

Let Good Sense Prevail

The motion of an election is on us. It would have been better had this been avoided as we have posited beforehand and would like to stand by now. A non-representative election such as the one we are about to experience today is impolitic by its very nature and predisposed to yielding the whirlwind of a deeper political crisis. At the same time, the argument of staging this under the pressure of constitutional obligation cannot be altogether brushed aside, regardless of how we landed on this pass.

Now, what happens after the election has gone through its motions meeting the Prime Minister's limited purpose which, even if it is accepted at its face value, would still need to be tangibly followed up to prove her *bona fides* in the matter. Undoubtedly, the opposition's call for a boycott of the polls has received lots of sympathy because of the transparent meaninglessness of the election.

We have had on the one hand an election without a substance being imposed on us by the ruling party while this is being vehemently resisted by the opposition on the other hand. So that the people are caught in the middle. Hence, some element of judgement should prevail at the level of political party leadership in order that there is no further deterioration in the law and order with eruptions of confrontationist violence anywhere in the country. Losses to life and property need to be scrupulously avoided despite the charged atmosphere because it is a motion worth going through in anticipation of positive changes in the near future.

We urge utmost restraint and tolerance from the political activists on both sides and on the part of the law and order people.

Let both sides be fully aware of their increased responsibility in a situation where not only does the political crisis remain unresolved it is also left in a heightened state of tension.

Jail Conditions

There is a report in the national press to the effect that in a number of prison houses inmates are going to sleep according to shifts worked out by themselves. The prisons of the land have long been peopled beyond capacity. Lately it is literally overflowing.

It is said that at present some 70 thousand prisoners and other detainees are housed in facilities that were to accommodate around only 20 thousand. During the past few weeks alone some thousands were pushed into these prisons. The arms recovery drive couldn't dig up significant caches of arms and what it unearthed mostly consisted of small arms and ammunition. The drive succeeded in rounding up some people though.

It is a limitation to our penal laws that punishment can only be meted out by imprisonment or fine or both. Fines generally accompany jail sentences. Jailing is the commonest form of our prevalent penal prescription.

At any given time, jails are saturated with undertrial prisoners so that any fresh wave of arrests puts a severe strain on the limited capacity of the prison houses. Pious wishes have often been expressed by power that be for a combination of reforms relating to the penal code and jail management. These need to be put in place without much ado in order that norms of justice are maintained and long-pending cases disposed of expeditiously.

Man vs Machine

The programmers at the IBM must have had a psychological angle when naming their chess genius computer the Deep Blue. Did the name influence Garri Kasparov into a feeling of reverence for the fathomless sea and the endless sky?

Why did Garri lose to the computer hopelessly at the end of only 37 moves? He, however, has a quite plausible answer to that. He says he was trying his foe, testing and sounding it, taking the feel of how the machine behaved when on the offensive and how it handled its situation while on the defensive. That cost him the first match.

A gritty Garri overcame Deep Blue in the second of the six-bout match. Did his newfound insight into the depth of the super-computer help him in that? May very well be. But when he will lose the next encounter or the next to the next — what will he say? Man learns from his mistakes. Garri has conceded that Deep Blue does not commit a mistake. This follows that it cannot learn from its mistakes — there being no mistakes in its game. Is it the same as saying that Deep Blue doesn't learn from its defeats while Garri reaps a richly harvest from his defeats?

Deep Blue can calculate 50 billion moves in three minutes. When it loses against a man, do that man's neurons calculate more moves in the same three minutes? Or man's creativity — that hitherto unexplained quality peculiar to man — has a way of conjuring flashes which short-circuit the billion moves and land on answers better than a super-computer's or very near it.

Politics Must be Geared towards Survival for All

by Dr T Hossain

THIS article perhaps is dated to be considered in the context of time. What happens today or will happen tomorrow and days after is unpredictable. All news and views published in national dailies are alarming. The time is running out or has it run out with no solution!

