

Updating Voters' List

After Thursday's meeting of several political parties, including the two leading ones, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) announced that within the next ten days updating of the voters' list would have to be completed following which election schedule would be announced. Given the fact that elections will have to be held by 30 June, there is really not much time for the EC before it needs to announce the dates for the election. The issue of updating of the electoral rolls has been one that the opposition parties have been demanding with passion and persistence. We think the EC did the right thing by allowing for ten days to make up whatever deficiency that exists in the current list. We urge all those voters yet to be listed to make good use of this opportunity and enlist themselves.

During CEC's discussion with the political leaders, another issue featured prominently, which we from this newspaper has also raised on numerous occasions, namely the issue of a code of conduct for the political parties. As this has been demanded by both BNP and AL during their discussion with the CEC, there should not be any difficulty for the EC to make some quick progress on this score. The formulation of a code is of crucial importance because the next election will be fought tooth and nail by AL and BNP. There should also be a detailed expenditure code for the parties and the candidates. The EC must really do everything it can to reduce the impact of black money in the elections. Already election expenses have reached such heights that only the very rich, or candidates sponsored by such people, seem to have any chance to take part in the polls. If the election is to have any meaning for leaders of modest means then the impact of black money must be curtailed.

We also feel strongly that the ordinance barring bank defaulters from participating in the elections should once again be promulgated. This would be another means of keeping the influence of illegal money under control.

So far the EC has moved with confidence and consensus. It cannot expect to do so on every occasion. Therefore, it must develop its confidence and its organisational strength to take the tough, and may be lonely, decision as soon as possible.

Water Famine in City

Water scarcity in Dhaka city is no new problem. Supplying water anywhere near actual demand will call for a radical rise in water production capacities and new installations costing Taka in terms of tens of crores and taking time spread over years. It is hardly likely that supply will ever catch up with the demand of 8.6 million Dhakaites without some breakthrough in water technology. So, when temperature tends to approach 40 degree Celsius what will people do in Dhaka city?

People can go without electricity for some time as they can without gas — till the other day most of them had neither electricity nor gas. But without water? Yet it is true that people in many of the metropolitan areas are going without water. How? They are adjusting to the crisis by, one, managing headloads of water from luckier areas and, two, by lowering living standards and life style to sub-human levels.

There has been agitations in the city over water related suffering. From reports and photographs of these it would seem that this is a problem of the poor — and of the poorer areas of the city. And this is not untrue. As with every other thing, preferences work in water supply. A smaller and privileged section gets more and regular and perhaps better water. This must change. But changes cannot come overnight. So, to respond to the present crisis, something must be done resembling the power load-shedding practice. Supply shutdowns must be fair and evenly distributed among zones and day-night perennial supply must be a thing of the past even in, say, minister's residences.

A pattern of seasonal water famine is now well set in the city. We know by now next year the situation will get worse. So, let WASA be very generous and farseeing in buying and mobilising a goodly fleet of water tankers, ready to respond in an hour's time.

By the way, exactly as electricity is being pilfered from main grids, water is also being stolen from main pipes. While stolen power is not less healthful than the regular stuff, tampered water poses threat to life. When will WASA act on this?

Consumer Protection Laws

Just as private enterprise is on the rise in Bangladesh so also is the awareness about consumer rights. Though theoretically one does not necessarily follow from the other, but in practice it does. It is only when products compete with one another to win the heart of the consumer, that the rights of the latter can be assured. So, it is our view that consumers' rights will get its real play only when industrialisation will have advanced, and there will be more consumer products in the market. But that does not, however, mean that we will not enact laws or carry out consumer awareness campaigns right now. We are fully in favour of suggestions made in a seminar of CAB last Thursday that we should enact more comprehensive laws to protect our consumers, yet we feel compelled to point out that sufficient use is not being made of many existing laws. This is primarily due to lack of knowledge on the part of most consumers as to the existence of such laws, and also a widespread feeling that these laws are more for the statute book than for the use by the affected people.

