

All for a Worthy EC

Chief Adviser Mohammad Habibur Rahman has taken a bold and commendable decision by moving out of the usual practice, and appointing an experienced administrator as the Chief Election Commissioner. We have already had two retired judges as CEC. It was supremely appropriate and timely to try an administrator, in this challenging post. However, the point must be very clearly understood at the outset. The EC must not be allowed, under any circumstances, to make the excuses the present EC has done for its absolutely horrific performance. The caretaker government has been institutionalised at a very heavy price only to see that the EC does not compromise its obligations to the state, people and to the terms constituting it. There is no scope now for the EC to foul up its things anymore.

At the beginning of a newly-charged EC it is very important that, with a dismal performance of Justice Sadeque for failing to hold any light to the new EC — the person of the Chief Election Commissioner, or persona if you will, will very much count.

It is to the new CEC we say that his personality counts. If Justice Sadeque could only — would only — dare! What held him from protesting and resigning? Poor man, still clinging to his unfortunate and thoroughly unconvincing theory that he had no way to know the facts and no law to use in case of suspected infraction!

We want EC to come past all that and arrive at a no-excuses land. It shouldn't prove that difficult. Justice Shahabuddin did his job quite well. And now there is a world of mistakes to learn from too.

We offer our best of co-operation to the new EC and its chief. They are the one hope for this nation to come to terms with itself the soonest. The caretaker government will be judged by the performance of the EC. Empower it to the ultimate and stand by it as long as it is itself free and fair and effective.

Bolstering the Economy

A five-point plan for a quick economic recovery was discussed on Sunday between the business community leaders and the Adviser for Industry and Trade SB Chowdhury. The moot points were round-the-clock operation of Chittagong port, an interest rates waiver in a cumulative sense, soft-term bank loans, law and order, and getting the lost buyers back into our fold.

The interim government adviser informed the business leaders that an inter-ministerial body were to look into these and other relevant aspects of trade and industry beginning this week. He suggested there could be a core committee at the FBCCI to liaise with the government committee.

Approach-wise we are on the right track. However, a time-bound and target-oriented strategy need to be adopted jointly at the earliest by the government and the private sector leaders.

It appears that certain areas of concern can be immediately addressed with an assured prospect of satisfactory results. The Chittagong port should be able to work off the congestion in double-quick time.

The caretaker government has an acceptability that cuts across the political divide, its in-built impartiality strengthens the forces of law and order to act with complete neutrality, and there are no anchor-points for the miscreants to hang on to. This is an ideal setting for maintenance of law and order. Neither the extortionists should be a pain in the neck of business people nor a physical threat to them. Nor should palm-greasing any stumbling-block at the offices.

The good news about our infrastructure, financial institutions and productive sectors coming to life should start filtering through to the interested parties abroad. But then our missions overseas have to build up a campaign to get back the buyers.

We are for fiscal incentives and soft loans to the affected industries and businesses but subject to basic financial and budgetary discipline. Our private sector will be tremendously helped if some procedures are relaxed.

Tension in Korea

There has been a military red alert in South Korea following two successive incursions made by North Korea into the Demilitarised Zone dividing the Korean peninsula. The 37000 US troops in ROK stepped up their surveillance, too. The DMZ was established under the 1953 armistice agreement whereby the Korean war, with its realpolitik ramifications, came to an end.

Since Thursday when Pyongyang publicly announced that it would no longer observe the armistice rules things have to hot up between ROK and DPRK somewhat like the China - Taiwan row after Beijing had flexed muscle towards Taipei. Though the analogy may appear to be a little overstretched, there is, nevertheless, the common US factor as part of a historical legacy in both the scenarios with an underlying unification drive to these.

The North Korean incursion has not been quite the one-off type, the security concern of South Korea rather deepens through the occupation of fighting positions and emplacement of mortars by the DPRK troops at a border village within the DMZ. Earlier the US had shown an active concern over North Korea's nuclear plans. The latest border move by Pyongyang reminds the US of the armistice obligations to come in defence of ROK as part of its pacific rim security stratagem.

The UN command overseeing peace in the buffer zone could help defuse the new tension by speaking up with Pyongyang authority. President Clinton's visit to South Korea next week may be put to good use as well.

Face the Challenge, Rise and Shine

by Qazi Khaliquzzaman Ahmad

The stake is very high in this phase of our national political life, with democratic politics once again at the cross-roads. Restraint is, therefore, urged upon all leaders of all political parties that they do not unleash destructive forces publicly or privately that cannot be sheathed back and will, as a consequence, mar the run up to the election and the election itself.

