

## ID Card Issue

Do we have time to issue computerised ID cards to six crore (60 million) voters? Or is six-month not enough? Opinions differ, as it does on every important issue under the sun, anywhere in the world, and especially in Bangladesh. The difference between diverse views in Bangladesh and elsewhere is that, here we all talk on the basis of impressions and 'guesstimates' and seldom on facts. To make things worse, many of us talk from our own partisan perspective not bothering about what is good for the nation. We are afraid that the current controversy about whether or not we are in a position to issue computerised ID card is beginning to fall into such a trap. The 'can do' group are making brave claims but are not coming up with practical proposals that we can examine, judge and decide upon. The 'we cannot' group is even worse. There is no attempt to provide facts or arguments as to why we cannot go for ID cards, except saying that six-month is too short to register six crore people.

As of Thursday, EC appears to have decided to go ahead partially, if not fully, with the ID cards project. We support it. But for the debate that has gone on so far, we have two objections to the state of the debate. First is that we are losing time as we are arguing, and this we have been doing for more than a year now. If the work got started when the amendment bill was passed in the parliament making it mandatory to give ID card to voters, we would have been well within time to complete the job by now. Second, we object to the 'all or nothing' tone of the arguments. Those who are saying that we do not have enough time to finish the whole job, should at least say how much of the job can be finished within the time that is available, 80% or 75% or may be even less. We are of the view that the work must start right now. If we miss this opportunity to get the system of ID card going, then this work will get postponed till the next election. All concerned must understand that there are lots of other uses of ID cards. Once we start getting our voters into some sort of data base, this will have a tremendous impact on all sorts of planning process. It will enable us to be much more precise and targeted to in our social planning. We will have a far better idea of resource needs and allocation.

Therefore we suggest that if not for the total 64 districts, we should introduce the ID cards for as many districts as we can. Alternatively we should at least try to do so in all the urban areas of the country. Under no circumstance should we abandon the project.

## Karbala Galore

We well imagine what Chittagong is going through now. Bengalees traditionally call the situation a *karbala*. For some time past Dhaka has been having its pockets of *karbala* without respite. The phenomenon of water supply pipes drying up without notice and continuing its dry spell indefinitely for hours and even days — has lately started its Chittagong stint. The malady is well understood in Dhaka. Water collection and supply is far short of what Dhaka indeed needs for its nearly eight million residents. A plummeting ground water level has effected a hurting out on that already deficit water production quanta. Without providing for running water you cannot call it a city or even a town. Without water it is not even a slum. To cope with the situation WASA in Dhaka has followed the DESA in distributing its own kind of loadshedding. This special kind of suffering has lately found a prey in Chittagong.

And then on Wednesday morning the unforeseen happened. The 18-inch diameter pipe carrying treated water to Chittagong burst at a point called Chandgaon. Result: a vast area of the city is now without running water and perhaps has already fallen a victim to a spreading diarrhoea epidemic. For two days a multitude of people is going without a drop of usable water and the ponds and other dirty and open reservoirs of water are being taxed into extinction by a mass of people in frenzy.

This can happen any day in Dhaka. Chittagong has been found unprepared for such eventualities, what about Dhaka? How will WASA handle such a situation here? Why wouldn't DCC have a hand in relieving the load? How can such a disaster be helped?

We want the authorities to take the Chittagong pipe-burst as a warning and prepare accordingly. Meantime things should start improving if only not to run people into despair. In the matter of conservancy, particularly in a fast growing megacity, coping is not just the thing to do. We should be able to run ahead of the problem unless we prove to be mindless morons totally devoid of thoughts of a healthful setting for life.

## Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is on the rise. The news is alarming but hardly surprising. What with such a large proportion of unemployed youth, large number of out school and college students, widespread social unrest and high level of frustration — all contribute to a situation that lends itself to drug abuse. There is yet no survey of actual drug users in the country. This may indicate that the government has not taken this problem seriously enough. But on the other hand, to its credit, the government has decided to establish three more drug addiction treatment centres in Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna. Thus there appears to be contradictory signals about the seriousness with which we are approaching this rising menace.

It is our view that time has come to face this challenge head-on. We must go public with the nature and extent of the drug problem. Comparative to many other developing countries our drug problem could still be small. So, some may argue, that there is no need to raise much hue and cry about it. We feel the very opposite. It is precisely because our problem is still well within control, that we should do everything to raise public consciousness to prevent its spread further. The fact that drug addiction is not that widespread should be of no consolation for us. Because given our social condition, the spread may occur very fast. Suddenly we may discover that the situation has changed dramatically within a very short period. So we say, the government should join hands with NGOs, public bodies, community based organisations, cultural and drama groups and launch a massive public campaign against the spread of drug addiction. Some progress has been made. There is now a far greater awareness of the problem than before. But time has come for a more concerted action.

