

EC Must be Firm and Clear

A state is as good as its elections are. An incumbent government's bonafide of wanting free and fair elections is the first condition for having them. This is, however, qualified by two factors: one, the state of politics as influenced by out-of-government parties and, specially in Bangladesh, the military and the student force; two, the Election Commission with the questions of its competence, capacity, capability and conduct. The present government's bonafide in the matter has been far too seriously challenged by the opposition parties. With this unsettled, the assessment of the first limiting factor — that of the state of politics — is unnecessary. At the moment, all our hopes of having free and fair polls — in fact all our last hopes — rest, as such, on the Election Commission.

But the EC is already on a wavering course. A question-mark hangs on the veracity of the draft voters' list — some 16 million short of the earlier one. The EC's explanation that the earlier one's extra volume was contributed by motivated and false over-registration did not cover the possibility that its own draft has indeed under-registered by a scandalous margin. The ever shifting dates for complaint and correction and revision are a proof of the EC's self-doubt about its performance.

Now the question is what good it will do to the elections if there isn't enough trust in the list — if there remains even one little hole that can justify the challenging of one or all outcome of the polls?

The second instance of oscillation has been an unclear stand on the feasibility of ID cards for all voters — although it was very clear from the beginning that time was fast running out for the project. When all of the time for materialising the original task handed to the EC had been lost, the commission continued to come out with all kinds of ideas about the ID cards — such as a partial coverage and doing the thing without database etc. The EC, to repair the dent that has been caused to its good name, must take a very clear and firm stand on ID cards.

A Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad survey has found out that eighty-seven per cent of the respondents wanted ID cards for the next polls but 51 per cent felt that trying to rush the job may result in many being excluded from voting. What has the EC to say about this? We don't know who will be at the helms when people go to polls, but the EC must not be found wanting in any respect whatsoever.

Beyond Price Watch

The price spiral, even in the midst of floods, is not as much of a tangled web as it may appear to be at the first sight. This is how we would like to react to the reported outcome of the Prime Minister's price review meeting with her officials and the private sector trade leaders on Sunday.

The PM has made a general remark on the budgetary duty cut-backs failing to ease price pressure on the common consumers, a trend that has been exercising the public mind for quite sometime now. The traders are likely to say they are still dealing in the old consignments and the benefit of tax rebates could only be passed on to the consumers after the new imports will have arrived. The same could be their argument about the local merchandise held in stock which had entailed production costs at the old rates of duty. The budget was passed only in June. There is no gainsaying the fact that it will be sometime before the traders started reflecting the tax-cuts in their pricing. At any rate, experience suggests that duty rebates in the last budget went unincorporated in the prices.

The traders are also apt to point out that import prices going high, like in the cases of pulses and edible oils, the asking prices had to be high, too. Then comes up the litany of transportation dislocations owing to the floods or political strikes. Since there are so many confusing variables likely to affect prices, the traders need to come out with a public statement explaining why they failed to share the fiscal relief with consumers.

Other than exhortative appeals to the traders not to hoard, what have we really got in terms of a price control mechanism so far? Of primary importance is a thorough-going watch over the behaviour of market forces beginning with production, local procurement and imports to effective supplies and demands whose sum-total goes to determine the prices. Speculative trade is its at worst during political agitation and floods, times for which the government should have a contingency price control strategy in close cooperation with private sector leaders. As part of this, the municipal wards, union parishads, police, R & H Deptt. and subregional trade bodies could have an anti-mastan task force to locally combat the menace of toll collection that goes to fuel the prices.

BGMEA's Battle

Bangladesh apparels have done well at the International Men's Wear Fair in Cologne, Germany, where all the seasonal collections for 1995 were on display. It has been a very rewarding experience for the BGMEA and, more specifically, for the twelve firms which made the debut at the fair under the former's umbrella. Our Garment manufacturers have been directly exposed to the changing preferences of consumers in a high-profile styles and fashions market, the biggest one in Europe and a doorway to other markets in the Continent.

One advantage in the German market is the absence of quota restrictions. Besides, our seriousness to disassociate ourselves from the use of child labour has gone into circulation abroad elevating our image as an ethical garment exporter.

All this is heart-warming not doubt, but hardly anything to rest our oars on. Within the next ten years of the phased withdrawal of quotas, in terms of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, our readymade garments sector must achieve a significant value addition in the production — line to stay in the business. For every taka earned, the local input has been as little as 23 poishas. The high import dependence of the industry needs to be curbed drastically.