It is undoubtedly a huge task for the caretaker government to carry out its mandate of holding the forthcoming parliamentary elections in a free and fair manner, but one that has a highly successful precedence in this country. And the expectation is that the 1991 experience will be repeated — only better.

But, of course, the real players are the political parties. The demand for the caretaker government was in reality a demand for a level playing field, to be ensured by the neutrality and non-party character of a caretaker government. But, obviously full cooperation of all the governmental agencies and other social actors are essential for laying out the playing field in a manner that will be fair to all the political parties and disadvantageous to none. This cooperation must come forth in the national interest.

It was also disturbing that, when asked why she was making strident speeches, BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia said that she would, because she was now in opposition. In opposition to whom? Cannot be to the caretaker government? Its main responsibility is to hold the next elections. But, more importantly, in government or in opposition, responsible politics demands sobriety and sensibility, particularly from a person who had just relinquished the chair of the Prime Minister and is seeking another term. Newspaper reports on her press conference of 5 April 1996, however, indicate a welcome departure from her earlier approach.

Again, leaders of other political parties are also not all soberly and correctness personified. However, since the fulfilment of the demand for caretaker government and till the writing of this article on 6 April 1996, Awami League president Sheikh Hasina has evidently been self-restraining and constructive in her speeches. One hopes that she continues to conduct herself in this vein and the attitude percolates to lower echelons of her party and encourages those belonging to other parties to behave likewise.

The stake is very high in this phase of our national political life, with democratic politics once again at the cross-roads. Restraint is, therefore, urged upon all leaders of all political parties that they do not unleash destructive forces publicly or privately that cannot be sheathed back and will, as a consequence, mar the run up to the election and the election itself. The political parties that are to be held responsible for the failure of the World Bank and IMF supported ongoing structural adjustment process to accelerate growth so far will in the course of time be history with a higher trajectory materialising once reforms take hold. Because the process does not address the basic issues arising from the prevailing sharp socio-economic differentiations and other socio-economic and geo-political realities. Hence, neither the package nor the pattern and pace of the reform policies are appropriate for the country.

Under the circumstances, the political parties which are seeking votes must explain to the people their economic policies in clear terms so that the people can make an informed choice. It is not enough to say that market economy focused policies will be followed, or people-centred

programmes which need to be explained to the people for them to relate their choice of the candidate to what is promised to be done in the future. A particular election has to do with future policies, future programmes, and future course of national development. It is not a choice to be made lightly.

In Bangladesh the economy is, at present, at the cross-roads. On the one hand, the micro-credit regime is tying up the so-called beneficiaries to rudimentary economic activities that guarantees below-or-at-poverty-level trap for the people caught up in the perpetual micro-credit syndrome. On the other hand, the economic reform programme has not only failed to accelerate economic growth but also accentuated poverty and shattered the prospects of domestic production in a wide range of activities. There is little prospect of the argument holding in Bangladesh; that the failure of the World Bank and IMF supported ongoing structural adjustment process to accelerate growth so far will in the course of time be history with a higher trajectory materialising once reforms take hold. Because the process does not address the basic issues arising from the prevailing sharp socio-economic differentiations and other socio-economic and geo-political realities. Hence, neither the package nor the pattern and pace of the reform policies are appropriate for the country.

Under the circumstances, the political parties which are seeking votes must explain to the people their economic policies in clear terms so that the people can make an informed choice. It is not enough to say that market economy focused policies will be followed, or people-centred

programmes will be adopted. People must know what are the policy implications that a party is deriving from one or the other of the basic approaches that it has adopted.

The BNP has pursued economic policies within the framework of the above mentioned structural adjustment programme and will likely pursue the same road in future. But the party has to explain why it has failed to accelerate economic growth and reduce poverty and, if it follows the same path in future, how might the ultimate goals of economic growth and poverty alleviation be achieved. A dogmatic explanation will not be helpful — people have heard the dogma before, over the over again. A realistic, hard-headed explanation is needed.

The Awami League should also explain its basic economic approach and goals as well as the implied policy and programme directions. The same goes for the other parties as well.

