

## 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 Kholiuzzaman 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 is my fervent hope that despite there being formidable odds, both the necessary and sufficient conditions will be fulfilled for holding fair and free elections within the mandated time period. But even if the playing field were level, much will depend on the protagonists to make the contest an opportune event in the political evolution of Bangladesh society. In order to ensure that, top political leaders of all the parties will have to bring a lot of political maturity and courage to bear on the way they conduct themselves and mobilize their colleagues and workers. Irresponsible utterances may unleash uncontrollable destructive forces by encouraging unruly and violent behaviour among other party functionaries and workers.

Unfortunately a top BNP leader, who was known for his sobriety, flung down an ill-considered and rather venomous gauntlet the other day that apparently acted as an encouragement to lower level party echelons for embarking upon inflammatory speech making. As an optimist, I would like to think that this happened as an

outburst while the person concerned was still going through a psychological zig-zag in the wake of his party's fall from power, and that not only he but other senior leaders of his party will find politically agreeable ways of expressing themselves and making their points.

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 sobriety 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.

grammes 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 pace 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

policies 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.

Having been in research for over 30 years and concerned about our past failure to break out of the poverty syndrome, I suggest that our main fault has been that we have always relied on imported dogmas and outside dictates in planning. Mixed economy of one sort or another, economic reforms — and never took a deep and long look into our own strengths and weaknesses to develop our own economic policy planning and action programming. Anyway, I would like to challenge the political parties to tell the people, as they seek votes, what they are going to do for the people, and how. Each party should be concentrating on putting forward its own ideas and ideologies, policies and plans, and refuting those of the other parties to establish its own credentials. 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 upheavals in a country as being a light between two disgruntled ladies. There are fundamental issues involved in the political struggle 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 mostly silly reason.

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-that-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.

## 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.*

ULTIMATELY the formation of a neutral caretaker government for conducting the next parliamentary election has ushered in peace and stability in the political arena of this country. Shockingly true, the recognition came in the wake of huge destruction of public and private property, colossal economic ruin and, above all, through sacrifice of hundreds of human lives in protracted clashes in different parts of the country for over two years. Hopefully, if the administration, that will be working now above partisan spirit, can free the country of illegal arms, the objective can be achieved with lesser hurdles. The other factor that warrants serious attention is the reconstitution of Election Commission with sufficient employment of law enforcement personnel at its command with specific charter of duties to be accomplished by them so that no untoward incident can vitiate the polls process.

The state of affairs in the past was generally not happy. Beyond the specific complaints against the past government, there is a deeper grievance. Because of both the position and the conviction, BNP chairperson was held in esteem for an aura of uncompromising attitude. She was identified at the beginning of the BNP rule as a person who could lift the country from a state of gloom to boom. But perhaps because of her unusual confidence in her henchmen, despite loud complaints of malfeasance and corruption against some of them from all quarters, the task remained unfulfilled. Her golden dream of bringing about prosperity of the country through development works, just after passage of three years of rule, turned out to be an embarrassing abstraction to the people, who in the later days got totally disillusioned with the political and economic programme of the ruling party. The situation

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 emancipation 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 'dal' throughout the country, total acreage of cultivable land for 'dal' and the possible yield in any particular year, discarding monsoon hazards and shortfalls by other sources. Evidently the laissez-faire attitude in high state matters landed the government in a disastrous situation and disenchantment of the people for the administration grew ever more.

Now that the administration, in the face of deepening economic recession, mounting political opposition and government officials' boycott of offices was quitting the seat of power, leaving the country in total chaos and disarray, a deepening crisis of law and order situation had engulfed the country. Rival militant groups in different localities of the city and elsewhere are now

taking advantage of this situation to avenge their previous hostilities. Shockingly, the government that ruled the country for five years did not learn much from the mistakes committed by the Ershad government. Pragmatists point out that the country is beset with a crisis lying deep underneath which the political pundits of the regime failed to diagnose. The gap between the people's expectation and economic reality is partly to blame. Since 1971, the economy has failed to grow as fast as the population, there are jobs only for a bare 5% of the vast 20 million people who are now totally jobless. Mounting frustration and endemic poverty have bred all pervading chaos. Besides this, the last regime's much-vaunted policy of education for all by the year 2000 appears to be a proposal never attainable.

Refusal to accept the proposal of a neutral caretaker government during the election days culminated in violent clashes and sparked off popular unrest. A wave of nationwide demonstrations, and hartals that started in late December '95 brought the movement to a boil causing a virtual stoppage of everything. Escalation of violence so far has taken a heavy toll of human lives, not to speak of the damages in property. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia finally gave in at a time when the country was profusely bleeding in many sectors. Stubbornly uncompromising and intransigent even to the point when the national interest was at stake, her promise to lead Bangladesh toward multi-party democracy turned into an authoritarian rule of leadership, alienating the administration

from the masses. And that inevitably set the party on a collision course, spelling colossal damage for the country.

Another mistake the party did was to conduct a one party voter-less election and turn the polls result in their favour by showing massive vote casting which was rejected by people at home and abroad. Even their overt effort to create some opposition blocks in the parliament did not bear fruit.