THE university is a hopeless place, he writes, because the teachers' subsistence so far as it arises from salaries, is derived from a fund altogether independent of their success in teaching the young. He thinks that the place will remain hopeless so long as the endowment of schools and colleges diminish the necessity of application in the teachers. He is of the view that the money thrown at non-fee-paying education would disappear down the sink of the system "in general contrived not for the benefit of students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease, of the masters". He wants the endowments to be replaced by fees specifically tied to the educational results achieved.

No, he is not an irate guardian or a worked-up taxpayer complaining about the institutions of higher education in Bangladesh. The complainant in this case is Adam Smith and refers to the prevailing conditions in the British universities in general and Oxford in particular in his days. (He died in 1790).

Adam Smith is, by any measure, the political economist exerting greatest influence even today on the economic and political theory and practice. And he had enough personal experience, first as a student at Oxford and then as a professor at Glasgow University, to lend credibility to his observations.

It must have been nearly four years ago that "The Economist" of London, while discussing the issue of the quality and accountability in higher education in Britain, made use of the foregoing quotations from Adam Smith. I was reminded of the same while listening to the various speeches in the inaugural session at the recent international seminar on "Quality Assurance in Higher Education" jointly organised by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh and the Commonwealth of Learning. Concern about ensuring quality in higher education is as relevant in Bangladesh today as it was in Britain more than two centuries ago.

In her inaugural speech, the Prime Minister was quite forthright in her views on the

Ensuring Quality in Higher Education

The University Act of 1973 is perhaps unique in its conception of autonomy of a publicly funded institution of higher learning. It is doubtful if this has any parallel even in countries like the UK, India or Pakistan etc. with whom we share a common historical tradition in the field of higher education.

issue. "It is, therefore, particularly essential for us now to ensure quality of higher education", she stated. Her pronouncement was indeed heartening, particularly in the context of the almost permanent state of crisis in the institutions of higher education in Bangladesh during the last two decades or so, and the growing concerns both within the country and abroad on the quality of the instruction and the degrees.

I am sure that the participation of so many eminent educationists, both from home and abroad, in the seminar must have resulted in many excellent recommendations — more or less the same out-come from other such seminars and workshops in the past. I wish I could be half as sure of even partial implementation of the same. Do the publicly funded and effectively non-fee-paying (according to a UGC report, in some cases students' fees amount to less than half of one percent of the total expenditure), yet self-governing universities have the necessary will, commitment and above all, the institutional framework to implement these recommendations. No less important is the extent to which the government and all the major political parties — each with not too non-violent partisan followings within the universities — are genuinely willing to help create the necessary climate for many overdue reforms for quality assurance.

My pessimism deepened when I saw a news item which came out about the same time as the seminar on "quality assurance" was being held. It reported a decision by the Admissions Committee of the Dhaka University to the effect that henceforth the children and the wards of the teachers, officers and employees of the University will not have to secure even the minimum qualifying marks in the admission tests as was the rule till now. (Even this

was discriminatory and inequitable as many other less privileged aspirants even with better performance are denied admission for lack of sufficient places). From now on, just sitting for test, regardless of performance, would suffice. The decision may technically be within the rights of the university authorities as conferred by the University Act. Yet, apart from the question of equity, it directly runs in the face of any commitment to quality assurance. One cannot help wonder whether the next step would be a decision these lucky individuals will not need to earn passing grades to get a degree — just appearance at the examination would entitle them to a degree!

My fairly close involvement with the universities

teacher, he was also a UGC member for a period. Based on his experience, in 1986 he wrote a series of newspaper articles on the governance of the universities, particularly in the context of the system introduced by the University Acts of 1973. I believe what he wrote nearly ten years back is as relevant — perhaps even more so — today as it was then.

As an illustration of the inherent deficiency of the system, he narrated an episode which is worth retelling. A junior teacher made it a general practice not to turn up for most of his classes. (A phenomenon with which many students and guardians are painfully familiar). When asked about it by the Dean, his simple response was that there is no provision in the University

country.