I am not however condoning the undermining of the national interests by our political parties by selfishly pursuing their own party interests. It is a shame that this is what the powers-be have been doing in this country. Now an opportunity has been created once again for a level-playing field for the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The political parties must now concentrate on politics of making their cases to the people in whose disposal it is to entrust one party or another with the authority and responsibility of running the country for the next five years. But the people can discharge that responsibility in a fair manner only if the electoral process is not marred by wrongdoing and violence by the political parties. Recalling February 1991 election, one should be reasonably optimistic.

dentials. An utopian idea? I hope not.

I would like to end this piece by referring to an article published in the latest issue (8 April 1996) of *Newsweek*. I do not wish to go into its contents, some of which, such as the comments on the revitalisation of the rural economy, are based on a lack of real understanding on the part of the writer about what is actually going on. Here I just wish to take issue with the writer regarding the title of the article "Trivial Pursuits: Two powerful women cannot stand each other". For no other reason, a nation that had finally found the Asian Dream is once again destroying itself. The future of a nation cannot be a trivial matter. It is not only male chauvinism but also naked western paternalism to dismiss the political process and upbraids in a country as being

between two disgruntled ladies. There are fundamental issues involved in the political struggles in Bangladesh, which must not be trivialised. And an international newsmagazine like *Newsweek* must not trivialise itself by attributing a nation's predicament to a most silly reason.

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were not taken aback at the spectacle of a head of a government being challenged from all sides. A prime minister serving for the full five years in a democratic setup had to go because of the rumblings of discontent.

With the economic situation worsening each day, the country's new-found democracy that was put on experiment since 1991 has only exacerbated myriad political and social problems. On the other hand, modernisation has brought about a world of expectations and longing that has also bred vices. Thanks to REB, electrification of the remote rural areas has enhanced comfort and facilities of living but it has at the same breath accelerated a breakdown of our indigenous culture. Fast money has led to an increase in crime, complicated land disputes and brought sophisticated weapons which even village mastans and goons are now carrying to fight out the rivals. Landless farmers have begun flocking to the cities in search of jobs. Unemployment is increasing, because the government has been unable to develop a solid manufacturing base and this is the most festering malaise that is likely to pose a serious threat to the reform process.

People, throughout the length and breadth of the country were exhilarated in 1991 when one of the contending political parties with democratic culture swept to power. Their enthusiasm has long since turned to bitterness and disbelief. Unsurprisingly, when a democratic government, holding an aura of "people-oriented" policies and promising fair deal to the people becomes riddled by corruption and other accusations, public outrage is unleashed in different forms such as street demonstrations, hartals and clashes. That inevitably has be deviled the administration that was ruling the country in the recent past.

formulate them. We need these methods and laws because in the present state of affairs, it is of no use to advocate that we must participate in the elections with honesty, selflessness, fairness as these attributes no longer have any value with the members of the political parties.

If the caretaker formula works in giving us an uncontroversial government, we have probably found the solution. If it does not, then I offer my thoughts above for consideration as one of the means of deriving at a formula to solve what we might be faced with again — an everlasting crisis.

I want to make a suggestion to the caretaker government that was formed in order to avoid vote-rigging which was a major complain of political parties. Army personnel could be used and not civilians in conducting the elections and fully armed military police be posted to guard the election booths and any attempt of rigging will be dealt with severely.

S. I. Ahmed
House 92, Rd-13
Banani, Dhaka

Caretaker Government, Politics and People

by Md Asadullah Khan

Musing over the bleak chapter and catastrophe the country had passed through during the last two years and that was largely because of the diehard nature of our politicians, politics from now on must be guided in such a way that power of reason and sensibility may take precedence over power of events.

came to such a pass that during its last days, the regime could hardly keep people happy, who by then perhaps had started following the regional leaders for their emanicipation and redress of sufferings.

Ironically true, leaders in the country right from 1971 pointed to the vast possibilities of this country and summoned up visions of a prosperous future. But even the "Dal-Bhat" programme of the BNP government became a shocking euphemism. At the time the BNP government came to power in 1991, Masur Dal was selling at Tk 20/- per kg, and average quality of rice sold at Tk 9/- per kg. People are now aware how the previous government's dream manifesto were set at naught by the time the government was quitting power. Taking the case of Masur dal, the administration had never taken any statistics of the consumption pattern of the people of this country and summoned up visions of a prosperous future. But even the "Dal-Bhat" programme of the BNP government became a shocking euphemism. At the time the BNP government came to power in 1991, Masur Dal was selling at Tk 20/- per kg, and average quality of rice sold at Tk 9/- per kg. 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