The Prime Minister said in her broadcast: This election will pave the way for an all-party election. It implied that the new Parliament will pass a resolution approving the election to be held under a caretaker government. But in her public speech, she warned that the opponents will be dealt with firmly after the election. Such contradictory statements created suspicion in public mind. The election commission is utilizing all forms of agencies of the public administration to ensure a free and fair election. But, it seems like scoring a goal in the empty field with a foregone conclusion.

With the background of Jagannath Hall incidence, the threat sounds ominous. The first law of biology is reaction to life-saving measures. Human life can neither be taken easy nor can be sacrificed for nothing. It has ac-

quired a mission. No kind of politics is of any consequence to sacrifice life so easily as evidenced these days in the vulgar scramble for sheer Power. Common man is a non-political being. But when it is realised that life and its values are at stake, the instinctive urge desperately tries to save it. Nothing on earth is more valuable than life itself.

1991 was considered to be a step in the right direction but the Magura by-election pricked the bubble of faith. It is a simple saying that a stitch in time saves nine. The mouth of the Opposition could quickly be sealed by an agreeable compromise. But the instinctive arrogance supervened. Tolerance was forsaken.

It was the bleeding Bangladesh for which mankind shed tears in its sorrow. Mankind shed tears for its 'father of the nation', now mankind is shedding tears for its impending calamity. But can any one take care of any body who cannot take care of oneself? Every body knows who's who in Bangladesh. We are accustomed to describe blind eyes as lotus. Are we indeed, shameless, heartless, headless sub-

human beings? We consider every body as fools except ourselves. Millions of shameful jokes and facts are floating in the air. We see Dhaka better on BBC or Zee TV than on BTV. In this instance, we represent crowd who shuts eyes so that others cannot see what it was hiding.

Already, the political parties have disgraced themselves. Every body in the village say about these parties that 'the pot is calling the kettle black.' Power is after compared with blood-thirsty tiger. It always relish the blood and flesh of its rider. Till date, no one escaped fate after misusing power. The means of attaining power maybe is the party. Example of two-party system is USA and UK is still tolerable, but, Russia's Stalin and Germany's Hitler left behind the worse example of misuse of party to satisfy the insatiable lust for power.

Mahatma Gandhi advised the abolition of Indian National Congress but for the love of a Nehru and lust of a Patel for power. Ghandhi gave his own blood. Many puritan Congressmen of pre-decolonisation period made

Khadi dress and Gandhi cap as the symbol of black market and corruption. So, party often turns into enemy of freedom. Therefore, the cult of leadership may be abolished, and all political parties replaced by educated village democracy and co-operatives as the slogan says: People are the source of power. If so, why should they part with it, instead of exercising it daily, in a disciplined way, decentralising to 68,000 villages? Let the people live in peace and make progress.

We read daily, many articles by the intellectuals who are really learned, experienced and impart sterile advice instead of working for themselves at village level. They may be unaccustomed to do so but still where there is a will — there is a way. They can call conventions of their respective community such as professionals or intellectuals, scientists and technicians, industrialists and teachers, etc. They need not form a party but a camp with a determined purpose to develop Bangladesh. They should cease to be any power-hunting party agents but master of their own education, experience, training and research.

They know very well that man is the student-teacher of the universe. They can be activists in drawing up programmes for the camps and invite volunteers on own initiative to learn politics, democracy, economics, or whatever that ensure security of life and livelihood and not otherwise as is virtually the case now, unfortunately due to so called politicians.

The younger generation will have to be saved from degradation and degeneration by the community of professors and professionals. It is the younger generation to whom the 21st century leadership rests. Unity and harmony among them can be established by known friends getting together and initiating dialogue. There is no need to call the spade a spade. There is no need to decorate their gatherings. It is better to help them organise themselves than to carry coal to New Castle.

