

Meeting Power Need

Acute power shortage during high summer no longer surprises us. What does really surprise us is the lack of a contingency plan to overcome this yearly crisis. The fact that the problem does not hit us all on a sudden is deliberately forgotten by the planners. This time we are told that shortage of gas supply is responsible for the low power generation. No one has ever claimed that gas production falls in the summer. Even if it did, why should the authority fail to read the situation well in advance? The problem seems to be the lack of any forward planning — not only in this sector but almost in every other area.

This time a joint committee has been formed to look into the matter but it cannot work magic when the problem is already on us. With an endemic power crisis, a country is hardly in a position to salvage the situation when the problem gets more acute. The PDB has an electricity shortfall of 300 to 500 megawatts. This will go up with more demand for power. So we need a comprehensive energy policy. The BNP government talked much but did little on this issue. In fact, about two years back it claimed to have almost got one such policy ready. However, it never materialised.

Asking the caretaker government to come up with an energy policy will be too much. However, it can take up projects where some progress has already been made. The move concerns facilitating the process of private investment in the energy sector. The silver-lining here is that foreigners have shown more interest for investment in this sector than in any other sector. No less than 10 memoranda of understanding were signed for foreign investment in this field. These must be implemented in double-quick time. For a short-term government convincing foreigners for investment may not be easy but it is not impossible either.

Last but not the least, the power shortage can be brought down substantially if we can do away with the excessive level of system loss. It is totally unacceptable that while the whole nation suffers from lack of power, there should be so much wastage. We have at present a rate of system loss in the region of 40 per cent and add to this the consumer habit of misusing power. We surely have a case on hand. Perhaps household vigil coupled with a switch-over to more sophisticated regulatory technology will help avoid wastage of power.

Why Play with Textbooks?

Even by our standards, there is no parallel to the delay we have incurred this year in getting the school textbooks ready. Nearly four valuable months have gone barren in terms of academic instructions. And it is a poor consolation to boot that pupils are having to busy themselves with 'sporting and extracurricular activities' under instructions from the Education Ministry.

Indeed we have set a ludicrous world record procrastinating with an abject lack of advance planning and time-bound delivery of goods. As if that was not enough the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and the Textbook Publishers' and Sellers' Association (TBPSA) are being recriminatory in an undisguised bid to hide behind the smokescreen of a simulated confusion. That is the reason why the government has ordered a probe into the delay in marketing textbooks for classes six and nine and the higher prices being tagged to books for classes seven and eight in particular.

The NCTB had decided to have new books this year for classes six and nine but the final manuscripts for these could not be made over to the publishers before the month of February. It is only in October last that the textbook board engaged some computer firms to prepare positives of the new set of books. Nonetheless, it is a mystery why the working on positives still goes on so far as the optional subjects are concerned, although the work on compulsory subjects has since been completed. Why did not the NCTB monitor progress at the computer end to ensure a timely delivery of the positives to the publishers? If the publishers' associations had 'breached' the contract with the NCTB by refusing to engage a larger number of presses to expedite the printing work, what held the board from taking the corrective step in good time?

It was a foregone conclusion that if book publication sneezes somewhere it catches cold elsewhere; with the books for classes six and nine remaining a distant possibility, those of classes seven and eight, even though well out in print, were hoarded up to hike their prices. The political unrest came in handy, too.

The notebook publication, allowed after a lapse of time, lured the printers away from textbook publication. When all this had been predictable why was the textbook printing schedule not drawn to take effect from June or July? Furthermore, the coordination lapses at the various stages have been simply unexcusable.

Korean Peace

In a masterly diplomatic stroke President Clinton on Tuesday proposed peace talks involving the US, China, North Korea and South Korea. This has been prompted by Pyongyang's recent military forays into the DMZ with South Korea in a deliberate violation of the armistice agreement of 1948.

President Clinton's proposal cuts not just both ways but trilaterally, so to speak. He has made no mistake about re-committing to the defence of and economic collaboration with South Korea and also assuring her of not dealing separately with North Korea. Simultaneously, he spread the olive branch to Pyongyang with the offer of talks knowing well enough that she would find it difficult to reject the Clinton gesture out of hand. North Korea's military incursions into the DMZ were regarded by the US as being intended to raise her bargaining power with the United States. Much as Pyongyang would have liked to deal directly with the USA she may not ultimately prove averse to the offer for the four-party peace talks as an opening gambit.

China is yet to agree to the peace talks at the foreign minister's level, although a spokesman from Beijing has already sounded positive on this. The US point of view seems to be that China has to be involved as a signatory to the armistice agreement to underwrite durable peace in the area.