The University Act of 1973 is perhaps unique in its conception of autonomy of a publicly funded institution of higher learning. It is doubtful if this has any parallel even in countries like the UK, India or Pakistan etc. with whom we share a common historical tradition in the field of higher education. The highly innovative system of university governance was introduced by this Act no doubt with the best of intentions. The expectations must have been that such autonomy and internal democracy exercised through various tiers of elected bodies will result in an unprecedented level of quality excellence. Unfortunately, after all these years there would be hardly anybody — not excluding those running the system — in a position of asserting that these expectations have been realised.

But there have been other consequences, certainly unintended or unanticipated by the framers of the Act. In my personal capacity as a guardian, and official capacities as Education Secretary (and ex-office Secretary to the Chancellor) for three years and part-time UGC member for seven years exposed me to far too many of these to be able even to catalogue. I would confine myself to some extracts from the latest UGC report available with me. It is for the year 1990, and the original is in Bangla.

The state of affairs in the universities in respect of maintenance and compilation of accounts is indeed deplorable. In none of these, a balance sheet as per rules is prepared. Some are 4/5 years in arrears in the matter of the preparation of annual accounts of income and expenditure. Some universities have not maintained cash books and prepared bank reconciliation statements for two years.... Audit objections raised 10/12 years ago, are

yet to be settled? "One university in FY 1988-89 have new appointments, outside the approved budget, to 269 posts including 163 teachers. This very same university in 1985-86 appointed in one go 200 class-four employees in a similar manner."

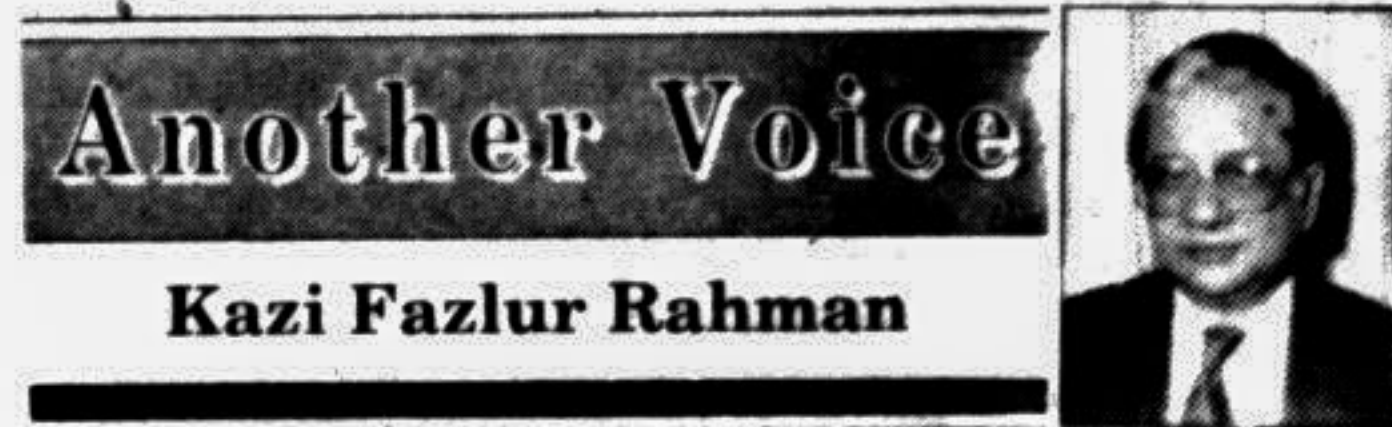
"During the last five years, the members in senior teaching position, that is, as professor or associate professor have registered average increases of 123 per cent and 133 per cent respectively. In some of these increases, are 301 per cent and 208 per cent. On the other hand, the numbers of assistant professors and lecturers have substantially declined. .... Average increase in the numbers of administrative officers was 43.98 per cent. In one case, it was 73 per cent. Relaxations of the rules for the creation and up-gradation of posts, promotions and new appointments are the reasons for such increases."

teachers are promoted after completing a given member of years of service whether they have the requisite number of publications or not.

Such mass upgradation of posts and promotions might have been made in the hope that these will contribute to higher quality of education. The assumption could have been that the best way to ensure quality is to designate overwhelming majority of teacher as professors or associate professors, regardless of qualifications. That was perhaps a mistaken notion — a rose is a rose by whatever name you call it.

Incidentally, could it be that the famous or infamous "mass promotion" to the posts Additional, Joint and Deputy Secretaries in the government bureaucracy was an attempt at emulating the example set by the universities?