This is an important area where CAB can make a great contribution — making the general public aware of their rights as consumers, and demonstrating the relevance of consumer protection laws. May we suggest that CAB undertakes a few law suits about violation of consumer rights. A few punitive judgments against companies who violate consumer rights will go a long way in restoring people's faith that these laws really work. Even one such demonstration will take the consumer movement a long way forward.

THE most useful cows in Britain are now deemed as the most harmful animals. The mad cow disease and its aftermath unveiled a plague of horror to devastate producers, upset consumers and embarrass the government. To remind the readers, the recent panic in the European beef market was triggered by the announcement that a new form of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) had been identified in 19 people under 42 years of age. That this fatal disease, mad cow disease as it is called, is caused by eating beef and thus has a strong link with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), apparently fuelled the flame. People at large got scared and stopped buying beef. Although the proportion of population so far affected by this disease is reported to be 0.00002 per cent or fewer than perish on the roads every day, the scare has already started to heavily pinch the British economy. According to The Economist of London, the share and bond market prices suffered as speculation mounted that there could be a ban on exports of British beef and related products. The scare would also adversely affect the

When Cows are Not Useful Animals
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growth rate, inflation and employment situations. The British policy makers are now in hot soup. Their agencies are being aggravated by the decision of the EU agricultural ministers to ban the imports of British beef into the European market. The nervousness of British government surrounding the mad cow disease episode tends to hang around, as Financial Times reports, four corners. First, it would be unwise to ban a food stuff when the risks are so low. Lower risks provides no room for complacency since public sensitivity to the issue is quite high. Second, the government cannot afford to declare the situation safe when it cannot be sure of the safety syndrome. And third, research should be generously funded to look deep into the affairs but at the moment not much of it is available. Sandwiched by the hue and cry, the British government proposed a dramatic solution to the crisis. Douglas Hogg, Britain's agricultural minister, declared that all British cattle over 30 months old would be incinerated at the end of their productive lives

this preventing meat from some 4.6m animals getting to people's tables. According to The Economist, "Europe's farm ministers demanded that Britain come up with an even more drastic plan which could mean the slaughter of millions more cattle". The overall situation seems to be a grim time for British

tain 11.8 million cattle would require a compensation of £865 per slaughtered infected cow and at that rate the total bill would be £10.2 billion. Further, the cost of killing and burning each cow would be £120. The total cost of killing and burning would thus stand at £2 billion. The British Meat and Live-

might have to be made to workers laid-off in beef-related industries. However these losses should be weighed against the benefits are likely to spring from new jobs created through slaughtering cattle, and the growth of substitutes like poultry, pork and lamb — the demand for which are likely to be beefed up as a result of beef crisis.

It is being argued that the slaughtering of cows would also affect the balance of payments situation. According to an economist, "a complete cessation of beef and dairy production plus imports of live cattle to replace the current herd would increase the current account deficit by up to \$6.5 billion a year for several years". Further, "deficits tend to damage an economy only if they persist for many years — although there is a chance that a bigger deficit would weaken sterling, pushing up import costs and thus inflation. In the short run, the fall in beef prices might lower inflation, depending on how much prices rise for other products. By and large, the absolute maximum by which GDP would fall

is calculated to be 1.2 per cent. Economists tend to argue that the impact on domestic beef sales will depend on two factors: first, whether consumers value the assurances of a 'no danger' situation given by the government and lower prices and second, how successful the producers are in differentiating beef produced from diseased herds and beef produced from unaffected herds.

Another adverse impact that the current crisis would impinge is reported to be on the cosmetic industry. Specially France, the country producing fabulous cosmetics, is likely to be hard hit as a result of the current crisis. Since many of the cosmetic derivatives are supplied by beef cattle, a demise of millions of cows might adversely affect the cosmetic industry. And along with it, the prices of cosmetics might soar high.