It is said: a people gets the kind of government it deserves. Let us be learned first so that we can have really the kind of government we envisage. We should deserve continuous education centers in every village and every

person so learned should take up responsibility of own locality for integral betterment of the quality of life with better quality food, clothes, shelter, health, education, employment, co-operation, co-ordination and development.

Decentralised power and privilege can make the whole country an abode of peace. We should see through the transparency into the reality and detect whatever corruption has crept in perchance or through loopholes in the social fabric, simply to eradicate it and ensure an austere administration. Political science is a branch of sociology. Politics is, in fact, the appearance while economics is the reality. There is no reason to surrender to hoodlumism or threat or black mailing or demagoguery or hero worship for the cause of 'politics' that satisfy only a few. All men are born equal and should live as equals. Politics should be for survival of all.

Our regular column ASI SEE IT by Ikram Sehgal due for today has not yet arrived from Karachi.

Election '96 : Whither Sagacity?

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam

AS we move up to 15th February, 1996, the date fixed for polling to elect the sixth parliament, unfortunately we do not find any ray of hope for stability and progress. This is not what 56 million voters ever expected. It appears that hard-liners in the main-stream political parties have succeeded to spoil national and international efforts for a settlement to hold a meaningful election. It is really sad to observe that the Government and MPs, who were elected through democratic process in 1991, could not create a congenial atmosphere to ensure free, fair and impartial election.

The political stalemate, starting from March '94, is still continuing; rather stiffened to endanger the future of democracy in Bangladesh. Without the participation of Awami League, the main opposition party, naturally the ensuing election will simply be meaningless. Two other opposition parties — Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami — have also boycotted the election; and they also cannot be ignored because they had representatives in the last fifth parliament, though their political sincerity is questioned by many.

Till the last moment, there was optimism that BNP would not toe the line of the fallen autocratic regime of Ershad and hold one party election. But, on 23rd January '96, the day fixed for withdrawal of nomination papers, the address of the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia over Radio-TV in the evening rather dashed the people's hopes. Since then, while the Government and BNP intelligentsia are upholding her address, the opposition parties and their intelligentsia are equally at daggers drawn. We have seen enough of mock fights and statements, with no result so far. Might be they have no dearth of zest to go on with the inter-party conflicts!

Meanwhile, at Khulna, school student Soman was killed; and many injured in Khulna, Bagerhat and Sylhet during the election tour of BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. Half-day hartal was observed on 29th January '96 in protest, at the call of the opposition parties. Thereafter gruesome 'operation' by law enforcement personnel at Jagannath

Hall of Dhaka University virtually trembled the nation. In protest a hartal was again observed on 3rd February '96. We do not know what will come about in the next few days while her tour programme is protested with black flags and hartal.

Before analysing why BNP has adopted a 1988 type strategy, which it abhorred then, let us have a look how the election '96 compares with '88 in intents and purposes. On 3rd March 1988, election to the fourth parliament was held under Ershad regime. Eight, Five and Three party alliances did not take part. The non-participation of Awami League and BNP made the election farcical; but Jatiya Party was bent upon holding it, raising the logic (or bogey?) of constitutional compulsion. To give a contesting shape to '88 election, Jatiya Party could manipulate to field Combined Opposition Party (COP) of ASM Rab, JSD (Shahjahan Saraj), Freedom Party, 23 Party Alliance, Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan, Janadal, Bangladesh Ganatantra Bastabon Party and independents in 1988. The total number of contestants was 978 and the result was: Jatiya Party-251, COP-19, JSD-3, Freedom Party-2 and independents-25. According to official source, about 2 crore 58 lakh voters cast their votes. But, no body believed that figure. As a matter of fact, there said to be a wholesale vote decacy, sealing of ballot papers, media coup etc. In that election, 18 candidates nominated by Jatiya Party returned uncontested. The first session of artificial fourth parliament sat on 25th April 1988 and it could hold seven sessions till it was dissolved on 6th December 1990, due to mass upsurge. By then, it passed three constitution amendment Bills, including insertion of Article 2 A by Act XXX of 9th June 1988 'Le' 2 A. The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in the Republic. No doubt, such insertion was made to hoodwink the people and divert their attention from the question of legitimacy of the Fourth Parliament. Ershad regime's much vaunted pseudo religious drive, however, could not save him finally.

