jobs or ensure, either themselves or their relatives, some benefit.

But it is the distance between development issues and political leaders at the national level that is the matter for my concern. To the best of my knowledge there is no attempt by any of the major parties to learn anything about what the leading development bodies are doing.

There appears to be a total lack of appreciation that development process is a science, and that societal change is full challenges and pitfalls. There are hundreds of theories and alternative experiences. All these, together, constitute a fabulous reservoir of knowledge and skills, and more importantly 'dos and don'ts'. But these skills and knowledge are available only to those who spend some time in trying to understand them.

I have some personal experience about talking to politicians on one of our fundamental challenges — the population problem. Once — during the good old days when we had a full Sangsad — I asked several of our MPs from both sides, as to what they knew about our population problem.

Except for knowing that we are highly populated, and that it was a serious problem, none of the MPs I talked to had any in-depth knowledge of what the whole thing meant. I explained to them that there were several projections available ranging from the 'best case' to the 'worst case' scenarios, which showed our possible population by the Year 2025 to be anywhere between 230 million to 280 million.

The national issues which called for such a bi-partisan national approach included violence in the campuses, sick industries, vacuum created by the absence of the elected local government at the Thana and District levels, and educational and administrative reforms as also key initiatives in the foreign policy area which would aim to find enduring solution to problems such as water sharing within a framework of long term regional co-operation.

What they said was only half true. Yes they were very busy people. But that was not why they did not know much about these problems. The real reason was their mindset. They all believe that development is a very simple thing. You get into power, then government policies and programmes will lead to development. This mindset divides our politicians into two obvious groups — those who are in power and those who are out.

The former group thinks — and I am only talking about politicians who want to do some real work, (a dying species, I will admit) — that having come to power they can bring all sorts of changes as they wish. Such confidence is obviously based on a total lack of understanding as to how difficult it is to bring about social change, and the very big gap that lies between vision and reality, between wishes and possibilities, between planning and implementation, and finally between implementation and what actually lasts over a period of time.

Because they do not have any deep understanding of the complexity of the development process, they think bringing about societal change is a matter of executive fiat, and that good governance is only a matter of good intentions.

Politicians in the opposition appear to hang on to the archaic notion that all development works begin after getting into the government, and hence they have nothing else

to do but criticise the power of the day, and wait for themselves to get to power. They seem to believe that when out of power there is no need to expose themselves to the development issues, in order that they can handle these problems better when, and if, they come to form the government.

Our politicians are so wrapped up in their make believe world of politics that development issues are far from their vision and thoughts. Thus when somebody else does something extraordinary, they do not even know about it, or ever bother to find out. So it takes a Hillary Clinton to tell the world about Grameen Bank before our leaders do.

Why only blame our politicians. How much time and space do we, as journalists, devote to our development struggle?

Instead of spending days after days, and tons after tons of newspaper on the inane, repetitive rhetorical and self-serving statements of our few political leaders, we could serve the nation much better by covering development issues and interviewing grassroots workers.

Finally a point about our academics. Several universities of Europe and the US are funding PhD studies on Grameen model. Every year hundreds of visitors come to observe projects of Grameen, BRAC, Proshika and some other successful experiments. None of our universities has shown the least bit of interest on any of the institutions and their projects, which have already attracted some of the leading intellectual centres in the world.

But then, now that the western leaders and institutions have started to recognise these successes, many of our own leaders, journalists and intellectuals will find time to notice them. How ironic.

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, NAP Chief, addressing a public meeting at Paltan Maidan, stated that the majority party alone was authorised to frame a country's constitution in a democracy.

A number of exemptions and clarifications were issued by Tajuddin Ahmad, the EPAL General Secretary, pertaining to Sheikh Mujib's directive to continue the non-violent and non-cooperation movement. These included, among others: i) all banks, including the State Bank, shall remain open for inter-bank transactions only within Bangladesh for the payment of wages, personal drawings of upto Rs. 1000, and purchase of industrial raw materials necessary for running mills and factories.

(Compiled by Rashida Ahmad)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'No Alternative to Immediate Resumption of Dialogue'

An Interview with Dr Kamal Hossain, President, Gano Forum

by Chapal Bashar



The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

Kamal Hossain (KH): The principal political parties in Parliament have each sought to pursue short term advantages at the cost even of their own long term interest of nurturing and consolidating democracy which was restored at a very great cost in terms of the suffering and sacrifice of multitudes of our people.

The national issues which called for such a bi-partisan national approach included violence in the campuses, sick industries, vacuum created by the absence of the elected local government at the Thana and District levels, and educational and administrative reforms as also key initiatives in the foreign policy area which would aim to find enduring solution to problems such as water sharing within a framework of long term regional co-operation.

The Magura by-election should not have degenerated into a 'free for all', which revived the terrible memories of the abuse of muscle and money in the 1986 elections and

adversely affect our economy. The prices of all goods and commodities, both domestic and foreign, have shot up.

If we further devalue our currency Taka we would be simply striking axe on our own legs and also adding fuel to the fire of our deficit in balance of payment of foreign trade and in repayment of our foreign loan liabilities.

