

Now is the Time for Sanity

What were ministers Noman and Shahjahan Siraj and special envoy Murtaza Khan and the divine presence of Matzbandari doing in the port area that day? They were ostensibly busy there to persuade the port workers not to jeopardise port activity. And they had all the backing of police and BDR to thwart people intimidating workers from joining duty. But this was not what happened. Shahjahan Siraj made it a day of film shooting with one or two ships in the background while eight microbus-full of private armed cadre reduced the port area into a battlefield, killing a rickshawpuller by bullet. Did the port return to normalcy as a result?

The Daily Star had always condemned, even denounced works of mob violence such as arson and vehicle-smashing. But when an established government, the most organised and highest sociopolitical authority in the country with army and police at its command takes recourse to mob cruelty and insanity to make a normal-state society to behave, past experiences bring back dire warnings. In Dhaka too the same day gunshots were fired from within moving buses and escorted government buses shown on TV to prove normalcy.

These are small things compared to the enormity of the election farce. But these are nevertheless important as these speak of a move away from an expected government attempt to smooth out big and numerous boulders of difference specially created by the rejection of the polls by all the opposition parties on the one hand and the rigging of it by the ruling party. Rather than reasoning things out the opposition has been trying to range the whole of the nation's will behind their political issue — which by itself is a reason non pariel. What is the government doing to match that? A living electronic media cannot very plainly match that. And besides there is the apparently insuperable constitutional impasse — aggravated by the unparalleled polls. The nation never depended so much as now on the good sense of the politicians, starting from the PM.

Khaleda is on the saddle — it behoves her to be the voice of sanity. Why, it is required that she be all reason, all rectitude and responsibility? She is moving away from all this as she is also pushing the opposition into evermore nationally destructive actions and programmes.

This must change. Nothing will improve if one goes on posing that it's all right everywhere. Didn't our poet say *aundho holey ki proloy bondho thakey* — you cannot wish away very real dangers.

Troubled ME Peace

The saga of hatred and vengeance in the Jewish-Arab relationship shows no sign of coming to an end. What the leaderships on both sides have been painfully building up through their peace effort is given a rude shock, time and again. In the latest bomb attacks — one in crowded Jerusalem and the other outside Ashqelon — by suspected Islamic radical group Hamas, 26 people were killed and about 100 injured. These attacks have apparently been in retaliation of the killing of Yahya Ayyash, a master bomb maker, by Israeli security men and the Hebron massacre of 29 Palestinians in a mosque.

Both prime minister Simon Peres and Yasser Arafat have condemned the bombings and acknowledged that these are an attempt to upset the on-going peace process. Happily, the Israeli prime minister has expressed his desire to continue the talks. But still the attacks are sure to temporarily upset the implementation of the Middle East peace plan. Peres will be particularly handicapped by these fresh terrorist attacks at a time when he launches his election campaign.

Evidently, the Hamas has struck in a very calculative manner. The radical group wants to see that the Israeli prime minister becomes unpopular with his own people. At the same time it wants to show that any understanding reached between the group and the PLO is only short-lived. On both counts the Hamas is likely to become quite successful. Peres has already risked his unpopularity, so did Arafat. Hopefully the limit of that unpopularity will remain confined to a small number of their respective peoples. So small that it will not pose any immediate threat to the peace process. However, the more arduous task concerns convincing people of the merit of a peaceful settlement of their problem. They are likely to strike whenever they get an opportunity. The people in that troubled spot must come out of this retaliatory saga.

Behind Textbook Crisis

The crisis of textbooks continues. The National Curriculum and Text Book Board (NCTBB) and the publishers are only putting blame on each other. But no serious attempt has yet been made to bring out the books soon or the availability of them for the students now in their second or third month in the new academic year.

The time which has already been lost from the academic year of the young learners will do harm beyond measure to their education. The NCTBB claims that the last manuscript — filmed positives to be precise — was given to the publishers on February 16 at the latest. Some of the manuscripts in such an advanced stage was given in mid-January. It claims the publishers agreed to supply the books in the market within a week. However, the NCTBB has no intention of admitting its own fault. The academic year did not begin this week or the past week.

On the other hand, the publishers are, reportedly, busy printing note books and they advance the excuse of non-availability of papers. Such blame or excuse will not help the students. Earlier we demanded an enquiry into this weird situation. We reiterate it. Both lack of planning and subsequent delay in printing textbooks must be severely dealt with. This is a serious matter and those who have treated it so lightly cannot be let go without punishment.

Case of Squandered Opportunities: What Next?

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

If the political parties cannot trust each other even with the election, how could they expect the people to trust them with the total responsibility of the affairs of the country?

