

Substance Versus Form

As we step into the 25th year of our independence we reach a water-shed — one of momentous significance in our trust with destiny. When the undying embers of freedom crackled into a fiery freedom struggle, in the face of an unheard-of genocide, our moment of glory was made then and there. Re-discover as we did our inner strength as a cohesive people. Essentially though it was a trial we took on — against stunning odds. The triumph came at the end of a nine-month-long war. At how heavy a cost we know all too well to be only obliged to pay our debts to the martyrs, crippled and the dispossessed! In building the promised land, where do we stand?

We picked up some laurels down the road but our trial continues and that also unfortunately because we have failed to build on our initial advantages. So it is with a mixed sense of triumph and trial that we greet this year's Independence Day.

Quarter of a century is no small time-period in the life of a nation, viewed in the context of how rapidly some countries nearer home have changed their lot. Such nations unshackled themselves from alien rule about the same time we did and their economic conditions were also comparable with ours — at birth. Yet they are now streets ahead of us in terms of political stability and economic growth. They did not even have our high degree of national motivation on reaching statehood, our familiarisation with democracy, steeped in history, and above all, the remarkable homogeneity of our people. We have allowed these extra-ordinary vantage-points to be lost through a maze of pretentious and spurious politics that sent democratic institutions crumbling down to pieces. We got leaders not by natural choice but by manipulated imposition.

Though our economic challenges looked formidable, these are at least sought to be faced under a free market economic system that all the major political parties are expressly wedded to. The social problems have no doubt been overwhelming, at times perhaps debilitating, but there too, we have displayed a certain sense of direction, a new determination, so to speak, in addressing them.

But we are stuck in politics and that too not of substance, but of form. Because polity-wise, we have evolved full cycle back to a parliamentary form of government from what turned into BAKSAL-type presidential rule in 1974 followed by a presidential system as adopted by Ziaur Rahman.

The question to ask today is: how long will the nation suffer through the wrangling over form only when we basically have what we need to turn a corner?

UN Role

A five-day regional conference of the World Federation of the United Nations Association (WFUNA) in Asia and the Pacific — the fifth of its kind — is in progress in the city. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia inaugurated the meet on Friday saying that in the post-Cold War era, the role of the United Nations has increased instead of diminishing. The developing world would get a better deal if the UN played its due role in the changed context.

The Prime Minister's reference to ethnic and localised conflicts across the globe should drive home the message that the UN bodies' incapacity to deliver the goods is all too manifest and something must be done about it. Peace in this world is elusive because there are social discriminations, racial and religious intolerance and clashes of interests. The removal of the threat of the Cold War, has not brought any extra benefits for the poor nations.

The United Nations' reputation got seriously dented in Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Afghanistan and Chechnya too the UN role has been far from satisfactory. Its military role for peacekeeping should perhaps come under serious scrutiny. This apart, the urgent need for re-defining the scope of trade and technological co-operation between the developed and developing nations has to be recognised. The hope that the avoidance of a huge expenditure on armament will release enough resources to foot the bill for education and health in the poor countries has not materialised.

However, there is a golden opportunity to pool resources within the industrialised world for the sake of attacking poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy in the backward parts of the planet. Instead, the developed countries themselves are enmeshed in a trade war between themselves. With little staying power, the developing countries are finding themselves at the receiving end. Such trade conflicts should by all means be avoided. At the same time the UN bodies must try to evolve new strategies to fight the common ills in the less developed countries. The conference now being held can take coordinated programmes on a regional basis.

Fighting Cancer

The high incidence of cancer in Bangladesh can be measured by the statistics that 150,000 people die of it each year while 2,00,000 new cases are reported annually. For a country with little facility for the treatment of this disease, this is a nightmarish picture. Once someone falls victim to this disease, he or she has hardly any chance of survival. Of course, some minor cases are curable through operation. But for those not lucky enough, death seems to be the only option.

Family and Health Welfare Minister has called for dealing with the disease by raising awareness level of the people against it. But we consider it differently. Keeping to the rules of health and hygiene is no doubt a virtue that helps keep diseases at bay.

The preventive rules about cancer are more demanding than these are in regard to other diseases. The question therefore arises: where simple rules are neglected, the complex ones are not going to be so easily followed by the general populace. The facilities that can help reduce the risk of cancer are almost absent. Smoking is yet to be contained. Playgrounds, parks, gymnasiums etc are a rarity. Then we have been contributing to the degradation of our atmosphere and environment at a rapid pace. These are not going to help the cause.

