

# Chairman Arafat Sworn in as President Arafat

He must prove that he can govern Palestinian people and govern responsibly and peacefully without causing security threat to his exclusive neighbour — Israel which still holds the final 'yes' card to Palestinian statehood.

## Speech, and its Rejection

It is a clear case of an inadequate speech being invidiously dismissed. So quick and categorical was the rejection of the PM's speech by the opposition that one is forced to wonder how seriously, if at all, was the content of it actually deliberated upon.

In the past we termed Begum Zia's offers "too little, too late." This time we feel it is definitely not "too little", but unfortunately "too late". We say so because by the time she has agreed to the idea of a "non-party" government, another serious issue has come up — that of legitimacy of her government. When, by the best of accounts, only 15 per cent voters turned up to vote, and when a most disgraceful example of vote-stuffing was witnessed, naturally then, the legitimacy of a government that is the product of such a process, comes under serious questioning. In a sense, the ruling party has brought the 'legitimacy question' on itself; first by delaying a solution for well over two years, and then by going in for a one party election. BNP, and especially Begum Zia, do not seem to fully grasp how weak and fragile her government has now become.

In her Sunday night speech Begum Zia addressed the original question of a neutral government to supervise future elections but not the one that has come up now — legitimacy of a government elected through a non-participated and rigged election. In fact, by 'congratulating' the people for 'voting' in the 15th February election she confirmed her rejection of all criticism of that election. By behaving as if the election was a perfectly acceptable one, she gave credence to the opposition suspicion that once the sixth parliament is 'legitimised' nothing could perhaps stop her from continuing for as long as she wants to.

The opposition reacted only on the basis of what was not in her speech, totally ignoring the acceptable points in it. We think that acceptance of the formula of a neutral government to supervise all future elections has been a major progress, and can be termed a victory for the opposition. The offer to hold elections — 'acceptable to all' — for the 7th parliament 'as soon as possible' is a clear admission by BNP chief that sixth parliament is not acceptable to all. What is lacking here is a specific date, which the PM should have announced on that day.

Perhaps the biggest blunder of Sunday's speech, and one that could have greatly improved the atmosphere of talks — we had suggested so in a signed commentary — was NOT TO ORDER the release of all political leaders at the same time.

The opposition, in our view, was too negative. It could have taken a position that the PM's offer is a positive one but not enough to address all its concerns. It could have also laid down some conditions in the light of Begum Zia's offer adding that only upon fulfilment of these they could think of participating in a dialogue. Outright rejection essentially leaves us where we were, in the throes of despondency and frustration. We urge the opposition to play a more constructive role than it is playing now, and give us not only rejections, but also a plan of action which will lead to a quick, peaceful and harmonious solution for all.

## An Artificial Crisis

The selling price of fertiliser per bag at the mill-gate is Tk 186.25, at the 15 buffer-stock centres Tk 250 and in the open market Tk 280-300. The northern region farmers are reeling as it has gone up to Tk 350 there. The price differential between stages of distribution, short of actually landing on the laps of cultivators, is to a large extent artificial. One almost sees a crisis on the horizon. The signs of mis-handling of an otherwise strong production-commodity supply position can be read easily. The distribution has increased by a sizable two lakh 7 thousand nine hundred and 27 metric tons from the level of last year. The daily average supply has notched up a neatly figure of two thousand tons.

Curiously, however, the good stock position is storing up some problems for us. Else how is one to explain the price upswing at the very outset of the peak demand season?

The list of dealers government had put together drew a flak for being based on partisan considerations soon after it was made known. Without delving into any detail on that score, suffice it to say that there is suspicion about several of them hoarding fertiliser to corner huge profits amidst manipulated scarcities. Their speculative instincts seem to feed on the political uncertainties and the communication difficulties brought on by the same. True, while fertiliser has been in abundance it could not move freely to the retailers, especially in the northern part of the country, due to hartal-induced communication dislocations. Hence, the abnormal price there. At any rate, that does not wholly explain why when the demand is yet to peak the price should be that high.