In the election held on 27th February 1991, 74 political parties (How many of them can we remember now by name?) and independents contested. The total number of candidates was 2787 for 300 seats and total number valid votes cast was 3 crore 41 lakh plus. The highlights of the result were: BNP bagged 140 seats securing 30.81% votes, whereas Awami League got 93 seats securing 31.81% votes. They were followed by Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, who received 35 and 18 seats respectively. Bangladesh Communist Party won 5 seats. Taking advantage of Constitution (Tenth Amendment) Act, 1990, passed by Fourth Parliament under Ershad regime, BNP shared 30 women reserved seats with Jamaat-e-Islami — 28 went to BNP and 2 to Jamaat.

At the end of about two years' political stalemate, BNP is also having some unknown parties to contest the election on 15th February, similar to that of 1988 style. Forty-eight BNP candidates have been declared uncontested, that is 16% of total seats of parliament have already been bagged by BNP stalwarts. A total of 1026 candidates will be participating from BNP and hitherto little known so-called opposition parties such as — independent candidates number 473, 7 party alliance, Freedom Party, Khelafat Andolan, NDA, Muslim League, NDP, Proghesh, Jatiya, Nagarik Sanghati, Janadal and Gana Adhikar Front. None of these parties and alliances had any representative in the fifth parliament, except NDP which had one seat only. It is an irony of fate that BNP has to be in such a composition for Election '96. Rightly, as the mainstream opposition parties have boycotted the election and aired threats voters will have little interest in the election that is at best farcical.

The hardliners in the BNP perhaps opined for this unwanted situation, of one party election, may be in the hope of continuing their power and position. They seem to have no passion and commitment for the country, which is visible in politics anywhere in the world, including our near-by countries. So, unlike in 1991, in 1996, the poor and innocent voters are bereft of minimum peace and happiness.

The writer is an economist and advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court.

To the Editor...

Children in election campaign

Sir, The Election Commission through its Code of Conduct has intended to make the forthcoming election as fair as possible under the circumstances. The election rules discourages use of black money in the election and there are other stringent rules. The Commission deserves appreciation for this laudable efforts. However, we have been noticing with great dismay that in the election campaign most candidates are using children (who are not voters even) in their election camps for various election related purposes, specially so called campaign.

Use of children for such purposes is not totally new in Bangladesh. The society, for long, has been witnessing the situation. It becomes more damaging and entails far reaching adverse consequences when children are induced and made to do certain jobs for money or lures. Through this process, many a children with potential talent becomes addicted to and accustomed with certain unwarranted life style, and habits. Many children end up their future before they could even try to explore the prospective future of a worthy citizen. Being a social burden, these children await for uncertain proceedings

and seek to survive in the society through various unacceptable means. Under the circumstances, both individuals and the society would lose. The nation would suffer from degeneration problem posing serious threat to the economy, law and order situations.

In the recent years use of children has perhaps reached its peak. It seems, we set a process for self destruction of our potentially significant future.

In view of the above, all concerned should take serious note of the practice. It is expected that the society in general and the political activists in particular should assume their mandated responsibilities and keep innocent children above all exploitation and misuse and along them an opportunity to a better and meaningful future.

Meanwhile, we would earnestly request the Election Commission to immediately put an embargo on employment of minor children for election related activities and make it a punishable offense. For this they would win the admiration of all.