OPPORTUNITIES are generally rare and indeed rarer in political life. The conscious and intelligent politicians must make best use of them. Unfortunately in Bangladesh politics this did not happen. Both the ruling and the opposition parties failed to consolidate the hard earned democracy. Over an irresponsible remark of a Minister the opposition party boycotted the parliament. Accusation and counter accusations continued and the opposition never returned to the parliament. Thus they failed to discharge their solemn duties and obligations reposed on them by the people who voted them to the parliament.

The ruling party also failed to respond positively and timely to the demands of the opposition and with the passage of time political situation went beyond its control. Indeed, it failed to govern. The cumulative effect of non-governance and of mishandling of the political process by both ruling and the opposition brought political and economic disaster, seriously affecting the life and livelihood of the common people.

The conscious citizens feel that in terms of international prestige, the country suffered greatly due to continued political stalemate and the outside involvement in the negotiations of the internal political affairs. The latest statement on this by the State Dept. reflects the correct diplomatic position. The State Department statement said "It is upto the government and to the opposition and all Bangladeshis to solve Bangladesh's problems, not the United States..."

Two years was not enough to find a solution to the issue of care-taker government. The people both individually and collectively tried to help the negotiation. Some members of CIVIC WATCH, Bangladesh in-

cluding myself joined the negotiating process and met the High Commands a couple of times and put forward several suggestions. But all efforts failed.

The ruling party decided to go ahead all alone with the general election in the name of the upholding of the constitution. Right or wrong, this however, gave the ruling party the opportunity to prove to the country and also to the world that no care-taker government was necessary to hold election in the country.

Even though the opposition did not agree the Prime Minister, as promised to the nation though under certain conditions, could have resigned 30 days before the election and asked the President to hold the election with the help of 10-member neutral advisory body. This would not have violated the constitution as he could still continue as non-functional Prime Minister under article 57 (3) of the constitution. The President could have called upon the opposition to nominate 5 neutral members to the Advisory body and in the event of opposition's refusal, which was very likely, the President could have selected 10 neutral members from among the citizens and held the election.

This did not happen. Unfortunately the President himself also did not take any initiative to find a solution. However, even under the ruling party stewardship the election could have been free and fair and indeed should have been so to establish their political position against opposition's care-taker issue. No stuffing of bal-

lot boxes was at all necessary as there was practically none to contest. Low turnout could obviously be blamed on opposition's strikes and hartals. But unfortunately this also did not happen and the ruling party squandered this big opportunity to establish its credentials.

The opposition also missed the opportunity as it could also turn this one-party election as referendum on their demand for caretaker government. Instead of 48-hour hartal during election and open threat to the voters, the opposition could simply call upon the countrymen to support their demand for caretaker government by boycotting the election. In other words, the people of Bangladesh should have been allowed to exercise their judgement and electoral rights. The political parties know very well that the voters in Bangladesh always make correct decisions. That would have established the opposition's demand in two respects — low turnout meaning peoples' rejection of the election and rigging by the ruling party confirming opposition's demand that fair election can not take place under the ruling party. Unfortunately the opposition did not make political use of this opportunity. The result was a total disaster. Again the people were the sufferers.

The Election Commission also failed as it went for holding election though the situation looked already beyond its control. The Chief Election Commissioner's visit to polling stations apparently with prior information and under the glare of TV camera and also his reported remark about satis-

factory turn out were unwarranted. He said he was determined to hold the election in a free and fair manner but failed to do so. Even the ruling party high command reportedly told the press that stuffing of the ballot boxes was done by the opposition which the opposition rejected as it did not even participate in the election.

The election Commission's total dependence on the law enforcing agencies on election duty for free and fair election was misplaced. Indeed, free and fair election largely depends on the participating political parties. The law enforcing agencies can only help the process.

The opposition may reject the election but it has taken place. Once the results are gazetted the election will be declared as legal. The opposition may call upon others not to deal with this government but dealings are on. Nothing has stopped except the normal life and the economic activities of the people. Indeed, the people's sufferings have increased under "democracy" for which they fought and sacrificed so much. Time has come to rethink about this type of party politics in Bangladesh where even party nominations play havoc on the electoral process. May be it would be better to have party-less democracy and election on individual basis where qualification, experience, merit and integrity will count more. If the political parties can not trust each other even with the election how could they expect the people to trust them with the total responsibility of the affairs of the country.

What Next?

Advice is most unwanted and generally remain unheeded. That's why only suggestion are being put forward if these are worth anything.

Those who have won the election may of the view that the sixth Parliament should run its life. But the ruling party is reportedly prepared to compromise and go for fresh election within six to six months provided immediate negotiation takes place between the ruling and the opposition parties for an amicable settlement. The opposition should grab this opportunity as they are also interested in an election — of course free and fair election. The following may be the outlines:

The President should call a meeting of the leaders of both ruling and opposition immediately and negotiate a settlement in the following line:

The six Parliament, whatever may be its character in the eyes of the opposition and the world may be allowed to meet at least once and amend the constitution on agreed basis (this amendment may be reconfirmed by the seventh Parliament when it would be elected as legality of the sixth Parliament remains under question and reportedly there was no election at all in 10 seats).