People Demand Commitments from Political Parties

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

The citizens of Bangladesh would like to be absolutely sure that the country's economy and their social life will not be disrupted again in any manner in the coming days and years. Life must go on with the political process

HISTORY will ultimately judge which political party or parties were responsible for the disaster that the country went through during the recent political turmoil. The long political stand off has not only tarnished the image of Bangladesh abroad but has also destroyed its economy which cannot be easily recuperated as the economy of Bangladesh, already way behind even other developing countries, has lost at least ten years in terms of its growth. The educational institutions already burdened with violence jams due to campus session have once again lost heavily in terms of classroom teachings due to hartals and non-cooperation movement, thus putting the future of our children in jeopardy. The country cannot afford to allow this to happen again.

The political party or parties responsible for the disaster of this magnitude remain answerable to the common people — the voters — the taxpayers. They must have already clearly noted the strong reactions of the people including business chambers, civic groups, professional groups, individuals over the longest political stand off which could have easily been resolved with some flexibilities from the political leadership of the former ruling and the opposition parties. Many people have already started talking and rightly so in terms of the bill of rights of the people (Ref: The 'Bill of Rights' for the citizens of Bangladesh — by Dr Munir Quddus — published in The Daily Star dated March 25, 1996). The silent majority

have already started coming up with their legitimate demands — the citizens' right to move freely — right to work and earn their livelihood — right to educate their children without outside interference.

The idea of a caretaker government does not conform to the principles of democracy and the concept of people's representation. But the last election which was terribly flawed and rejected by the opposition ultimately proved the point that a political party in power in Bangladesh could not be trusted with the election. Indeed, the political parties, not the people, virtually declared themselves unworthy of trust during elections. If they cannot be trusted during elections, why and how should the people trust them with the affairs of the country? Now the question arises — would a caretaker government be formed again and again to hold by-elections that may have to be held from time to time, as one cannot rule out another Magura scenario that led to this unprecedented political turmoil in the country? The political parties must come up with an answer to this.

The caretaker government is not the panacea. The '91 election was free and fair not because caretaker government as such was present in all polling booths to ensure fair polling, it was because the political parties that participated

in '91 election, behaved responsibly and fairly and also allowed the voters to vote without intimidation. As the political parties showed maturity, acted fairly and remained within the democratic norms during '91 election, the bureaucracy also acted similarly as they were not induced or forced into any wrongdoing. The people are baffled today — they would like to know why the same political parties with practically the same leadership cannot show electoral maturity once again. However it is the hope of the people of Bangladesh that when the same political parties are expected to contest the next general election, this should also be a free and fair election.

On behalf of CIVIC WATCH — Bangladesh (a totally neutral and non-political citizens' rights organization), I and some other members had the privilege to talk several times with the top leadership of major political parties during the last couple of months and my impression is that these leaders are in a position to rise to the occasion provided they put aside their past differences, if not forget and forgive, for the sake of the welfare of the people of Bangladesh which should be their topmost concern.

In any case, election or no election, the citizens of Bangladesh would like to be absolutely sure that the coun-

try's economy and their social life will not be disrupted again in any manner in the coming days and years. Life must go on with the political process. The political parties by now should realise that violence, intimidation, rigging and all other undemocratic practices destroy the credibility of the political parties. Bangladesh is a small country and the people know who are responsible for these.

The people of Bangladesh are politically conscious and they are sure to consider all these while casting their votes.

The political parties are free to promote their own political views and give publicity to their election manifestos through standard democratic means and let people decide whether their programmes are good for them. Lust for staying in power or going to power obviously leads the leaders to wrong political decision the burden of which ultimately is borne by the common people and the economy. This must stop.

The political problems must be solved politically within the political institutions including parliament which is the best place for dealing with all political issues. The elected members of the Parliament should not resort to resigning en masse (resignation on personal ground is normal) because the people expect the members of the Parliament to work for them in the Parliament for

which they are elected. Indeed this should be the commitment of the Parliament members to the electorate.

The political parties are free to call for strikes (hartal) which they claim fall within the democratic rights of the political parties. But such rights should be exercised very seldom and judiciously and only when all other avenues have been exhausted. Indeed, a strike is meant to indicate a political party's protest on an issue and should not exceed a maximum of one day. Such protest may help enlist people's support on an issue. But 'Lagatar Hartal' only antagonises people and the whole purpose of hartal gets frustrated. No citizen should be forced to join a strike (hartal); it should be left to the people. The widespread practice of damaging cars and other transports including rickshaws must stop. No political party or parties should declare 'guncurlew' as this is not covered by the country's law and does not fall within any democratic norms. No political party should assume umbrella support of all the people of Bangladesh or any of their programmes or hartals as there are many political parties in the country and people may have different views on such issues.