We thus find that the cows are the most harmful animals as far as today's Britain is concerned. The mad cow disease has already crippled the wheels of British farm economy. Only time can say how long it will take to turn the cows as the most useful animals.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



cattle farmers. As may be recalled, there was another big BSE scare in 1989 which adversely affected the farmers and from that wreck they are still fighting to stage a comeback. What are the probable economic impacts of the current cattle chaos on Britain's economy? The latest issue of The Economist tell us something on this.

The slaughter of all of Bri-

stock Commission estimated that around 400,000 people are engaged in beef and dairy farming. The treasury stipulates that every 100,000 rise in unemployment pushes up the social security bill by £275m. So, even on the assumption that the entire workforce were fired and unable to find other work, the cost would be £1.1 billion a year. In addition, payments

Accountability of Politicians: Post-movement Reflections

by M M Ahmed

NOW that the national ordeal has apparently ended, citizens of this country have some very cogent questions to ask the country's politicians no matter what form or shape the administration takes now or in the future. In almost the past two years people were made to continuously suffer — I do not want to get into the details as enough has already been written about it in the press, specially in the past few weeks. Who gave the politicians this right?

Is This Politics?

Apparently for fulfilment of one's personal ego the entire nation was kept at bay and fundamental rights of the people guaranteed under our constitution, while still in force, were snatched away from them in the name of movement. Some of the instances may be cited as follows.

Forcing to stop working: While it is always the avowed responsibility of any administration worth its name to ensure provision for its people of basic necessities like food, shelter, clothes, medical care and education, not only these were not provided but situations were created to ensure that the heads of the households, no matter how rich or how poor, were not allowed to go to their respective places of work for earning their livelihood thereby compelling them to abandon taking care of themselves and their families.

Where is the mechanism of people's sustenance in these circumstances and who is going to take the responsibility of deaths occurring in these situations?

Forcing to stay indoors by stopping communications: By stopping almost all modes of communication people were forced to stay indoors and neglect meeting their responsibilities towards themselves and their families. Some of the direct adverse consequences of this: meeting food and medical requirements was disrupted; people were incapacitated to meet family emergencies.

Again, who is willing to take the responsibility of deaths occurring in these circumstances?

Stopping the process of education: For lack of resources and other factors our education system already suffers from stagnation, serious jamming, prolongation of courses and consistent degradation of standards. In the name of movement, educational institutions were not spared. Who is going to account for these added losses and how?

Wiping off respect for the law: By forcibly implementing various disruptive programmes, groups of activists were set loose to perpetuate a reign of terror upon people obviously with political patronage, support and encouragement (let us not be naïve about it — every one knows it). Innocent students, youngsters, workers, labourers, rickshaw-pullers and the like were and have been turned into trained bandits, bomb-throwers, vehicle-breakers and, worst of all, law breakers. Who is going to de-train and discipline them to respect the law again and how?

If the political parties (in

opposition today, may go to power tomorrow) can inflict such tortures on the people in such a stark manner how do we trust them for future and vote for them and give them power to rule over us? Aren't they supposed to serve people? We have all along observed the reverse!

Is the Pattern Still Valid?

There were times when, for example, Gandhi started and successfully implemented the process of political agitation process of staging hartals and non-cooperation movements unceasingly one after another with a view to pressing the independence of India from the slavery of the British Raj. The model was very successfully followed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman against the Government of Pakistan. Those were foreign rules and slavery; the motive of all our political movements then was to harm the foreign rulers and, if at all, the peoples of those foreign countries. Opposed to that, this is self-rule and freedom, but the opposition parties pattern is harming ourselves and the people of our own country. Aren't we making a mistake somewhere by copying those models in present times under totally different circumstances?

The agitations then were for a 'noble cause' against external forces; the agitations now are for a much narrower 'self cause' directed towards internal factions. During the last two years of political agitations it has been amply proved by all the political parties (in power as well as in the opposition camps) that they have no regard for the existence and wellbeing of the country and, least of all, of its people. They have rather shown disregard to the people of the country as well as to the souls of millions of martyrs who laid down their lives for the creation of the country. If these norms are acceptable, these will be nightmarishly repeated. The entire nation will again be made hostage whenever any political party or, worse as we have recently seen, any of its leaders chooses to launch its agitation. It was abundantly clear to all of us that any political leader, no matter how insignificant one might be or how petty the party might be, could call hartals and stop all our daily life activities whenever desired. Are the people of this country going to allow this and remain as silent spectators to the destruction of their lives and of their families on a perpetual basis and receive congratulations through the press after the hartal day(s) for observance of and adhering to the whims of such leaders?