So the preventive steps are really daunting. The curative measures are almost equally challenging. But there are some ways of treatment, notwithstanding their high cost. At least the health minister can take care of this by creating more treatment facilities for cancer.

THE fall of communism, a cause for much satisfaction in the capitalist west, produced in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union an interlude of ecstasy followed by years of pain. It is a region in ferment pulled in opposing directions. Bosnia — where a pluralistic and non-sectarian polity confronts naked fascism aided ironically by the liberal west — symbolizes this transition. The destruction of Grozny and brutalization of the Chechen people by Boris Yeltsin's Russia is the latest portent of great human tragedies — ongoing and in the making.

Russia, still a country of eight time zones and enormous resources, is the epicenter of this troubled world. European and American appeasement of Serb aggression is but one evidence of the importance of the great powers attach to winning Russian goodwill. Their measured response to Russian atrocities in Chechnya is another. This too is ironic as Russian's centrality in defining the prospects of mankind is underlined at the very moment of its collapse as a great power. We do not know which way the wounded bear shall turn.

Russian's instincts are divided — humane and thoughtful on the one hand, chauvinists and deadly on the other. Above, I wrote "Boris Yeltsin's Russia" because I see two Russias co-existing uneasily, and a third leaning now to one side, now to another. First, there is the Russia of people like Sergei Kovalev, the Kremlin appointed Commissioner for Human Rights who went to Grozny last December when Yeltsin ordered the assault on Chechnya's capital. There he lived in a dingy fifth-floor apartment without heat or water; and defied Yeltsin's orders to return to Moscow. For weeks he bore the bombings, witnessed the wanton destruction — civilians killed, the city incinerated. When the Kremlin ordered him to stop briefing the press, he defied again and persistently brought his government's atrocities to the attention of an indifferent world.

In opposing the Kremlin's crimes against humanity, Sergei Kovalev was not alone. By most estimates a majority of Russians oppose Yeltsin's war. Among the thousands who turned up for the anti-war demonstration in Pushkin Square — there a small group of dissidents had in 1968 protested the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia — were nearly all the luminaries of Russian art and literature. Elena Bonner, widow of the physicist Andrei Sakharov described the war on the Chechens as "return to total-

To the Editor

BBC and VOA

Sir, In Bangladesh there is a large audience for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA). BBC World Service Radio and Television programmes are also relayed everyday for a fixed time by Radio Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Television. These show that BBC and VOA are very much trusted by our people. So also the case of CNN. But some recent happenings raise in our mind the questions: are these organisations quite careful about what they broadcast or publish (in their various documents) regarding Bangladesh or its neighbours and can they be trusted any more if it is seen that they are not bothered about accuracy? I am sorry to say that BBC has been indeed negligent in this matter. Kindly allow me to show some examples.

(1) I have seen a 1995 diary of the BBC World Service which has a map of South Asia along with maps of the World, England and the continents and in this map the Indian state of Meghalaya has been shown as a part of Bangladesh both in writing as well as in the drawing of the boundary of Bangladesh and India.

(2) On last January 20, in a news programme of BBC World Service Television's Asia Today the newscaster was interviewing the BBC correspondent in Bangladesh, Mr Galpin, on the summoning of our parliament the previous day by President Abdur Rahman Biswas and the newscaster referred to the President by the feminine gender pronouncing "She". This showed the ignorance of the BBC's newscaster and her reluctance to gain proper knowledge about South Asia although she was taking part in a programme about this area.

(3) On last 15th or 16th February BBC World Service Television broadcast a report from Mr Galpin on the labour agitations in which he said two demonstrators had been killed whereas by then it was known that at least four persons had been killed in police firing and beatings at Ghorasal and Dhaka.

(4) On 17th February BBC World Service Television and Radio broadcast an interview with controversial woman writer Taslima Nasrin. They described her as "exiled writer" whereas the fact is that

she went abroad and is staying abroad by her own desire, that none had forced her to leave the country.