The price jacking needs to be addressed without being deflected by the clouded national politics.

## River-crossing

Aricha, Nagarbari and Daulatdia ferry terminals present once again blistering congestions of vehicles. The supply side of the economy is going to be irreparably hurt if something is not done to straighten the bulges quickly. Admittedly, inter-district movements have been hindered rather frequently by hartal with the result that we have today an insuperable backlog to clear.

One way of bouncing back in terms of river-crossings would be to off-load some of the burden to railway freight, if not to large country-boats, in order to gain a respite at the ferry ghats. To be spot-on, the choked Cross Channel-4 needs to be dredged up. The ferry service will have to be suspended for a few days to facilitate this. Where is that lead time for that, given the mounting pressure of vehicles at the terminals?

Since there are lean periods of ferrying activities induced by the opposition's agitational programmes these may be utilised to do the dredging work in the mid-river by way of reaping something out of a disadvantageous situation.

A RAFAT was sworn in as President at the "White House" — White House not at the top of the long long 16th Street in Washington but a refurbished two-story house at Gaza Strip.

He took oath of office of the President of Palestinian Authority in a simple ceremony at the chamber of the newly elected Palestinian National Council which is called the "White House". By placing his right hand on the Holy Quran, Arafat took the oath to "fulfil the national hope" of the Palestinian people. This is undoubtedly a big commitment which he alone can not deliver. He has to have the full support of his people, the members of the newly elected Palestinian National Council and above all the full cooperation of the Israeli government which the Palestinian Authority has to negotiate with for determination of the final status of the occupied territories now under Palestinian self-rule and of Jerusalem. He must be aware of his responsibilities.

Immediately after the swearing in ceremony, President Arafat spoke to the reporters and among other things he said, "I feel I have a very big responsibility on my shoulders, to carry on in our long march, to continue in the peace process and to continue building our future." He is no longer Chairman Arafat — he is

the President of Palestinian government and that calls for major change in his style of governing the Palestinian people even under self-rule mandate. His election was based on democracy which is not something common in his part of the world.

Therefore, he has to adjust himself to the idea of democracy and practice it on the ground; 88-member Palestinian National Council which has 38 opposition and independent members elected on democratic principles must be allowed to play its role. This will not only strengthen Arafat's position as a leader and President but would also create confidence in the minds of the opposition. This may soften the stand of moderate Hamas members and indeed bring in far-reaching changes in the Palestinian political spectrum. If more of the Hamas members could gradually be brought into the mainstream of Palestinian politics, the terrorism will come down which will have positive effect on confidence building between Palestinian and Israeli people — something absolutely crucial for future negotiations. Hamas stands weakened

after Arafat's stunning victory in the election. But the correct political move for him would be not to ignore Hamas as though politically weak — it continues to be a menace as a terrorist organisation thus posing a major threat to the peace process. Arafat's earlier effort to work with moderate elements of Hamas must con-

can never be trusted and any future Palestinian state would be a perennial security risk to Israel.

Therefore, today Arafat and Palestinian people should be particularly vigilant against terrorism and Arafat must be ready for broader accommodation of Hamas leaders provided they agree to renounce terror-



tinue. This has become all the more important now because of ensuing Israeli election in May, 1996. Arafat's as well as Palestinian people's future lies with Shimon Peres's obtaining fresh mandate in Israeli election. Therefore, he and Palestinian people must try to keep the area free of terrorists' attacks. Palestinian people must prove to be a good neighbour to the Israeli people and that would strengthen Peres's position. Any increase in terrorism will only prove Israeli opposition's point that Palestinians

ism. He must try to convince the Hamas radicals that terrorism must stop, though, against standard norms. Intefada, stone throwing and Hamas bombs led Arafat's way to the negotiating table. But once at the negotiating table all forms of terrorism must stop. It would depend on how Arafat makes the political manoeuvre. Indeed, formal election of Arafat as the President of Palestinian Authority places tremendous political responsibility on him. A nation engaged in war against Israel for

over four decades and having lost tremendously in terms of men and materials and above all its motherland will need ample time and international support to come back to its normal shape and acceptable political behaviour. Here lies the role of its leader or leaders.