The Answer is "No"
The answer is an emphatic "No". People are simply fed up — starting from the millionaire businessmen down to the rickshaw-pullers on the streets. We have to learn to engage in politics like decent and civilized people and formulate a set of norms for doing that — by clearly ensuring that fundamental rights of the people are not touched in any way. People are free to pursue the activities of their daily lives and they must be allowed to do this. There cannot be any compulsion, not to speak of coercion, in expecting others to join or not to join the politi-

cal programmes. It should entirely be left to the discretion and prerogative of the people to follow or not to follow — none has any right to force people by adopting violent means.

It's High Time that Certain Rules were Set

People of this country have their highest regard for the newly appointed Chief Adviser. It is expected that the following views may be considered by him and, wherever agreed, legal coverage provided, during his present tenure, as people virtually have lost their confidence in all political leaders by now.

Who are to lead? Only those persons are to engage in politics and seek election to the parliament who are first approved by, say, a "People's Front" established in the locality of residence of those persons. This will be a sort of passport to politics which must be locally obtained to enter politics — this will no more be available at the whims of the offices of the Dhaka-based high commands of different political parties to meet their seemingly narrow political goals and ambitions. We have seen "People's Curfew", "People's Mancha", etc. — now let us establish "People's Front" to first clear the politicians all over the country. It needs no mention that such a "People's Front" will not be manned by politicians of any shade. People in general must have the initial right to decide whom they want to be led by — it cannot be thrust upon them by extraneous elements. Being someone's wife or daughter should no more be the sole criterion of admission into the arena of politics. It has to be earned with full qualifications, experience and dignity and with local people's mandate.

How should the differing leaders behave? Country's laws must be respected at all costs. Till the time the country's constitution is there it has to be respected. Everything else emanates from that constitution. If we haven't learnt this yet, we belong to the jungles. Each department of the society — military, para-military, police, judiciary, civil servants, businessmen, professionals, students, etc must respect the law and carry on with the duties and responsibilities entrusted to them. We do not want another show of disobedience recently exhibited by the government servants. If the Secretaries can get away with flouting government rules and orders, who and what will discipline the government employees of lower strata? Look at it from another angle: What would have happened if the police or the army engaged throughout the country to maintain law and order in the past few weeks would have exhibited the same kind and degree of disobedience showed by the govt servants? Anyone, no matter who and in what circumstances, flouting the law must be punished — otherwise one day we may have to consider a system under which even murderers can go unpunished and pardoned!

Differing leaders have to be accountable to the "People's Fronts": If the activists of any party break the law that party

and its leaders have to take full responsibility and be accountable for the misdeeds of their activists because the activists only function under the direction and with the moral, logistic and, as the case may be, financial support of their leaders.

Ways of organising agitations: The very purpose of agitations is to inform the general public of one's differing stand and to create pressure on the administration to consider one's views. This can be done in a civilised manner as well without shutting down ports, offices, educational institutions and vehicle movements. Let the hartals be token ones (a few hours, a few places, etc) without hampering any one's life. It was so surprising that throughout the agitational process no one thought of resorting to Gandhi's famous hunger strikes.

Norms for contesting the next elections: Country's next elections are due shortly. Let us seriously ponder over these issues and vote only for those candidates who have been duly cleared by the "People's Front" and have such commitments in their party's election manifesto.