Why not the USA devalues her currency Dollar and sells goods and commodities, machinery and equipment, arms and ammunition worth billions of dollars to third world countries?

If the USA could sell us finished goods and commodities, machinery and equipment at a cheaper rate we could also export many goods and commodities including Flour Sack Kitchen Towel at a much cheaper rate for which Mr Ekram Belal is interested for a Chicago importer.

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To the Editor...

'Strong Taka'

Sir, This refers to a letter of Mr Ekram Belal of New York, USA published under the caption 'Strong Taka' in your esteemed daily of February 20, 1995.

I would like to mention here that on the advice of the World Bank, IMF and many others, we have devalued our currency Taka several times since 1972 in the name of increasing our export and earning foreign exchange. But, as a matter of fact, in the practical field we have always imported goods and commodities more and more, of colossal amount of money, and our export amounted to pittance.

Our deficit in balance of payment of foreign trade for the last twentythree years amounts to several thousand crore of Taka. Further, the devaluation has raised the liabilities of our foreign loans to a Himalayan height.

of caretaker government. The discussion on the issue of caretaker government could start at the point reached in earlier discussion on 28-29 December. The 29 December position of the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition's position as stated on 10 January, 1995 could be a starting point for an agreement on the framework for the next elections.

The vexed constitutional and legal situation presented by the Speaker's ruling is not irresolvable. Once a political agreement is reached, members could return to Parliament to enact such constitutional amendments or legislation as may be necessary. If there is need for removing any doubt as to the constitutionality of such action there are at least two courses which could be adopted in keeping with the norms of constitutional propriety: (i) seeking an advisory opinion of the Appellate Division under Article 105 of the Constitution which could provide a means of overcoming any apparent constitutional difficulty that may be presented by a larger number of members of Parliament insisting that their resignation have become effective while the Speaker in these circumstances was unable to accept this position.

An agreement reached that the next Parliament could adopt any constitutional amendment to ratify the actions taken. The nation needs a political settlement urgently. If the parties again fail to attain such a settlement to end the state of uncertainty then a major citizens' initiative is called for. I would appeal to fellow citizens to consider a united people's initiative, involving leading citizens, who enjoy public confidence and who have been in the past or would be in the future acceptable as members of a caretaker government, who could consult all civic and professional organisations who had been active in the movement for restoration of democracy so that the all pro-independence and pro-democratic forces could present a united national consensus on the question of caretaker government and the framework for the next elections.

Everybody is talking about elections — but when should it be held — Within the next few months, or later in the year, or at its scheduled time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice. The elections should be held within 1995. It would be desirable, for an agreed election date to be arrived at through mutual consultations taking into account the need to establish a proper constitutional framework for the holding of free and fair elections.

How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed? To ensure independence of the Election Commission, its institutional structure should be strengthened by providing it with budgetary resources directly and also giving the Commissioner power to employ and control their own staff. The Election Commission should have power to initiate prosecutions against violators of the electoral law and of the legally enforceable Code of Conduct whether the violator be leaders of a political party or high-placed officials in the administration or in the law enforcing agencies. There should be a standing tribunal presided over by a senior High Court Judge, who should be empowered to take cognizance of complaints made by the Election Commission or affected parties and to deal with these on an urgent basis, including taking any interim steps that may be necessary to prevent further violence. Finally, if the Chief Election Commissioner and members of the Election Commission due to their past performance keep on losing confidence, a new Chief Election Commissioner and members may have to be appointed after mutual consultations among the parties so that those who are entrusted with the high responsibilities to the Election Commission can truly enjoy public confidence and possess the qualities of courage, independence and integrity, which will enable them to act without fear or favour effectively and not be impaired in the discharge of their constitutional duty by timidity and indecision and a self-imposed sense of timidity.

How to formulate a Code of Conduct for political parties to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code? A Code of Conduct could be adopted, using as working models the South African Code of Conduct, the Indian Code of Conduct and the informal code of conduct which was formulated by the Bangladesh Election Commission during the municipal elections. It is imperative to give the code of conduct a legally binding character and to empower the Election Commission to have the power to initiate investigations and prosecutions as well as to have a high-powered standing tribunal to deal with the complaints.

What are your views on the need for a computerized voters list and Identity Cards? Can we ensure fair election without them? If we want them, then what should be the time frame for elections? Identity cards and voters' list would certainly contribute to improve free and fair elections. With a concerted effort these could be done without any loss of time.

We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the next election. What are your suggestions to make elections funding transparent, and accountable? Black money is truly one, if not the greatest, threat to free and fair elections. The Code of Conduct should have express provisions which should make it a penal offence for parties to sell nominations and to provide for drastic penalties including disqualification particularly for those who break the law with regard to election expenses as well as to prohibitions in the Code of Conduct with regard to posters, erection of camps and providing of financial and other material inducements to voters. This should be monitored by community-appointed monitors, civic organization and by monitors appointed by the Election Commission. Such a multi-layered system was in place in South Africa and achieved very positive results. Some of the initiatives of the Indian Chief Election Commissioner Mr Seshan show that where there is a will to enforce a code of conduct, the way can certainly be found.