Today, before the ensuing general election, the people are obliged to demand com-

mitments from the political parties to the effect that they will not resort to hartals or anything that will destroy the economy of the country and stop the people from earning their livelihood. Undoubtedly, those political parties which will come up with this sort of commitments will get full support of the people of Bangladesh.

Finally, the people look forward to a commitment from the bureaucracy too. As the bureaucracy is the only link between the incoming and the outgoing political governments, they must not desert their offices. As a former Secretary, I believe that the Secretaries are indeed the pivots of any administration and as such they must continue to work. They are, however, free to express their concern about lack of security to the higher authority for necessary steps for proper protection. The bureaucracy is remunerated for their services by the taxpayers of Bangladesh and they are required to serve the people as long as they are in service. Whether a political government is legal or illegal has to be decided by the bureaucracy. Indeed, even if any political government is ever considered illegal for any reason, it is more important and necessary that the bureaucracy stay firm in office to run the government machinery as otherwise the people would feel abandoned and unprotected. None can allow this to happen. However, if someone wants to join politics, he is free to resign and join political parties.

The Erosion of Democracy

by Nazim Kamran Choudhury

The Politician's Creed:

*If we propose, we must explain.
If we promise, we must deliver.
If we make mistakes, we must admit them.
If we ask for sacrifices, we must be the first to make them ourselves, and above all, we must give the electorate, the people, the vision of the future which is attainable.* — Lord Weatherill

ON the 1st of September 1995, Lord Weatherill, the former Speaker of the House of Commons, while speaking at a seminar in Dhaka arranged by the Centre for Analysis and Choice (CAC), gave what he thought should be a politician's motto. He said that unfortunately, all over the world, politicians are no longer being held in high esteem. He thought that it was perhaps due to the times we were living in, when views of democracy, of what is expected from governments, political parties and individual politicians, were all coming under much closer scrutiny.

He felt that the electorate has become more sophisticated and much more knowledgeable due to increased literacy, and expansion of the electronic media like the radio and television. While the electorate's expectations of the quality of life has increased, his belief in the ability of politicians to deliver it has decreased. He sees politicians make promises which they do not keep. Again, examples set by politicians in their personal lives have, often, not been good. Lord Weatherill sees these developments as a serious threat to democracy. He described how as an election observer he visited an ANC office in South Africa and saw the following poster on the wall.

*I was hungry and you formed a committee to investigate my hunger.
I was homeless and you filed a report on my plight.
I was sick and you held a seminar on the situation of the underprivileged.*

You investigate all the aspects of my difficulties, yet I am still hungry and homeless and sick.

Lord Weatherill said that the peoples' representatives have the responsibility to ensure the future of our democratic system of government by setting a personal example in their personal lives, which would ensure the respect of those they represent.

At exactly the time Lord Weatherill was visiting Bangladesh, Professor Samuel P. Huntington of the John M. Olin Institute of Strategic Studies, Harvard University, was presenting a paper,

Democracy for the Long Haul at a seminar held by the Institute for National Policy Research, at Taipei in Taiwan. The paper dealt with what he called, the Third Wave of Democratisation that begun in the early 80s and which 'by 1989 was in full flood, reaching its crest with the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, which was then followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union.' He goes on to say that 'These events generated a swelling tide of euphoria that a global democratic revolution was underway, that liberal democracy was destined soon to triumph globally everywhere, that history was at an end. Like the rest of the emerging democracies,

Like the rest of the emerging democracies, Bangladesh too was a part of the third wave. We too were euphoric and believed that democracy was firmly implanted in our soil, and that there would be an end to the autocratic attitudes of the past.

Bangladesh too was a part of the third wave. We too were euphoric and believed that democracy was firmly implanted in our soil, and that there would be an end to the autocratic attitudes of the past. But as Professor Huntington observes, 'our euphoric moment has passed, and we too have become sadder but wiser.' So have we, in Bangladesh, become sadder but have we become wiser? I think not. 'History has a dialectical dynamic. Any substantial movement in one direction tends eventually to lose its momentum and to generate countervailing forces,' says Professor Huntington. 'Each of the first waves of democratisation was followed by a reverse wave in which some but not all of the new democracies reverted to authoritarianism.'

He suggests that a new reverse wave may be gathering, which could lead to the erosion of some third wave gains, and as such the primary emphasis, at this time, should be placed on consolidation. 'Democratisation is the solution to the problem of tyranny, but the very process of democratisation itself can also create or exacerbate problems with which new democracies must grapple.' He goes on to mention three problems. The first being that elections makes political leaders compete for votes and the easiest way is to appeal to tribal, ethnic national and religious constituencies. This in turn promotes communalism and ethnic conflict. Pakistan and India are today prime examples, while we in Bangladesh are not immune to it. The second problem is the proclivity of emerging democracies for

interstate war, and this stems in part from the same incentives that stimulate ethnic conflict. Bosnia is present evidence on TV screens. The third problem, and for this Bangladesh could be a prime example, is that 'democratisation involves the removal of state constraints on individual behaviour, a loosening of social inhibitions, and uncertainty and confusion as to standards of morality. By weakening, as it must, state authority, democratisation also brings into question authority in general and can promote an atmosphere of amorality, laissez faire, anything goes.'