Mahabubur Rahman Lalmatta, Dhaka

Stop this Harakiri!

by Abdul Kader

IN the wake of stupid, unfortunate and senseless 'harakiri' now being committed in our country, one has the legitimate 'democratic' rights to ask: who are behind this national tragedy? It is difficult to believe that only the politicians belonging to the mainstream political parties are responsible for the current suicidal game. Most probably, the politicians danced to the tune of their 'advisers' who have successfully outwitted their masters and cleverly thrown them into the quagmire of 'so-called sanctity of the constitution'.

It is time for the patriotic citizens to take note of the impending danger. One of the greatest misfortunes of our nation is that none of those who were at the helm of affairs in the past could read the 'writings on the wall'. Even they could not rise above self-interest to guide the destiny of the nation. As none were 'statesman', they could hardly realise where they failed and failed to take lessons from some of their neighbours who have been successful in putting up some semblance of democratic ideals. The rulers of the third world countries are usually guided by their 'foreign masters' and personal 'whims' and 'ego'. And as such when bad time comes they find that they are trapped by their so-called 'donor-masters'. The present state of affairs in our country are perhaps the direct results of such machinations and dubious role played by certain known 'friends' who are masters as well.

The people who are democratic and peace-loving do now find themselves in the midst of cross fires of security forces and agitated political activists. Perhaps, the most unfortunate thing about democracy is that it changes hue from country to country. The democracy in USA or the UK differs from Bangladesh's. The sub-continental moisture makes all the difference! The bipolar world has become a heaven for those who were and are traditional friends of autocratic rulers everywhere. While preaching democratic principles they perhaps say: 'Don't do what we do. Do what we ask you to do!' Unfortunately, none of our rulers has ever tried to understand our precarious geopolitical situation which looks like a 'fait accompli' to confront this nation peren-

nally. If a modern state lives on its foreign policy then how successful this nation has lived so far? We have had tried to appease every big nation but until now our relations with a close neighbour is far from satisfactory, why the OIC countries are not showing any interest to solve the current political impasse of Bangladesh? Which of our actions have apparently torpedoed the cordial and warm relations that existed between this country and certain OIC countries only a couple of years ago? At a time when Bangladesh is burning, the silence of the Islamic Ummah is a definite concern for the people of this country. Mere slogan of 'friendship with all, enmity to none' has hardly helped this nation. Even some of our retired military strategists have pondered over the geo-political fate of this country and have come to the conclusion that, notwithstanding everything else, 'India factor', as it is called, cannot be ignored.

The fallen dictator HM Ershad once disclosed that our country can defend itself against any external aggression for eleven days only. He even suggested that India needed a 'friend' in Bangladesh he was ready to be one. Since then much water has flowed down the river Buriganga. During the past five years another political party tried its hand, for the second time, to deliver the goods but with little success. As a result of the past failures to fix up 'priorities' of its goal, the nation has once again thrown itself into an uncertain situation.

Is the constitution that much holy to place it above everything else? Was it not amended a dozen times on mere personal grounds? Is it above the doctrine of necessity? When it is suspended, where does the sanctity lies? The latest turbulent situation through which the country is now passing, following certain undesirable incidents that occurred during recovery of illegal arms, has finally pushed this unfortunate country towards perhaps, a kind of tragedy this country has not seen before. But the question is: Who will fight whom? Will the 'sons of the soil', who follow either this party or that fight among themselves turning this land into a 'battlefield'? Such a protracted in fight will harm both the rich and the poor. It

will be out and out a suicidal and fratricidal war! The snar section of the intelligentsia has called for a halt. Perhaps, with her back on the wall, the Prime Minister has come out with threat to punish the 'anarchists' after the election. One may ask her: Why not punish them now? Or, Why the anarchists were not punished before? Where lies the problem? The 'anarchists' have proved their worth by robbing the ornaments in broad day light not only of the wives of civilians but also of the wives of the military personnel. Perhaps, now is the time for remembering Shakespeare. In one of his immortal drama child asks her mother: "Mother why good people do not punish bad people?" Mother replies: "Because bad people are majority in number." Are the bad people majority in our country? If so, then nobody will believe that after February 15, good people will be able to punish the bad people, that is the 'anarchists'.