(5) And the Bangladeshi correspondent of BBC who reports in Bengali, has been continuously putting out broadcasts suggesting that great violence was about to break out regarding the demand of the opposition parties for a neutral caretaker government. His report of 19th December last used a quotation of Mr Tofael Ahmed, Awami League leader, in which the politician says, "hartal programme may start from 29th and this programme will continue as long as the government does not fall." Again on 23rd December the BBC Bengali Correspondent broadcast a report saying, "An opposition source has informed that after the resignation they will not give breathing time to the government." Even the correspondent had reported on 17th January, regarding the numerous cracker blasts on the Shab-e-barat night, "It is not difficult to understand from last night's activities that if clashes begin for some reason then there will not be a shortage of ammunition." Fortunately, for the people of Bangladesh, nothing of that kind of violence has as yet occurred.

I hope I have been able to demonstrate that for some reason or other BBC is no longer able to maintain its accuracy, objectivity and balance — qualities for which it became famous and qualities to achieve which in earlier days BBC correspondents had even embraced martyrdom and imprisonment.

VOA too has committed blunders, like reporting that three persons had died on a day in clash between police and demonstrators when actually none had died and the clash too was short-lived. Also, while reporting on the gherao programme of the opposition in front of the Prime Minister's secretariat the VOA said that it had taken place in front of her house. This was far from the truth at least as far as the Prime Minister's residence is from her office.

We hope BBC and VOA will be respectful to the Bangladeshi audience and give them accurate news about their country.

R Ahmed
Topkhana Road, Dhaka

Russia's Tormented Soul

by Eqbal Ahmad

had sent off commandos to help Saddam Hussain's 'noble cause' and blow-up US ships; 'they were tourists' he insisted. Similarly, he denied his own written words about Poland, the Baltic, or nuking Japan as 'total falsehood'; but sensing his audience's antipathies he offered: 'watch out for the Chinese and Muslims.' Muslims are an obsession of Mr Zhirinovsky who grew up in Kazakhstan.

This obsession is the centerpiece of his book, *Last Dash To The South*. The Director of the Library of Congress, historian James Billington finds it "in some respects psychologically an even more unstable work than *Mein Kampf*." The purpose of the "last thrust", says Vladimir Zhirinovsky, is "to liberate the world from war which always begins in the South." He invokes the threat to the western world "from the direction of Teheran which is constructing plans for the pan-Islamic seizure of vast territories, from the direction of Ankara where plans for a greater Turkic state were prepared long ago." He believes that "Russia's true and historic role and destiny is to protect

Christianity from the Muslim threat." He would proceed with mission moderately, step by step: first reconquer and abolish the Central Asian republics; then conquer the region from "Karachi to Constantinople."

One should note Zhirinovsky's ultimate dreams: "I dream of the day when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean." The objective, of course, is peace: "The sound of the bells of Russian Orthodox churches on the shores of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean will bring peace to those people." Mr Zhirinovsky hopes the US would see the advantage in sharing the world with a re-vitalized Russia: "It is like two girls and two blokes. The men have to decide which girls is theirs and then there are two couples; everything is friendly."

Don't laugh! This clown represents something just as did the one with the butterfly moustache six decades ago, and just as do Serbia's Milosevic, Karadzic, and Mladic. He embodies the dark side of Russia, and knows also

the dirty secret of western leaders who appease Serbian genocide of Bosnian Muslims and promote sectarian schemes in the Balkans and Palestine while ringing alarm bells of an Islamic threat to the world. Like most dangerous opportunists Zhirinovsky plays on a people's feelings of humiliation, speaks the language of stark simplicity, and affects a populist posture. "In a rich country", he says, "My programme will not go down well. But in a poor and embittered country like Russia this is my golden hour." So he has been making waves, and with each success compels Russia number three — of Boris Yeltsin and the ambitions which surround him — and his western allies to accommodate the agenda of Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

In the 1991 presidential election Zhirinovsky surprised the world by winning 7.5 per cent of the total vote. In the 1993 parliamentary elections his party won the largest bloc of seats in the parliament, polling 23 per cent of popular votes. His following among Russia's disaffected military is known to be strong; and the

former, KGB suspected of propping his movement.

Yeltsin is obviously responding to the challenge by appropriating Zhirinovsky's programme item by item. Four years ago he was mindful of "Islamic sensitivities" and withheld open support for Serbia. Now he has abandoned that pretense. For two years Yeltsin heeded liberal counsel against precipitating war in Chechnya; then inched toward it throughout 1994 until December when he launched a war of extermination along lines suggested by Zhirinovsky. In 1991, Yeltsin upheld the right of free press; in 1994 the Russian press and the government were already at odds.