1. The Prime Minister should resign 30/45/60 days before the election and should not continue even as non-functional Prime Minister.

2. The President (from now on a non-party neutral person to be elected by the Parliament as President) to take over and hold election with the help of 10 non political and neutral

advisors to be nominated by both ruling and opposition in equal numbers.

OR  
The Ombudsman (a totally neutral, non-political and honest person) to be appointed immediately to take over and hold election with 10 advisors.

OR  
The Chief Justice to take over and hold election with the help of 10 advisors. This should be taken as the last alternative. The above arrangement should be for five years or may even be on permanent basis to avoid future political chaos.

3. The Chief Election Commissioner and other members of the Commission (at least — qualified, non-political and neutral persons including judges to be considered) to be appointed in consultation with the opposition in the parliament.

4. The Election Commission's authority must be augmented to make it fully independent and administratively effective to hold free and fair elections.

5. The electronic media must be placed under the Election Commission during elections. And indeed, the electronic media should in any case be brought under an independent Broadcasting Authority consisting of qualified non-party neutral persons. It should not be a part of any Ministry of the government.

Finally, for the purpose of creating proper negotiating environment, we, on behalf of the citizens, appeal to the opposition parties to shun violence, other destructive and disruptive activities and ask the ruling party to refrain from using Special Powers Act for political purposes and arresting political leaders.

The writer is the chairman of CIVIC WATCH, Bangladesh and President of North South University.

Peace, Profit and Prayer

There are three basic principles guiding US foreign policy during the 1996 election year, says Jim Lobe in this Inter Press Service analysis.

The Israeli-Egyptian agreement at Camp David 17 years ago, but also ensure that Jewish and Arab-American voters will vote Democratic.

Similarly, more breakthroughs of the kind Clinton helped spur in cooling the peace process in Northern Ireland over the past year will not harm the president with politically active Irish-American voters, millions of whom are concentrated in key cities throughout the industrial Midwest and Northeast. These regions are seen as crucial battlegrounds in the upcoming election.

Hence, the recent announcement that Washington will mount a major new effort to resolve the 21-year impasse over Cyprus could hardly come as a surprise. The powerful Greek lobby, traditionally Democratic, has been angered by Clinton's extended courtship of Turkey, and this may be their moment.

Even more than peace, profit has eclipsed virtually every other major US foreign policy interest under Clinton. The primacy of profits in 1996 looks unassailable, although the administration hinted late last year that it may draw back from initiatives particularly in the free-trade area. Some of these initiatives could make the administration politically vulnerable.

Of these, the most important is Mexico and the future of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Never popular, NAFTA appears to have become a political liability with this year's peso meltdown. The administration has clearly lost its enthusiasm for certain aspects of the accord.

Thus, the recent decision to indefinitely delay the moment when Mexican trucks can freely travel on US highways showed an acute and

unaccustomed sensitivity to politically powerful labour unions.

Similarly, the government's passivity in the face of both Republican and Democratic lawmakers' efforts to scuttle initiatives to bring Chile into NAFTA and to offer Caribbean Basin countries NAFTA benefits suggests a cautious stepping back from the furious trade liberalisation pace of Clinton's first years.

But elsewhere, the administration can be expected to vigorously pursue market-opening opportunities for US business — not least in the new Middle East "marketplace" which Washington hopes its peace-making activities will help bring about.

The administration's obsession with emerging markets, especially in Asia, is not likely to ease significantly this year. On the contrary, the likely announcement of billions of dollars in new deals in India, Indonesia, China and elsewhere will be translated by the political language of the campaign into the creation of hundreds of thousands of new US jobs.

Indeed, the administration is institutionally committed to this theme, having spent considerable funds and intellectual effort in revamping much of

the country's formidable intelligence apparatus to serve US economic interests.

But foreign policy, as the administration has learned, cannot run on positives — like peace and profits — alone. Favourite "rouge states" including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, as well as their alleged terrorist surrogates, will give Washington an opportunity to demonstrate its toughness during election year.

With the Republican-led Congress ever eager to punish these recalcitrants, striking out rhetorically and even economically against them offers only political gain for Clinton whose dual-containment policy against Iran and Iraq is almost certain to be reinforced in 1996.

To his credit, Clinton appears to have succeeded in removing three key countries — Syria, Cuba and North Korea — from the list of evil-doers against whom Democrats are routinely accused of being too soft.

The sensitivity of Syrian-Israeli peace talks, the denunciation, accord with Pyongyang, and progress in immigration issues with Havana make it more difficult for Republicans to argue that Clinton is selling out.

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Irregularities in promotion

Sir, It seems the government is hell-bent to allow irregularities one after another, particularly in matter of promotion for the post of Joint Secretary to the government since February 1992.