Therefore, President Arafat must rise to the occasion. He is bold but he does not seem to have enough patience particularly with his own people. The winners of wars and builders of nations and big institutions generally do not survive long politically probably because of their impatience to move ahead quickly and probably alone. President Arafat must try to be patient, accommodative and more democratic and he has a long way to go. He is in an extremely critical position strategically. Palestinian statehood is something anathema to Israelis. Arafat has indeed been put on probation through self-rule. He must prove that he can govern Palestinian people and govern responsibly and peacefully without causing security threat to his exclusive neighbour — Israel which still holds the fi-

nal 'yes' card to Palestinian statehood.

And this leads to another important and indeed critical issue — amendment of the particular provision in the PLO Charter that calls for destruction of Israel. Arafat made the commitment during peace deal with Israel to make the amendment. Indeed, before Palestinian election, Shimon Peres once again reminded Arafat about this. As Arafat has the mandate he must prevail on some reluctant Palestinian representatives in the Palestinian parliament (in exile) to agree to drop this particular provision. Otherwise, future negotiations on final status will be put in jeopardy. Palestinian members must understand that mere existence of a provision in the PLO Charter will not lead to destruction of Israel. The present reality. This is the immediate test on Arafat's leadership. The amendment, if carried out immediately, will reflect good intention of the Palestinian people towards Israelis and indeed will strengthen Shimon Peres's position in the ensuing Israeli election.

The return of Shimon Peres as Prime Minister against hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu is very crucial for President Arafat as only this will ensure continuation of the peace process.

## POST-ELECTION SYNDROME

# In Search of a Way Out

by Hybat J Chowdhury

ELECTION to the sixth Parliament was at last held amidst lots of speculation, enough acts of violence along with other lesser evils and of course with no less inconvenience the

electorates, who really matter, were forced to bear. The party in power has obviously felt a sigh of relief that it has somehow achieved its objective by getting elected en masse the nominated party candidates, albeit without credible contestants in the field due to all out boycotting called by the opposition parties. That the peak of elation of the ruling party is so high could clearly be visible by the extravagant jubilation the party stalwarts are presently showing. The exuberant celebrations and the victory processions are all indicative of their profound joy and satisfaction on their performance, at least on the surface. Or is it so? Victory by what measure or on what count? What is there to glorify? It was clearly intended to be a plain walkover that appears to have succeeded very well indeed as planned, even more than as anticipated.

But has it served the purpose that the ruling party expected to achieve? This is a big question if one considers the mood and reaction of the common people. Through its over-enthusiasm, the ruling party has found itself caught in a cobweb of controversies. Credibility of party and the poll aside, contestants personal credibility is put to a much greater stake at their own constituencies. And that presumably without having been realised the implications of it, both in short and long term, by the candidates themselves.

To start with, there were some intense efforts to lure one or two parties from the main opposition alliance to join the election without much success except perhaps tempting some to join the ruling party on individual basis. This is of course has failed to raise the credibility level of what is actually termed as a truly participatory election. Having failed in that there was this great act of creating and lining up of a number of obscure and totally unknown people and parties as political entities for the election run who obviously made themselves a laughing stock among the common people. To add to this those disgruntled candidates who failed to get the party nomination became rebellious and started

open agitation, even violent ones, resulting in their expulsion from the ruling party. This obviously does not speak good for the loyalty and discipline within the party and has seemingly rendered the power that be to anything but a cohesive force. Definitely such a thing would not fail to draw notice of the electorates. As if this was not enough many rebellious candidates expelled from BNP braced themselves to compete in the poll as independent contestants giving some additional pinch to the nominated party candidates and compete they did apparently without much success. In this effort they only proved themselves as something of merely epicycles around the periphery of the greater environment of party power.