People's fundamental rights will not be touched. This of course includes everything: the right to earn livelihood, the right of unhindered use of utilities, communication system, streets and pathways (meetings and congregations cannot be held on public streets creating immense public inconvenience; a separate open space must be earmarked for such meetings where all

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To me that story still holds good and carries an eternal meaning. We are virtually being liberated after every 25 years. Every time we are failing to identify correctly what are to be done for improving the quality of life of the children and women in particular and people in general. This part of the planet first became independent in 1947 and then in 1971. A political platform was changed in 1990 and again people fought for about two years for non-party caretaker government for conducting fair and free election to enable them to exercise their right to vote. In this they succeeded on 30 March 1996. This remarkable victory reminds us that without killing any more time we should identify some priorities in socio-political and economic sectors. We will have to keep these duties above all debates. We will have to make a long-term plan for at least 10 years and fix targets and indicators to assess progress in each sector.

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political parties will address the people by turn) and mode of transportation of one's choice. If any party touches, disturbs or suspends any area of the fundamental rights of the people, that party will have to adequately compensate the sufferers in financial terms and not leave this all-important matter for the government to handle.

(ii) Coercion, intimidation and violence will not be adhered to.

(iii) There will not be any pressure for collecting political donations from businessmen and general public (let the donations be made tax-exempt and be paid out by cheques along with curtailing the period of pre-election canvassing in order to keep a check on election expenses incurred by parties).

(iv) Protests will be made in an organised and civilised manner.

(v) Unbridled hartals, blockades and the like which suspend economic activities will not be called.

(vi) Private vehicles will not be requisitioned. This of course is directed towards the government and government-backed parties and their programmes when privately-owned vehicles, specially trucks, buses and minibuses, are indiscriminately requisitioned in the name of carrying out government and government-sponsored programmes. (I have always wondered how and under what authority does the government do this as a matter of right) The law of such requisitions needs to be reviewed in the context of demands of modern times. The law, in whatever form it

may be, was surely framed a considerable number of years ago when circumstances were different and it was easier to enslave people and deny their rights. Circumstances have changed and therefore such law must be scrapped and people's rights restored legally.

Conclusion

Over the past couple of years we have very frequently and with ever increasing intensity exhibited to the world that we are immature politically and are incapable of governing ourselves. Our moral degradation has been very steep. We have proved ourselves to be irresponsible, careless, unaccountable and of course corrupt and self-centred. Elsewhere we have always observed that no matter how much the politicians differ amongst each other, care for the country is always supreme with all of them. Nothing was done to harm the country and its people. Only this was seen recently in our country where the political parties simply stopped caring or thinking about the country.

Our demands and the needs of the times today are very simple provided these get into the conscience of our politicians and administration. People who aspire to rule must be competent, honest, committed, unselfish and accountable and must be approved and selected from the grassroots level. They must conduct themselves throughout the election process professionally with full transparency and thereby earn the distinction of the right to rule over and govern us. Is it too much to ask?

OPINION

People's Victory: Some Thoughts

Shafiqul Islam

The resilient people of Bangladesh again proved that they are indomitable by forcing the government to yield to the non-party caretaker government bill. No obstructions can stand in the way. We are very proud of their sacrificing spirit, firm determination and consciousness of their rights. We should take very careful steps to utilise this high standard of will-force in reshaping the country's socio-political and economic fields.

Long ago I had an opportunity to go through a book written by Syed Mujtaba Ali titled "Pancha Tantra". There was a very interesting story in that book — "Korobe Kushan Sob-ma Awal" meaning, if you want to kill the cat you will have to kill it in the very first night. Through that story the writer addresses the politicians who are engaged in liberating a country or in changing the political platform and urged them to identify the basic needs of the people and determine what they are supposed to do to achieve that. Because people are tuned to listen to their leaders during that time, once that period is over the opportunity is missed. It becomes difficult to reach that goal.