WITH the country's general election drawing close, the political arena in Bangladesh seems to be growing brisk. The signs of the seeming briskness are as follows: (a) Political activists of different political parties are apparently brewing and preparing for the next election battle; (b) large number of leaders and workers are seen joining either Awami League (AL) or BNP (possibly, because of their prospects in the coming election); (c) retired civil and military officials are entering into politics wearing particular party's hat; (d) the ever mobile or the 'power' politicians are also reported to be rushing to buy AL or BNP sympathy with the presumption that either of them would win in the next general election; and (e) the two chiefs, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed are found travelling wide and promising wild in their public meetings which are growing in numbers. It is, however, not to argue that other political parties are not warming up for the next election but their probability of winning the election is probably not deemed high and hence seem to attract not much attention from the joiners.

### More May be Worse

The more supporters a political party has, the higher is the probability of its doing well in an election. *Ipsa facto*, political parties tend to deploy different tactics to lure more supporters, especially those

# Politics To-day : When Prudence is Pasted-up

*As the election draws near, deserters from other parties, as a natural phenomenon, join 'prudent' political parties to secure their 'berths' ... But the leaders of such 'major' parties count only 'quantity' rather than 'quality' of the political immigrants.*

capable of winning a seat in respective constituencies. Hind-sight, however, the quality of such candidates are allegedly ignored, inadvertently or inadvertently. For example, three JP MPs are reported to have joined BNP by crossing the floor. All of them are alleged to be products of an autocratic regime — a regime against which BNP boasts to have fought nine years. The most disconcerting of all is the fact that one of these three 'deserters' had been one of the closest lieutenants of Lt Gen. H M Ershad. This deserting MP is alleged to have amassed huge wealth and for which the present government, immediately after assuming power, sued him. It is reported that few cases are still chasing him. When he joined BNP and BTV had to telecast the ceremony, the nation was bemused and amazed to see to what extent an 'uncompromising' charperson of BNP could compromise on power games. Close at heel, some other JP leaders, with more or less the same kind of history, also were shown to place their allegiance to BNP. Thus a mere shift of allegiance could turn hatred to love in to-

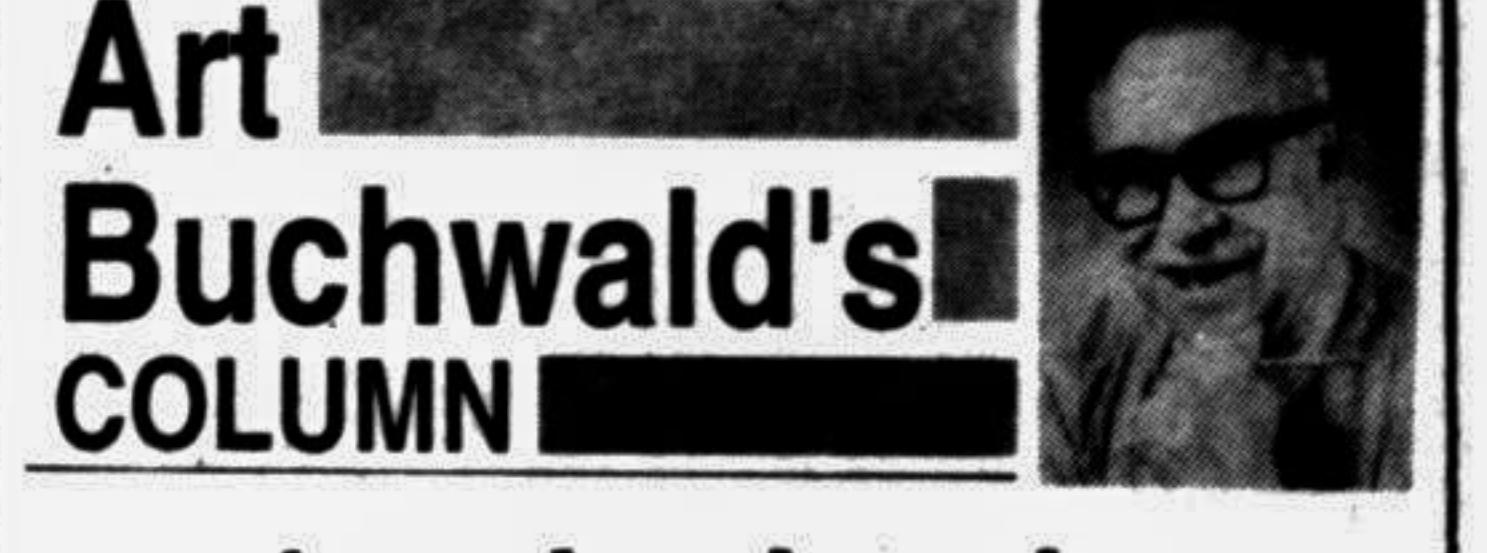
day's politics where prudence of our political leaders seems to perish.