As for the United States and allies: in the days when Mikhail Gorbachev was their favoured Russian leader, they used to dismiss Boris Yeltsin as a "drunken lout". When he put Grozny to fire, Clinton's White House declared that Chechnya was Russia's "internal affair". On January 20, when Moscow announced that the Chechen capital had fallen after forty days of unequal battle, the New York Times reported the wisdom at the White House: Yeltsin and his aides must be "supported, strengthened, and taken seriously." Obviously, the "lout" is now their "pet". Vladimir Zhirinovsky awaits his turn. Is he kosher?

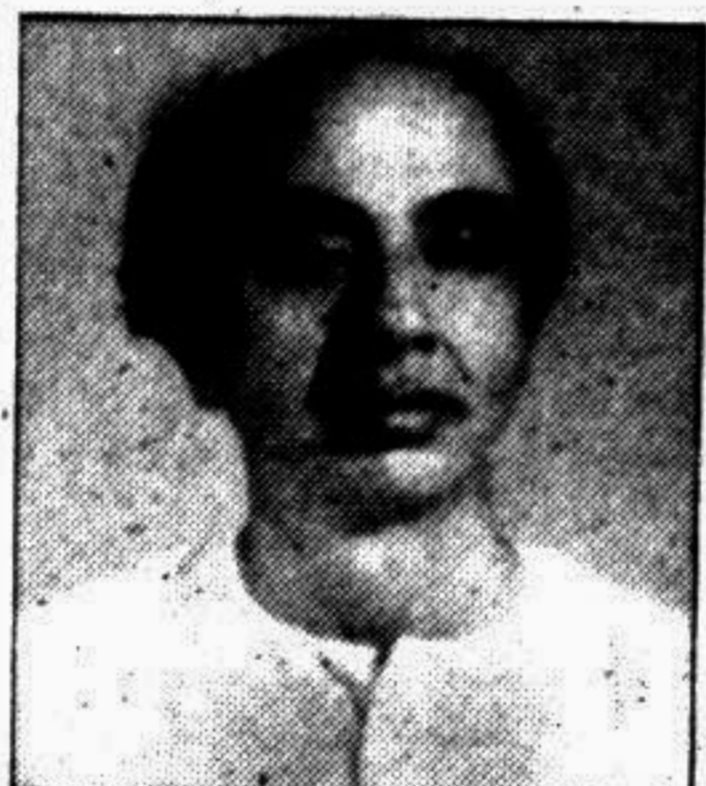
Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

Interview of Trade Union Leaders by Nazmul Ashraf

"Disrespect to Democratic System is Root of the Stalemate"

Abul Bashar, Convener, Patkal Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad and Central Leader, SKOP



DISRESPECT to democratic system by the political parties was the root of present political stalemate, said Abul Bashar adding that proper democratic prac-

tice within the party and with other parties was a must for political stability and stable governing system.

Even after four years of the restoration of democracy, a democratic culture was not developed due to lack of democratic values and beliefs in the major political parties, he noted.

The present BNP government has lost credibility to each and every section of the society because of its obstinacy, indecision and inefficiency, he said and added that it was also because of the ab-

sence of farsightedness of the ruling party that the country was now plunged into a deep crisis.

Terminating the opposition's demand for a caretaker government to hold the next general elections as logical, the trade union leader commented that the Prime Minister should have accepted the demand much earlier. But the PM had killed time and made the political situation further complicated, he said.

Bashar suggested that solution of the problem was still possible if the PM initiated a fresh round of talks with the

opposition with broader outlook. On the question of black money, the labour leader accused all the major parties including the BNP, the Awami League and the Jatiya Party for nominating black money-holders to contest elections since, he said, the major parties were one way or other obliged to such people.

In this regard, he regretted, the Khaleda Zia government did not take any action against the bank defaulters despite publishing a list of the defaulters soon after she came to power.

"The Political Stalemate has Deepened Economic Crisis"

Abdullah Sarkar, Central Leader, SKOP and President, Samajtantrik Sramik Front

THE root of the on-going political imbroglio was caused by the capitalist countries and the pro-capitalist world agencies that were gradually grabbing the economy of the country, said Abdullah Sarkar.