Then came the mad rush by the nominated candidates to get themselves elected unopposed as if to prove their great popularity amongst the voters. The reason possibly being that their main focus of attention was on the ministerial position they obviously aspired for. But in the absence of any credible opposition this exercise is looked upon as not only funny but utterly childish. Most of the nominated candidates could definitely claim to be some of our leading personalities have integrity of character, mostly well-educated, highly sensible and well-placed in the society. Then why make such a farce. Oppose or unopposed they were pretty sure to be elected anyway. Far from brightening the image they have through this act alone contributed much to achieve exactly the opposite.

And this is not the end of the game. On the actual polling day it was alleged that some heavy vote riggings were seen and noted by many impartial observers, some of whom were from foreign lands as is evident from the comments made by well-placed quarters both in UK and USA. It was of course made easy by the absence of polling officials and party representatives at many centres. Such a thing is viewed as totally unwanted, unnecessary and uncalled for. The poll conducted under the ruling party was without any

credible opposition and as such there should not be any cause of concern that calls for such an act. Has the ruling party ever realised that this vile exercise without any compulsion could be highly unproductive for the party itself, even to the point of irreparable damage it has caused to the party?

The ruling party has advocated so much and for so long that there is absolutely no need for any neutral caretaker government to conduct a free and fair election and it stuck to this concept up to the very end. But now, much to their dismay they themselves by their own act have clearly established that no national election in this country with our present frame of mind could ever be free and fair under a party government. Had they acted differently i.e. more sensibly with clear vision and enough foresight, they would have by now been left with at least some excuse for their claim. It seems the ruling party has missed the last opportunity, perhaps without ever realising it. The party in power has even gone that far unperturbed as to get the gazette notification on part of the election winners and is planning to form the cabinet of ministers as if nothing unusual has happened in the country.

Enough attempts have been made by many to evaluate the just concluded election, a disgraceful one by any count. Some of the comments might be taken as fairly palatable but most others not quite so. The evaluation exercise is still being pursued and meanwhile over two weeks have gone by since the holding of the polls. Now all the parties are taking to the street to sort out the score and we are keeping ourselves busy in our desperate bid to making further comments and offering suggestions apparently without much response. However, comments like who is gaining what ground by taking what strategy or who is losing what advantage by embarking on which wrong course are not at all conducive to find the much sought-after solution. Could one expect the contending parties to attend to such

comments in any constructive way? By fuelling some bitter rivalry are we really helping the situation? Is it the way we aspire to bring them to the negotiating table? Through such unintentional acts we would surely push them further apart, instead of bringing them closer.

Has the election been concluded yet? Where is the complete result sheet? Besides reports of very low turnout at many polling stations, absence of polling officials at many polling booths, violence, vote rigging, hijacking and loss of ballot boxes, kidnapping of polling officials and candidates etc, the people have been intimidated by the Election Commission that some polls have to be repeated, some due to technical reasons, some due to unruly or violent acts, some not held at all and so on and so forth. The question remains as to what has gone wrong with us and that too with regard to this all important national election to uphold the constitutional obligation and continuity.

### What next?

Do we expect the people of this country to remain as silent spectators to the painful drama that is being staged before them? If so, for how long and how far? All the main opposition parties have vowed to realign what they imply as the rightful demand of the people to exercise their basic right of franchise without fear or favour which can be ensured only under a neutral caretaker government. Obviously they have enough reasons to consider gaining strength in their demand by the type and manner in which the 15 February election was conducted which amply proves the validity of the demand. On the other hand, the government party also feels stronger by the very fact that it has somehow managed to hold the election in good time and therefore has succeeded in meeting the constitutional compulsions and keep continuity. Under such mental frame both sides are inclined to take tougher stand in their approach and that is exactly what they are doing now instead of getting flexible by of-

fering some valid ground which is so essential for any fruitful dialogue and understanding. The people are clearly caught in the middle of such confrontational line and seemingly taking the actual brunt.