AL is alleged to have been towing the same line. Some of its recent recruits from JP do not hold a clean slate either. In fact, few of them are alleged to have built fortunes during the last regime. Among the joiners, some had not been even distant sympathizers of AL in the past but in 1995 they

might face in future. Many of the workers and leaders accumulated black money during the earlier regime. Some of them escaped during the 1991 election and the rest follow now. If AL and BNP have to rehabilitate them, just out of a competitive bidding, then we must conclude that the prudence of our political leaders is being pasted up by power games. They do not, in fact,

edge on this has already been eroded due to the non-fulfilment of many of its earlier promises viz. autonomy for TV/Radio, separation of Judiciary from Executive, fair input and output prices to farmers, corruption-free society etc. With these unfinished agenda, the BNP chairperson and her entourage have been making yet a lot of monetary commitments which might upset the hard-earned macro-stability and fiscal discipline. BNP's election pledges seem to carry more weight than its pledges to reforms and hence disconcerting episodes might await the nation after the election.

AL is also not lagging far behind. Some of its election pledges do not seem to follow from careful judgements. For example, how could AL, if voted to power, subsidize agriculture sector or farmers? Will the subsidy be meant for a part of agriculture or for a section of farmers? What would be the cost and benefit of such subsidy? These and many other such promises need clarification. By and large, the election promises of both BNP and AL do not seem to be premised on sound economic footings.



## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

could suddenly discover that "Bangabandhu" is the architect of Bangladesh or that only AL could salvage the nation. Housing such supporters in AL camp could, perhaps, do more harm than good — a real fact which power game of to-day may not like to accept.

In fact, what seems to scare us is not the entry of these types of politicians to AL or BNP politics as their sudden and unnoticed "habitual" exit — that these two parties

practice what they tend to preach. But people of this country are growing matured, perhaps, at a faster pace than their "beloved" leaders are and on this count only, leaders might have to pay heavy price both in the short and in the long run.

### Commit to Breach

Both BNP and AL leaders are travelling wide and throwing wild promises just to lure voters. BNP's comparative

## Red Hot Anger Across the US West

### Defending Rural American Dream against Green and Red Tyranny

*The hatred of government underlying the Midwest militias in the spotlight as a result of the Oklahoma City bombing is also evident throughout the rural West. Yet traveling through the region and speaking with dozens of its people reveals even stronger feelings than hatred, especially an intense love of land farmed and grazed for generations coupled with a fierce attachment to property rights already evident in the American battle for independence in 1776.*

Jon Christensen writes from Alturas, CA

"THIS is a war and we're choosing up sides," Gene Gustin, chairman of a county public lands advisory board in Elko, Nevada, told a "Win Back the West" rally here early this year. "This is about whether we'll live as a free society. We know it's getting close."

This was not a group of extremist militia men bent on overthrowing the US government by armed force. No one was dressed in camouflage. No one carried an automatic weapon. Instead, the crowd of 350 — a wash in cowboy hats and gimme hats — had packed the only movie theatre in this rural ranching community in remote northeastern California to hear how Nevada's new generation of Sagebrush Rebels are fighting federal environmental regulations in Elko.

Driving 200 miles north from Reno, the nearest metropolis, I had come to see what this spreading grassroots revolt in the West is all about and how close it is to violence. What I found was more of the desperation, anger and confusion that one hears everywhere in the rural West today, driven as much by fierce love of the land as hatred of the government.

The rally was in January 1995, three months before the bombing in Oklahoma City. But it was just over a year after a satchel of explosives ripped through the ceiling of the Bureau of Land Management headquarters in Reno. It was two months before a pipe bomb exploded at a Forest

Service office in Carson City, Nevada, just two blocks from the state capitol. And it was deep into what many here have taken to calling "the war for the West."