The noted labour leader said that expanding control of the imperialist forces over the national economy and the adoption of so-called open market economic policy by the ruling party as well as by the parties expecting to be in power some day had caused a deep crisis in the country's agricultural and industrial sectors. The political stalemate on the caretaker government issue had deepened the economic crisis, he added.

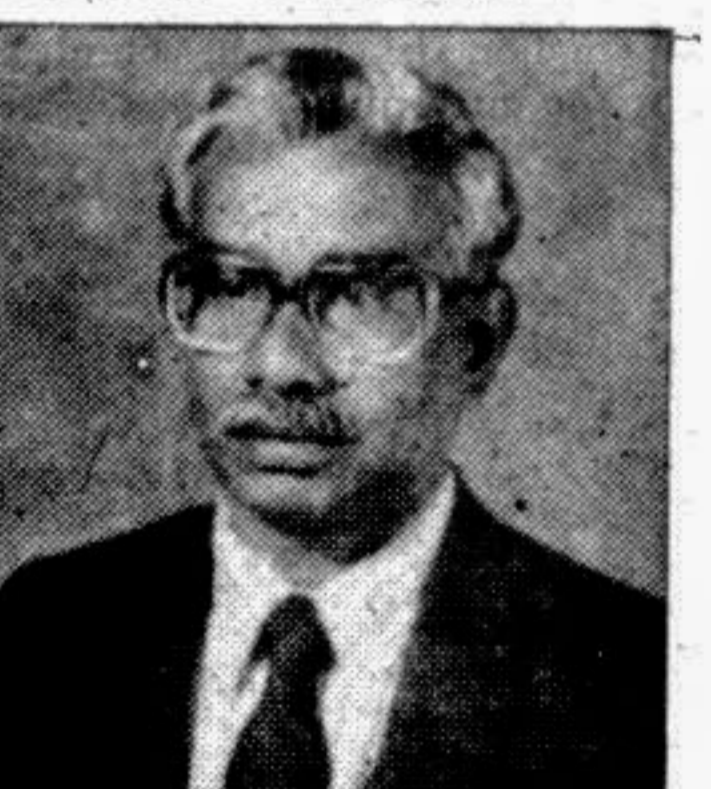
The prolonging political

crux was also blocking the way for institutionalising the nascent democracy. Sarkar opined and blamed the ruling and major opposition parties for creating the problem and keeping it unresolved only to serve their identical purposes under the existing economic system that was by no way suitable for the toiling masses.

The non-suitability of the present economic system had been proved under the rule of BNP which had apparently failed to change the lot of the common people he said adding, "Rights of the working class won't be protected by a mere change of a party in the power. A change in the economic policy conducive to the working class can only stop exploitation in the society."

The SKOP leader blamed the ruling party for attempting to cling to power and the opposition, especially the Awami League, for striving to go to power at any cost. "Such practices were harming the hard-earned democratic process and barring it from being institutionalised," he noted. "It seems people's struggle for democracy had gone in vain."

On the way out of the crisis, Sarkar viewed that a settlement of the caretaker issue only could help the people to have an atmosphere for identifying their problems and to have those resolved. For a permanent solution, he suggested the people would have to look for an alternative force which could really give them