The University Funding Council in Britain has been instrumental in meeting to a large measure the concerns voiced by Adam Smith in that country. Will any institution ever be able to do it in Bangladesh?



over the years in various capacities — student, teacher, guardian, secretary to the chancellor, UGC member, examiner, and member of various committees from time to time — has left me with one firm conviction. Our universities still have a sizeable number, though it constitutes an increasingly dwindling minority, of highly competent and committed scholars and teachers who are as good as the best in any other country. It is the present institutional arrangements and system of governance that largely inhibits them from contributing their best to the quality assurance.

Professor Qazi Abdul Latif is one such person of eminence whom I had the privilege of having as a teacher more than four decades ago. In addition to being a lifelong

Act requiring a teacher to take his assigned classes!

Certainly many functionaries in every area of public life in Bangladesh can be legitimately charged of dereliction of duties. Still, none of them would be able to take the defence that the laws governing the conditions of his service exempts him from any obligation in this respect.

It is the same system and mindset produced by it that often makes a student wait for six months or even more for the results after the examination. And that is again, with rare exceptions, after spending five or six years for completion of a course of studies nominally designed for three years. Again, such "session jams" are not solely due to campus violence or general political unrest in the

Bosnians' Fight for a Safe Home

by Shahjahan Mia

Bosnian Muslims. Tears and tension, terrors and horror are order of the day there. The Serb savagery and brutality on the hapless and innocent Muslim population in the whole Bosnia-Herzegovina have humbled the Hitlerite barbarity on the Jews in the World War II. The Serb atrocities on their Muslim opponents have put to shame all accounts of cruelty and horrors heard, or seen of contemporary world events.

After making their way into Srebrenica and Zepa the Serbs would now turn their guns to Gorazde, the third UN declared "safe area" in the eastern Bosnia. And if the attitude of the world leaders and the United Nations con-

tinues to remain non-committal, the fall of Gorazde is a matter of days only. Because, the Western indifference and the support from Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic are encouraging the Serbs to go with their aggression and atrocities unabated. The people mercilessly kicked out from Zepa have also started pouring in to nearby safer zones before the influx of refugees from Srebrenica has ended. If Gorazde falls to the Serbs, the situation will worsen further. The Croatian Serbs and the rebel Muslims have also launched attacks on the north-western enclave of Bihaq where about 1200 Bangladesh soldiers are stationed as peacekeepers.

The just concluded London conference called by British Prime Minister John Major with much fanfare to discuss the Bosnia crisis has ended without any tangible results. Again it could not come out of the Western periphery of remaining con-

front words against the Serb aggressors carrying on with their brutality in Bosnia. However the French attitude of doing something positive is a fair stance.

President Bill Clinton called the London meeting encouraging, but Senator Bob Dole, who is seeking Republican nomination for the next US Presidential election, dismissed the results as a dazzling display of ducking problems. He said he would seek a Senate approval on July 25 to ignore a 1992 UN imposed arms embargo on Bosnia.

The question now haunts the minds of many as to why the Western powers are so

Serbian onslaught has stirred the humanity, but it has failed to touch the conscience of the world leaders.

The United States of America who now feels shy to commit ground troops to Bosnia for the safety of the Muslims there acted very promptly to punish Saddam Hussein who invaded Kuwait in 1990. No one, of course, would support the invasion of a country by another in the present-day world. But the fact is that the Western powers then wasted no time to involve themselves in a full-fledged war coming from another hemisphere. Without lending any support to Saddam's action in Kuwait, can it be said that the reason behind the quick American

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American support. The Americans stuck to their proposal of carrying out "air strikes" which many believe cannot be effective without heavily armed troops on the ground to derive the benefit out of the bombardment. It is a well-known aspect of the modern warfare that effective air-cover is necessary for the artillery and infantrymen on the ground or vice versa. But only air-strike, however heavy it may be, could bring little results. Strafing from the air by the NATO fighter planes will again lead the cunning Serbs to take the lightly armed UN troops as hostages and chain them with ammunition depots, or at strategic places to use them as human shields.

The London conference has exposed the hollowness of the Western promises to do anything effective in the Muslim dominated Bosnia. The Anglo-American strategy of dilly-dallying has been evident from their attitude except utterances of some

non-committal to a cause which demands immediate deterrent measures to silence the Serbs who are carrying on with their sinister design, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia.