"Why are we here?" Modoc County District Attorney Hugh Comiskey asked the crowd. "Because we realize we're in danger of losing our claim to America as a result of government developments in the last 20 years. America was made great by Americans owning and working their land. All of it is based on owning a piece of land, the right to own property, the ability to roll up your sleeves, plan, and get ahead. Now the dream is so tarnished we doubt its existence."

Comiskey said the rural American dream is threatened by federal government regulation driven by an urban environmental vision. He described a nightmare vision of wilderness and wild lands taking over public lands, of Sierra Club volunteers and federal agents surveying private property for endangered species and riding hard over local communities, of a United Nations biodiversity treaty that would force the elimination of people from half of the United States.

"Whether we face green tyranny or red tyranny and ultimately face bloodshed is up to you the people," he told the crowd.

Dick Carver, a county commissioner from Tonopah, Nevada, was the main attraction at this rally. He told the story of how he got Nye County to pass resolutions laying claim

to all federal land in the country. On July 4th last year, he commandedeer a county bulldozer to open a road closed by the US Forest Service in the Toiyabe National Forest. When a federal officer tried to stop him, Carver pressed ahead, backed by a crowd of armed local supporters. "All it would have taken was for him to draw a weapon and 50 people with sidearms would have drilled him," Carver said to raucous cheers.

"But it wouldn't help us or then for that to happen. Let's make it work without bloodshed."

"I think we'd better look at this as our last chance," said Wayne Hage, a Nevada rancher who participated in the unsuccessful Sagebrush Rebellion that sought to turn federal lands over to the states in the late 1970s. Hage has sued the federal government for "taking" his ranch without compensating him because the Forest Service cut his grazing permits.

"The squeeze has come," said Hage. "In the last 20 years, the noose is getting tighter. The goal is to extinguish private rights. It's the same old battle of 1776 and before, whether free people will exist or we'll be serfs under an elite class that is destined to rule."

Hage helped start an organization called the National Federal Lands Conference that sponsors meetings and rallies around the West to teach ranchers how to resist federal regulations. Last fall, the

group's newsletter encouraged Westerners to form militias to defend their communities and land. "Everybody has the right to defend what is theirs," Hage said. "It has to be done individually. You can't expect the government to do it. We as individuals have to stand up and be counted."

As the rally broke up, I went to talk to a group of eighth graders from a nearby school, all from ranching families. "When it gets to destroy our life, it gets personal," said Spencer Smith. "It's our way of life. If they take it away, we don't have anything. Everybody wants to have something of your own to talk about. Our ranch, that's what we pride ourselves on." "It's the American Dream," said Connor Nolan. "They're pushing it to the point where we have to stand up.

However, he continued, "I don't want to sit back while they annihilate our way of life. If they look positive, maybe we can come up with some compromise." "We have to," said Spencer Smith. "The land is for all of us. If says in the Constitution, I don't think it will get that far — to a war or confrontation."

I left the rally taking a small measure of hope from the willingness of these young Westerners to consider the possibility of compromising with the larger world. But this tentative optimism was accompanied by a growing fear that their small hopes would be overwhelmed by the confrontations to come.

— Pacific News Service

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## OPINION

### The Standards of Politicians' Criticism

**M M Ahmad**

with dynamic enthusiasm? The latter also complain, but constructively, with practical lists of proposed measures, to increase investment and export.

The continued absence of any "development" in our political leadership is appalling. The public apathy on the issue is significant: there is hardly any public discussion or outcry on this low level of political gamesmanship in our country. How to break this vicious circle? The dirty politics is on again on the eve of the next general elections. May be mud-slinging comes naturally to us in this land of rain, rivers, and floods. The dryness of the Farakka Barrage cannot return to dust the celestial egos of the political *mastaans* (here the word *mastaan* is used in the positive and literary sense, meaning intoxicated with power, status or position).