When the whole nation is sitting on the crater of a volcano, it may have a last word with President Abdul Rahman Biswas who once told a group of journalists shortly after assumption of his office that he had some ideas about the welfare of the people of this country. It is not high time that he comes forward to spell out some of those ideas to save the nation from the danger of an enormous 'inflight'? Be that as it may, it is advisable to remember the message of the Holy Quran. It says: "Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world: But the things that endure, Good deeds, are best in the sight of thy Lord, as regards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes. On the day (Dooms Day) We shall remove the mountains, and thou wilt see the earth as a level stretch, and We shall gather them, all together, nor shall We leave out any one of them. And they will be marshalled before thy Lord in ranks (with the announcement). "Now have ye come to us (bare) as We created you." (Al Kahf: Ayat 46, 47, 48).

Thoughts on Constitution of Bangladesh-VIII/ Constitutional Guidance to the Government on Healthy Economy and Responsible Governance will be published tomorrow.

Electoral Endeavours

by Farah Ghuznavi

WITH the current uncertainty that pervades the country, there is little doubt that regardless of whether or not the 'impending' elections are in fact successfully held, there will be questions about the credibility of the election results. After all, given the past history of our electoral endeavours, it is highly debatable that we will be able to avoid repeating the "lessons learned" at those earlier polls.

I was fortunate enough to be present at a social gathering some time ago, where a number of senior and retired government servants were also present. The conversation largely centred around the forthcoming elections and the (allegedly slim) chances of these elections being concluded successfully, especially given our past record in this area. Everyone there seemed to have a story about past electoral disasters that they had presided over.

One gentleman talked about his experience a few years ago, where he stated

that in the constituency where he was one of the persons supervising the polls, the voters were given only one ballot paper, with two boxes to choose from to deposit the paper in. However, he insisted that, in this case it didn't really matter which box the paper was dropped in, since at the end of the day, all the votes in the "no" box were simply transferred to the "yes" box!

Another story came from one of the other senior gentlemen there, who said that in his locality it was the younger mastan types who were told to come in and do all the voting. It was carefully explained to them how they should vote during these elections, and in what order they should proceed. However, because these boys were a bunch of idiots, they found the directions too convoluted. In despair, the returning officer ended up telling them how to vote after they entered the booth (the political party agents were not allowed into the booth). First a certain number of people were told to vote for

one party and then another number were told to vote for another. This was an important matter, because the officer concerned had to make sure that the appropriate percentages of the votes cast for various parties were maintained correctly in order to get the final result that the government of the day wanted!

An even less subtle example of adversely influencing voters came from someone who described an experience where many of the local people were visited by the hired mastans of a particular group the night before the elections. The conversation that followed went something like: "So who are you going to vote for this time?" (This was asked while a gun was being brandished in the potential voter's face). "For you party, of course", babbled the hapless individual concerned. "That's nice. Well, since we know how you will vote anyway, you needn't bother coming in person to cast your vote. We'll make sure it's done for you!"

Now whether or not these

stories are the unvarnished truth, they certainly raise some concerns. There is a story of how many people chose to make their political views clear during the long years of Thatcherism in Britain. Since Margaret Thatcher was re-elected on a number of occasions despite the fact that she was very unpopular with a certain segment of British society, those who felt that way would often ask each other despairingly how she had been re-elected yet again. This was particularly the case after her surprise victory in the last elections she contested, when the opposition Labour Party were widely considered to be the favourites to win. After their shocking last-minute defeat, people who had initially raised the question of who was voting for Mrs

Thatcher finally began to wear badges stating I didn't vote for Margaret Thatcher. Given how notoriously unreliable some of our past election results have been, perhaps we too will need to adopt a measure of this sort one day.