I may be dubbed as a die-hard fundamentalist if I am living with the identity of a Muslim in any place of the world today. It may be a sin or misfortune, but, events, happenings and attitude of some of the so-called world leaders said to be championing the cause of world peace and protecting human rights bear testimony to this. It is heart-rending to say that if a Muslim woman is violated, her baby killed and husband butchered that is not always considered as violation of human rights. The condition of the Muslims in Chechnya fighting for a homeland of their own in the Russian Federation and the agonies of the Bosnian Muslims trying to protect their independence and ensure a safe home from the

action along with its Western allies was because Iraq was a Muslim country emerging fast as a potential (nuclear) power?

From all these gimmicks of Western diplomacy and duplicity many now believe that Western powers do not actually want the rise of a Muslim state in Europe.

The United Nations on the eve of its 50th anniversary celebration is also losing its credibility further as a world body to effectively handle the crises in different places of the world. For, it could not rid itself totally of the allegation of being dominated by the Western powers led by the United States.

The responsibility given to only 79 Ukrainian soldiers to defend the Zepa enclave having 17,000 people was simply ridiculous. The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia also miserably failed to deliver the goods both on humanitarian cause and military aspect in a war without possessing mil-

itary machines worth the names. So, the UN role in Bosnia has been something like half-hearted and very casual.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed called for the ouster of the UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali and he said he would not attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the UN as the world body has failed in Bosnia. The affected people in Bosnia also asked the UN to ensure their safety and security or give them arms to fight the Serbs.

The question now remains, what really is going to happen in Bosnia in the days ahead? There is no sign that the Serbs having received uninterrupted material support from both Serbia and the Russians who are of same Slav race, will cease their aggression even if they are bombed by the NATO planes. The Bosnian Muslims, on the other hand, with no supplies of arms and ammunition will continue to lose more men and grounds to the advancing Serbs who have already taken 70 per cent of the Bosnian territory.

It is a happy augury that the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in a meeting held in Geneva on July 21 resolved that the OIC member countries would maintain the Muslim forces on the ground even in the event of a pullout of troops by the Western countries from Bosnia. The OIC said the organisation was not legally bound to respect the Bosnian arms embargo.

It now remains to be seen whether or not the Muslim world can forge a unity in all their ranks to side with their brothers in Bosnia. They have the oil power necessary to keep the machines moving. Will they use it again for the Muslim Ummah? The Muslim world is of course eagerly looking forward to an effective move before it is too late for the Bosnian Muslims to secure a safe home.

The writer is News Editor of BSS.

To the Editor...

Ugly taste

Sir, My middle-aged wife handed over to me a ten-taka note with a big laugh to see for myself to what extent the taste of a man can go, of course, downward! I was surprised to see how a man could write on a ten taka currency note inviting any girl to give (love) letter to him. On the other side of the note also he wrote the same thing inviting any girl to write to him. Thus he spoiled the currency note.

I enclose a photocopy of the note for your information. I have traveled Far East and Europe. How decent there people are. Their currencies are absolutely clean. No writing on it, even no dirt. It is really shameful for us when this sort of note goes to a foreigner.

In the recent past one of my friends who is a Filipino laughed at me showing ugly

writing on a fifty-taka note. However, it was in English. They (foreigners) may take it as a mark of taste of our people.

I would like to request our male community, irrespective of educated and unedu-

cated, through your esteemed daily, to stop this practice.

Shawk Ashraf Salehin Dhaka.

II

Sir, When I was shopping at Sauria Bazar in Manikganj, I got a five-taka currency

note in the change from a shop. I was surprised to see how a man or woman could write inviting any boy or girl

to write love letter to one Miss Makul of such and such village, PS, district etc. with such note as — "please write to me in this address. Help

me. I am a young girl..."

We have, of course, seen this kind of battered currency notes many a time and still see this spoiling habit to continue.

When we look at the notes of our neighbouring countries like India, Burma, Sri Lanka we seldom come across such a thing. In fact, people there never write any thing on their currency notes. But in our country we have been suffering from such a malaise. I would like to request all such 'enthusiasts' through the columns of your esteemed daily to stop this bad practice.

Abdur Rahman Kohinor Paikpara, Dharmt, Dhaka