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ernment structure there must be commitments to revive the Thana and District councils. The role of Union Parishad has to be linked with villages, and the concept of Village Parishad has to be introduced. The culture of democracy has to start from the village, union, thana and district levels through their respective councils. Every council should have autonomous status for preparing and implementing its own action plans. There should be in-built system for accountability and transparency. Check and balance system between the people's representatives and the executives should be clearly defined to avoid ambiguity and fixing up specific responsibility. We have experienced that the Secretariat in Dhaka is the centre and the main source of power. Everything is tied up in complicated procedures. As a result, in spite of ample opportunities in Bangladesh, the desired level of progress could not be achieved. If we look to our neighbouring countries (India/Thailand) we find that due to their decentralized policy and structure of administration they have provisions for local level planning and implementation for each state region. States are not dependent on the centre, the Federal Government. They have their own accountability and transparency in operations. People have their participation in planning and implementation. In view of this, we consider that each district of Bangladesh should be made a centre of development. District Council should be the apex body having executives and people's representatives to decide and execute programmes. Likewise, there should be the thana council for the thana, and so on.

Economic: There must exist provisions for letting the people of the respective district know about the resources, income and expenditure, surplus and deficit of the district. Planning should be taken up for intensive cropping, crop rotations, soil test to advise the farmers on appropriate cropping, use of fertilizers, insecticides and irrigation water, etc. Measures like introduction

of buy back system for ensuring fair price to the farmers, fixation of price on all costs inclusive basis for each product, storage of products after the harvest and arranging the distribution during the lean period would help the farmers immensely. Provisions for more cold storage to preserve perishable agricultural products including fish would add to the facilities. However, these are some examples only.

Social: Count and compile data of district population to identify the number of children eligible for immunization, enrolment in primary school, unemployed and physically handicapped and plan for appropriate and immediate action for them. Make district map showing educational institutions, health facilities and make plans to cover the uncovered areas. Make provisions for supply of pure drinking water and hygienic latrines on cost sharing basis for the uncovered people of the district. Incentives for the retired persons to encourage them to go back home may also pay off in utilising experience. Through their new ideas could be introduced in the villages. I know one retired person in our village who used to collect various types of seeds, plants and planted those at his own house which gradually turned into a place of attraction for all the villagers. From the mahogany trees he had planted in the 80s he has developed a seed bed from where the villagers collect saplings. Further, as security of life and property, though constitutionally guaranteed, has become a real concern for the peace loving citizens, this can be addressed through the village parishad.

In order to do these, political commitments as well as simple processes have to be in place. Responsibilities have to be defined as to who will do what, when and for whom. We would hope that before going to compete for the seat of power one must have clear commitments and that has to be known to the members of the public on the basis of which they would elect their own leaders.

The writer is Division Chief, UNICEF, Khulna.

To the Editor...

CTG's/CEC's task
Sir, At this juncture, your editorial, "New Govt's Task" (DS, 31.3.96) is a praiseworthy effort. The DS on the matter of the next poll has only mentioned, "the prime-function for the CTG will be to hold the national election within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament." But so soon, should we forget the terms, "impartial, free and fair", those so long and so frequently harped as keynote catchwords? If I am not wrong, the whole gamut of the struggle of the political parties was to become cock-sure of an impartial, free and fair poll held under a selected and not under the elected government. Your editorial would have sounded

wonderful if this important fact was reflected and emphasized.

The following editorial, "For a Dignified Exit" (DS-31.3.96), in which the DS has rightly suggested that the CEC should exit for its controversial role in 15-February poll. I wished, if DS could also have cautioned the CTG on the pitfalls of poll process in our country. I would like to suggest the CEC, through this letter, that as CEC has adopted the voter ID card to ensure flawless voter list and make sure a genuine voter cast his own vote, he should also adopt ways to ensure neutrality and fairness with all the millions deployed around the polling booth.

When the Servants of the

Republic themselves cast shadow of doubts about their neutrality, and the Republic has to get the election completed by them at various stages, some visible action would be necessary to bring back confidence of voters on the public servants conducting the poll. Otherwise, it will not be illogical if some one terms the next poll too as "farical" on that ground. I hope good sense will prevail.

The CTG is our last resort to show the world that our best selected person has not failed, also avoided the "sukma karchupi" of any party in the next poll.

A R Choudhury
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