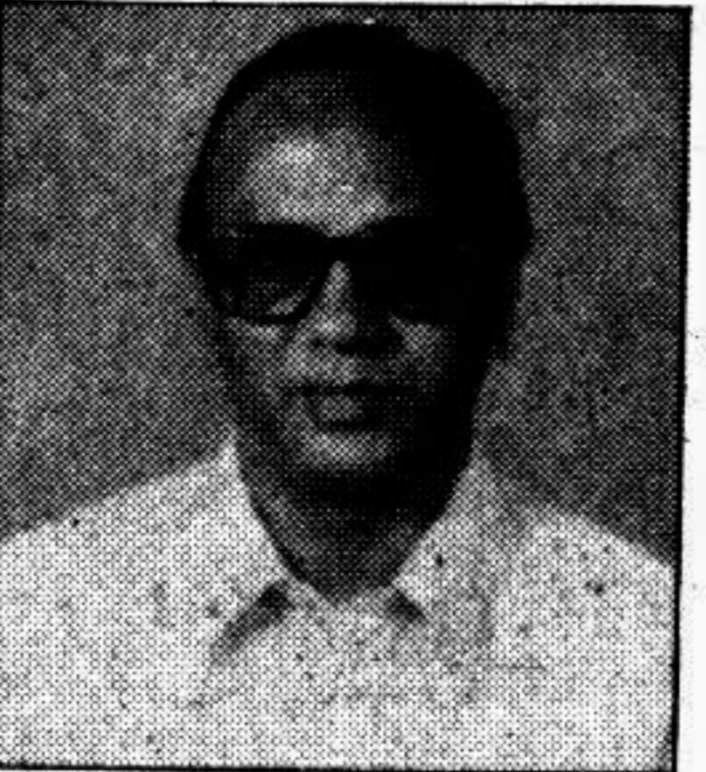


economic freedom. The left parties, dedicated to the majority working class, can be the substitute," he affirmed.

Stressing the need for an immediate solution to the persisting political disaster, Sarkar warned, "Otherwise anti-democratic forces may capture state power."

"Ruling Party should Accept the Caretaker Govt Demand"

Dr Wajedul Islam, General Secretary, Trade Union Centre and Coordinator, SKOP



DR Wajedul Islam Khan said the current political crisis was caused by the ruling BNP's rejection of the Opposition's legitimate demand for a caretaker government to conduct the next general elections.

However, he equally blamed the opposition parties for the

way they had pushed up the demand i.e. the en masse resignation from the Parliament.

In this context, Dr Wajedul Islam viewed that the Opposition should have continued pressure on the government through a simultaneous agitation in and outside the Parliament. The en bloc resignation had further complicated the way for resolution of the political crisis, he said adding that the governing party could have avoided such an undesirable situation by showing a liberal attitude to the Opposition.

To get rid of the crisis, he said, the ruling party must broaden its outlook, accept the caretaker government demand and then arrange a sitting with the Opposition to finalise the formation of such government.

On the question of next general polls, Dr Wajedul Islam viewed that it could be held as per schedule provided the BNP accepted the caretaker issue right now. Otherwise, the party in power would have to quit in the face of opposition agitation making an early polls inevitable.

The Election Commission needed full cooperation of the political parties and an authority to exercise it (authority) to unhindered, he said adding it was only possible with a non-party government in power.

Commenting on the measures envisaged by the EC bill passed, Dr Wajedul Islam said: "Whatever powers the EC were given and whatever steps were

taken, those were bound to yield no good results with a political party conducting the elections. All-out cooperation of the political parties and sincerity of the administrative machinery with a non-political government in power can only guarantee a free, fair and peaceful election."

Supporting the EC move to introduce Identity Cards and a database election system, the SKOP leader said that these would contribute a lot in determining fairness of an election.

According to him, the use of black money still remains the biggest factor influencing the polls. He suggested stern action against the candidates using black money.

"BNP should Overcome the Crisis through Dialogue"

Lutfur Rahman, Joint Convener Patkal Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad

LUTFUR Rahman identified BNP government's obstinacy, inefficiency, breaching of commitments with political parties, professional groups, student community and trade union bodies and politicising the administration as reasons behind the current political stalemate.

"I wish the elected government of Khaleda Zia complete its term but I believe the nascent democracy won't be harmed if the present government is removed by the Opposition now agitating with a legitimate demand — a non-party interim administration to supervise the next general election," he told.

The ball was now at the ruling BNP's court and only BNP could rid the nation of the crisis by arranging a dialogue with the Opposition to finalise the composition of the proposed caretaker government, he viewed.

Besides, he added, the government should dissolve the 'crippled' Parliament and announce the schedule of an early elections.

Speaking on the independence and authority of the Election Commission (EC), Lutfur demanded removal of the Chief Election Commission as he had lost credibility especially after his role in handling the controversial

Magura by poll.

Commenting on the EC bill passed, he said the new provisions provided by the EC bill was not enough to ensure fairness of a poll. Neutrality of the election conducting persons should also be guaranteed.

He also recommended strict laws to punish the poll offenders and quick disposal of the election-related cases. He added, violators of election rules should be declared unfit for the next consecutive elections. "No step can work until the election is held under a neutral government," he said.

Solution to the lingering political stalemate is very



much possible provided the Prime Minister showed statesmanship and acted responsibly in handling the national issues and dealing with opposition parties.