As if looks now, both the ruling and opposition parties have so far claimed to be the winners. Many of us have commented that the loser is the country itself. But the country cannot be the loser. It is the people and people alone who could be termed as the 'sole losers', their livelihood and wellbeing at that.

The only other entity that allowed itself through the process to become the prime casualty happens to be the Election Commission. So far its handling of the election process appears to be highly questionable, clearly oblivious of the actual situation obtaining in the country, as if the national poll was being conducted under ideal condition; i.e. free, fair and fully participatory. The Chief Election Commissioner has of course followed the legacy of his predecessors in this business and it is not very much unknown how all the previous elections, barring only in 1991, were conducted and the kind of results they produced. The person so appointed to conduct such a responsible task is usually drawn from a service where the people repose their highest esteem, trust and confidence and he is of course expected to live up to it. However, it is not altogether obliterated from our memory how the Chief Justice of the country's Supreme Court used to allow himself to become the Chief Martial Law Administrator when there was a military takeover in the country, perhaps to give some credibility at the initial stage to the takeover.

The sole exception and an exemplary one at that, happens to be the one under whom the only free and fair election was ever held in this land. This has clearly proved

that given the will and determination such a thing could surely be made possible in this country.

It appears that none of the parties, both in government and in opposition think and care about the fate of the country and the people. The political turmoil covering nearly two years now without much excuse and justification has almost ruined the country's economy and progress that the people once hoped for and looked forward to. The business community has already urged to keep the commercial activity out of political ambit. But how? Where does complete homestead in an fire could one save the stable? Under the prevailing situation, desperate as it is, what would happen to the fate of the emerging tiger that we once projected ourselves as? The foregone conclusion is slowly getting visible now despite any stretch of wishful imagination. The people of the land have already been pushed far enough and would surely resist to be pushed any further. Situation in many other countries that I have the opportunity and privilege to observe, with conditions much worse than ours, often living under perpetual armed conflicts from within and outside, was never so pitifully brought down to such a level by their own leaders.

Never in the history of governance of statecraft so many were held as hostages for so long by so few just paraphrasing the famous speech made by Sir Winston Churchill at the House of Commons in tribute to RAF, with the only difference that his speech was made with reference to the courageous and heroic act that save the country from complete catastrophe, this one refers to the ignoble episode that has apparently led our country to the present pathetic state.

Would the people of this poverty stricken country see the end of the political turmoil? And would the stability would return soon to allow the people to see a better life? Future alone could say what is in store for us. Only wisdom of our leaders, if applied, even at this late stage, can still make the differences and save the country from further ruination.

## OPINION

# The Colours of Neutrality

Alif Zabr

The Daily Star is trying to publish neutral (unbiased) editorials on the political impasse, while I, as a 'neutral' citizen, am doing the same exercise, namely, neutral assessment; to enable me to decide on the options as a voter.

But I find that these two brands of neutrality are not compatible in many areas. In fact we differ on the very approach to the issue. I find the modus operandi of the opposition group questionable, morally and ethnically; basically on two counts: i) walking out of the parliament and ii) indulging in the politics of violence to achieve its goal. There is a third corollary: opening the campaign during the third year of the duly-elected regime to bring down the elected party in power by hook or by crook before the end of the mandated period.

The question is not what wrongs the ruling party committed, and how big or serious these are. What is objectionable is trying to find a solution outside the constitution; and that too before the 5-year term was over. The opposition parties could have campaigned for votes through proper election manifesto.