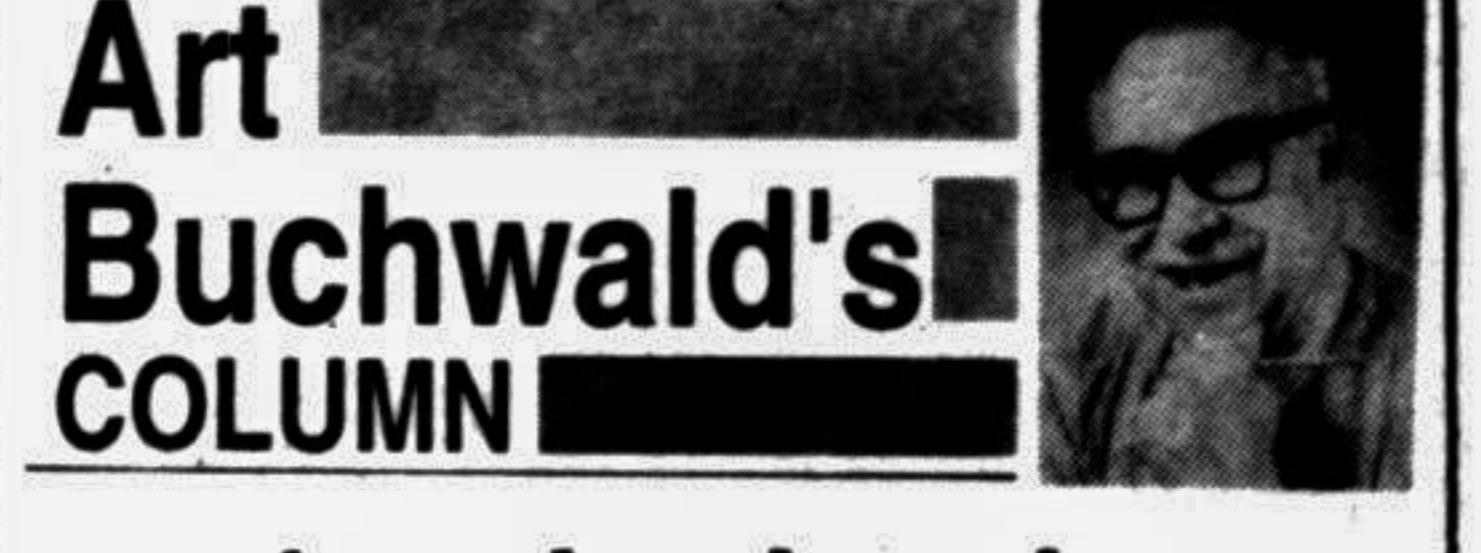
The healthy voter was forced to visit hospitals for the treatment of all kinds of non-existent diseases; but the never received the hospitality he deserved, politically and socially. The same treatment (mehmандاری or *khaatir*) continues in the form of enslaved freedom.

"Men may come, and men may go, but I go on for ever." (Tennyson, the Brook)

## Last Words

As the general election draws near, more deserters are likely to join either BNP or AL to have berths during the election. This is not an unusual phenomenon and in the past also we witnessed such shifts. But over the years, it has been observed that the leaders of the major political parties seem to run only after "quantity" rather than "quality" of the political immigrants. We would like to plea to our national leaders not to entertain those political leaders and workers against whom various charges are hanging and against whom social indignation rears high. After all, corruption, dishonesty, influence of black money etc cannot be eradicated from the society by making laws alone. The most important task is to build social awareness against those sins and the sinners. If national leaders are found welcoming them in their respective tents just to get elected, then we have nothing to say.

We would also like to earnestly request our learned leaders not to make as much election pledges as they can but to do the reverse, as much less as possible. After all, we do not want that our leaders should be called treacherous due to their inability to carry out the commitments in future. All of these can only be possible through the application of prudence of our leaders who would rank the country above the party.



## Lordy, Lordy

**W**HILE politics does make strange bedfellows, it can also scare the heck out of you. It is especially nerve-racking for people like me. The Republican Party and a majority of its presidential candidates are now shunning between the sheets with the Christian Coalition. And there is some debate about whether the Coalition has captured the hearts and minds of the GOP.

So I went to the Republic Party headquarters to get some guidance.

"Do you have to be a Christian to be a member of the Republican Party?"

The man looked up the answer in a very thick book. "Not necessarily. You can qualify for a waiver if you have a letter from Phil Gramm, Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God."

"Not so fast," he said. "I still need to give you a test."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Of course," I told him. "I'm a registered voter."

"Do you believe in the same God that Pat Robertson believes in?"

"Which God is that?"

"The one who tells you how much money to send in to Robertson so he can carry out the Lord's work."

"I'm not sure, but I'll check on its when I say my prayers tonight."

"Since you are not a Christian, how do you feel about school prayer?"

"I don't think a person can belong to a Christian political party and not be in favour of it."

The man was checking off my responses. "Where do you stand on school vouchers, which would enable parents to send their children to Christian schools instead of public ones?"

"It will help the party. I'm for them."