True, Ershad, the last autocratic ruler, destroyed the democratic institutions and on many accounts it was revealed that he and his cronies amassed millions of dollars in wealth by kickbacks on business and repatriated the wealth abroad. But the legacy of the last regime only calls up poignant memories with its programmes in most disastrous condition because of infiltration of arms in all places, especially in the universities from outside, distressing health services, deadlock in industrial plants, dwindling food production and soaring prices of daily necessities, mounting inflation and draining of foreign exchange reserve that would prove to be deterrent to the march of the country towards a happy democratic society. The damage and loss inflicted on the country in the two years outstrip the gain achieved in the first three years.

The nation now must feel relieved of the stifling situation. But unless politicians from both the camps extend cooperation to the caretaker government, at least in their effort to free the campus from illegal arms and by refraining from inciting each other, suc-

cess will remain elusive. The nation now will have to get over the sinking feeling that so long bottled up people's hopes and aspirations. 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.

Historical parallels are not always exact but they often come about with striking similarities. History keeps its own peculiar rhythms, sometimes rewarding the lowly and punishing the mighty with a brutal speed that leaves spectators gasping. Margaret Thatcher was pushed from power after 11.5 years in office by her own ruling Conservative party leadership. In this connection the failings of Britain's longest serving prime minister is worth recalling. She was a leader who demanded obedience and not consensus. She judged her colleagues — most of them men — quickly and often harshly. I make up my minds about people in the first 10 seconds and I very rarely change," she once admitted. Margaret Thatcher known in the contemporary world as "the iron lady" characterized herself as "the lady's not for turning". Surprisingly, the iron lady softened when the national election was coming up. With striking coincidence, the resignation of Khaleda Zia from the seat of power, although seemed a distant possibility suddenly telescoped into a historic event, that perhaps caught even Khaleda Zia by surprise. Events took such a dramatic turn that people

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 not an 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 remotest 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 bedeviled the administration that was ruling the country in the recent past.

## To the Editor...

### Secretariat saga

Sir, Strangely enough, we all seem to have forgotten that it was Amanullah Aman and his followers who managed to stir up the Secretariat on his arrival there. The government officials and the employees were subjected to humiliation as well as manhandled and threatened with dire consequences if they refused to follow the then Prime Minister to remove Aman, which she did not. She preferred to remain silent about the whole situation created by the gallant soldiers and his followers.

On the other hand, she apparently chose to 'show' the nation her 'student front' would be enough to teach the so-called opposition who were behind all causes that toppled her. What an irony! One never learns from past mistakes, nor follies played with people.

With the fertiliser crisis taking place once again, no one seems concerned about the Secretary, Ministry of Industries, who happens to be a close associate of the former PM. An inefficient person, who cannot in my opinion even learn to mend past follies, surely does not deserve to be

sitting where he is till today, drawing a fat salary from the public exchequer, when there are others (though limited in number, naturally) capable of suitably guiding such a key ministry.

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### Whither flyovers?

Sir, The traffic jams on most Dhaka roads have crossed all limits. It appears that there is really none to redress the problem although we hear about official agencies like the DMC, Works Ministry, R&H Department and so on are working in this regard. It is observed that they have been building some over- and under-bridges at some points, but will that solve the traffic problem? The problem is not of human passage but that of transports and vehicles. So, the sooner we understand this, the better.

It was suggested by many earlier too that immediate construction of flyovers at least at ten road junctions like Gulistan, Farmgate, Jatra Bari, Saidabad, Moghbazar Shantina-

gar, Motchak and Sonargaon is the only solution to the problem but none seemingly paid any heed to this. The proposal may be given serious and urgent thought if the authorities concerned want to solve this monstrous problem in the near future. A national capital cannot be allowed to be bogged down like this with its authorities just beating about the bush.

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### A lesson from previous caretaker government

Sir, A situation has been created to make the people believe that elections under a caretaker government will be free and fair. Have we ever paused to think: will it really be free and fair?

The caretaker government, irrespective of who the advisers are, will be in my opinion a weak government without any previous experience of running a state, without any experience of tackling chaotic situation

intimidated by any political party and indeed without experience of handling any insurgency should it occur during its period.

Politics nowadays is not clean and simple. Political parties have trained personnel in running state machinery as well as in creating or organising and planned disruptive law and order situation. Any party wishing to take advantage of a weak government in the country can do so.

We should not be naïve to the extent of believing that to install such a government with any name like caretaker government or interim government, the political parties have the good intentions of holding free and fair elections. There could be other motives. A lot can happen even before the elections are held.

There is more disadvantage to the political parties in holding elections under a caretaker government than holding elections under the party in power. Should a party attempt to rig votes or should all parties try to rig votes, who will stop them — a weak government, with no experience or incentives — the people, who would rather stay indoors for

fear of being hurt by bomb blast, for fear of being hit by stray bullets, for fear of their cars being set alight — the other political party, whose interference will cause a street war to erupt? What can one visualise in such a situation? Complete chaos.

The caretaker government in 1991 had conducted a successful election and the BNP came to power. But look at the result was. Right from the beginning, the AL had accused the BNP for vote-rigging and agitated for removal of the government which ended up in the situation we are facing now. Times were better during the last election and political parties were less destructive which is why it took 4 years for the situation to come to its stage. But the present times are bad.

What we need is not a caretaker government to conduct elections. We need a method of election under the government in power, backed by laws and legislature, by execution of which no question about the fairness of the election is raised by anyone. I do not know what these laws and methods would be. The legal experts of our country could

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 complaint 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.

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