The opposition is trying to create a precedent, which others might be tempted to follow (outside the constitution) if and when AL comes into power, on the near future. This is a foreboding trend which the citizens should not support.

I have another objection to

the tactics employed by the opposition parties trying to bulldoze into power using cannon fodder: the appeal is to the herd and the herd, in turn, I am against rabble-rousing. Why instigate the public and encourage unnecessary confrontations leading to violence? The purpose appears to be more or less clear: to create a law and order situation (coffin processions and the halo of coming out of the jail).

The grievances of the opposition do not call for a revolution or mini-revolution. I object the view that political leaders are above the law, and can commit no crime. As an ordinary citizen I should have been arrested long ago had I committed even a part of the offence the opposition have committed in the false name of democratic rights. Who are fooling whom?

The basic problem is to raise the standard of politics in the country. The editors have to focus on this issue first, and then go into the nuts and bolts of a proposal. Let us not get lost in the branches and the leaves. We are fed up of this political power games.

There is only one consolation from all the suffering we see around us: We got our freedom too easily and too early in nine months, instead of, say, in ten years of struggle. We are simply paying the price due for freedom. We are paying in installments. The compound interest is piling up. Will it deliver us from the rent seekers?

## MA final exam of Jagannath University

Sir, We are the students of M A Final Year of Jagannath University, and we are supposed to sit for the Masters Final on the 11th April, '96 under the National University. But it is a matter of great regret that the scheduled classes did not take place due to the following problems:

- The preliminary and the Masters Final examinations of different subjects under Dhaka University and National University held at Jagannath College and University in 1995.
- The BA examinations held at the same institution.
- The BCS examinations held at the same institution.

For these reasons the syllabus of the Masters Final was not completed in the given time. But the aforesaid date of examination is knocking at our door.

Hence we would like to put a question to the authority concerned of National University: will it be plausible to hold the examination as per the scheduled time? If so, a great number of students of M A of the different departments are likely to be unsuccessful. Besides, we all know that without taking proper preparation, no student can cut a good score in examinations.

It is also funny that no tutorial examination, specially of M

A Final, was held in the English Department as yet. Only 25 classes actually took place in the English Department before the long vacation. It was supposed that the classes of the University would resume after Eid-ul-Fitr. Is it possible to complete our syllabus within a month ahead of Final Examination?

We therefore would humbly appeal to the authority concerned of the National University to look into the genuine grievances of the students and thus change the scheduled date of the M A Final examination for the greater good of all concerned.

Some students  
Department of English  
Jagannath University  
O H Kabir  
Wari, Dhaka

## The election and right to vote

Sir, We have lost much of our valuable time, energy, national wealth, life and property due to bitter differences of opinion between the ruling BNP and the opposition AL-JI-JP. Why have not they held any referendum on the dispute of 'Caretaker Government' issue?

Would the outcome of general elections of February 15, 1996 help us overcome the 22-month-old and ever-deteriorating political crisis in the country?

What is democracy? What is the right of franchise of the

people? How and where from we learnt and got inspired about democracy and people's right to vote?

What referendum, general elections, people's right to vote? Can anybody force a voter to 'cast' or 'not to cast' his/her vote?

Why and how did the people use their right to vote in 1937 and 1946 under British rule and in 1954 and 1970 under neocolonialism of Pakistan?

How are the referendum, general elections conducted in UNO, EC, SAARC and ASEAN countries? Whither Bangladesh today?

These are questions that perturb us in our present-day political scenario.

O H Kabir  
Wari, Dhaka

## Appetite for election

Sir, The recent happenings have taken away my appetite for reading newspapers, watching the TV, listening to the BBC — my usual pastime. I have been watching, with more than passing interest, the elections since 1946. I know very well in which of the elections the people's will had been manifested and in which it had not been. An inner voice has always told me when the election had been free and fairly fair. This time the loss of appetite has been so great that I can say without any hesitation

A voter  
New Eskaton Road, Dhaka