The first such irregularity occurred in February 1992 when hundreds of seniors were superseded and several dozens of juniors were promoted to the post of Joint Secretary to the government. This was protested and the former State Minister for Establishment Nurul Huda made a confession about the irregularities in a meeting (at the Osmani Memorial Hall in Feb 1992) before a person no other than the PM himself, and assured to review the cases. But the promised review was not made which necessitated approach to the court of law for seeking justice.

The High Court, in its judgement, termed the promotion of Feb 1992 as illegal in late 1994. The promotions of 1992 were made through unconstitutional means. The deprived officers then thought that justice would be done to them by the government since it very often spoke of democracy, accountability, transparency and the like.

But regrettably, in this case, the government instead of doing justice to the aggrieved officers, probably to safeguard the interest of the illegally promoted officers, filed petition with the Supreme Court. The decision is yet awaited. Meanwhile, many senior officers retired without getting justice.

However, one fine morning in late 1995 (October), some amongst the deprived officers were promoted to the men-

measures taken to mitigate the sufferings of the superseded officers, rather it was proliferated, extended by a successor state minister and thus the last nail to the coffin box of justice.

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Zakat

Sir, Recently, just before the Eid, the Imam of Mohamadpur Quaderia Talabia Alia Madrasa Mosque during his sermon before the Jumma congregation put forward a proposal pertaining to zakat collection and distribution among the poor. He requested the government officials and other intellectuals who were present in the mosque to ventilate his proposal so that the government authorities and others may materialise the same.

According to the proposal, first, the zakat money be collected area-wise by a committee formed by the government or local businessmen. Secondly, on the basis of the availability of the zakat fund so collected, a number of deserving poor persons (say 100) be selected and a reasonable capital be provided to them with necessary logistic support for starting some small business or any other income-generating project.

The group or individual receiving the zakat money will not be entitled to get the same benefit in the following year. The next year another group of individuals will get the zakat money. And this process will continue for converting the poor into earning members and self-reliant. The holy month of Ramadan may be fixed for distribution of the zakat money collected throughout the year.

The Imam Shaheh while referring the main philosophy of the institution of zakat in Islam said that zakat is actually meant for alleviating poverty from the society thereby making the poor self-reliant. He said many Islamic administrators in the past had followed such system (as he proposed) in regulating the zakat fund for economic emancipation. He placed stress on the

need for state intervention on the system of zakat-giving and distribution; the authority must see whether zakat is given correctly and timely by those upon whom it has become farz (compulsory). He expressed the hope that if zakat was paid and distributed as per the code of Islam, there should be no poor people or beggars in our society.

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Why the talks failed

Sir, I fully support the views expressed by Mr O H Kabir in this column on 2nd February. He was so correct in saying that it was now useless to blame either the government or the opposition parties for their failure to reach an agreement which could have enabled us to see a fully-participated general election.

They should better have left the issue to the general people who are the ultimate decision makers in a democratic society. The political leaders both in the government and the opposition parties could try to persuade the people in favour of or against participating in the polls with fair arguments but they should neither have forced nor intimidated people in exercising or not exercising their right to vote. If the election was allowed to be held peacefully in a free and fair atmosphere the actual turnout of voters could bear indication, to a great extent, of the will of the people.

But whatever the result of this election, the provision for an interim administration must have to be accommodated in the Constitution by the Sixth Parliament within a period of say three to six months from the date of its inaugural session and then the assembly shall have to be dissolved for holding a fully-participated general election. During this whole period all the parties should maintain a congenial atmosphere for holding the elections in a peaceful manner.

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OPINION

Arms Recovery: Point to Ponder

Helal Kabir Chowdhury

I am no pedant to offer any suggestion to the persistent political crisis in the country. Nor any such endeavour has been entertained by the government or the opposition. The controversial February 15 election is over and the opposition has launched a new movement in the form of non-cooperation.

But my pointer is not to elaborate the election or any movement. I shall focus on the illegal arms recovery campaign initiated by the Election Commission to ensure free and fair election. This measure was a much belated action undertaken by the government adopting the election issue as a pretext. My questions may not sound palatable.

Why did the government engineer this so late? Couldn't this appalling state of spent up law and order situation deserve any merit of serious thinking or jolt the mind of the administration beforehand? Couldn't just as a natural or routine gesture the administration launch this drive much earlier to rescue the nation facing almost an identity crisis? And, above all, why did they have to announce repeatedly through the media about the mopping up operation thereby alerting the miscreants?

What has the government gained? Couldn't the operations take place in an under-the-table, unannounced way that would justify their performance? According to a newspaper report the most sought-after ones have either gone underground or crossed the border. We came across newspaper reports stating the number of arms recovered and persons involved being arrested, which was by any count negligible compared to reality.