Keeping this statement in mind, let us look at our present situation. Can strikes, hartals blockades, imposed on

the electorate gave, in the last elections, a clear and distinct mandate to the 5th Parliament. It returned all major political groups, but gave none a clear mandate. Work together for democracy was the message and work they did, for nine months. After that, like boxers in the ring, each went into their corners — only to come out, at the sound of the bell, with fists flaying.

The consolidation of democracy is not the sole responsibility of any one political party or group. It is the responsibility of the entire political, social, academic and economic and military leadership in sort of society as a whole. Opposition may often be frustrated but if they believe in the Parliamentary system,

concentrates enormous power in its own hands. So much so that many recent political commentators in Britain have described Parliamentary cabinet government as an 'elected dictatorship' and have cited Mrs Margaret Thatcher as an example. It is true that a party with a comfortable majority in Parliament can pass any legislation and do almost anything it wants. If such governments show disregard for minority opinion it runs the risk of driving the minority away from Parliament and on to the streets. While the power of the majority party in Britain may be vast, it is even more so in Bangladesh where individual MPs have little role and no independent opinion because of Article 70 of our Constitution.

As we head into the next elections we must reflect on all that has happened, the price that we have paid, and ponder on what the future holds. If we have not learnt any lessons, then it is the nation's loss. If we have, then how are we going to change? Democracy may be our desire, but it is, as Lord Weatherill said, like freedom, 'a very fragile flower. Bear in mind that it is for easier to lose our freedoms than to gain it.' Politicians must remember the words of Benjamin Disraeli who said 'all power is a trust from the people, and for the people all springs and all must exist.'

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which prevents votes against party directive. In Britain, and in more established democracies such as India, the majority party will underplay their vast power by allowing healthy debates and the expression of minority opinions. This comes not from the Constitution itself, but from conventions, traditions and established practices.

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While it is the responsibility of all parties to ensure that Parliament and democracy work, the government has a more than equal responsibility. Professor Huntington says that one 'serious threat to democracy is executive arrogation, which involves an elected chief executive concentrating power in his own hands and in varying degrees subordinating or even suspending the legislature and ruling by largely by decree. By its very nature, Parliamentary government

sensible people have grown wary of them. Everyone of them are unable to understand this rejection. Yet they continue to term their personal demands as 'people's demands' and in the name of the people, destroy the socio-economic infrastructure of our fragile economy.

Now we have a neutral caretaker government and hope to have a fair election. But what is more important is to ensure political stability. And that can't be achieved without prudent leadership. Why don't we look at Malaysia which has taken a giant leap forward? We have all the resources and manpower; don't we?


So dear leaders, wake up, and save this country. It is never too late to wake up even for a 'Rip Van Winkle'.

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That's because you're looking at him on TV. Anyone who does that even for a short while is going to lose their sense of humour.

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Buchanan's Laugh

(The opinions expressed in this column are my own and not those of Bay Buchanan, the candidate's sister.)

EVERYONE I know is not going to vote for Pate Buchanan — all for different reasons. Mine is pure and simple: I can't stand Buchanan's laugh. Every time he says something, he breaks into a cackle as if he has a bullfrog caught in his throat.

I am aware that one should not judge a candidate by his chortle, but Pat's says more about him than all the huffing and puffing he expresses at his rallies.

Buchanan's laugh has turned me off because I don't think that this country can stand four years of a president saying something unkind about a particular group or issue and then laughing about it.

Buchanan enjoys playing the bad guy so when he appears to be amused he scares the hell out of the majority of Americans. Why does he pretend that he is enjoying the role he has carved out for himself? The prevailing opinion in Washington is that Pat says mean-spirited things about Bob Dole in order to divide the Republican Party, making it impossible for the party to win the presidential election. He's doing this so that he can run in the year 2000. By then the Republicans will be so intimidated by him that they will hand him the nomination on a plate. That's Buchanan's game plan — tee hee hee.

Despite what everyone around me says, I don't think that Pat is an evil man. Some of his supporters may be, but when you are so far out on the right, you take anyone you can get.

What bothers is that Pat laughs because he has just said something wicked. I have watched every one of his rallies on TV, and when he runs out of mean things to rant about, he cackles. His followers eat it up. But it doesn't do anything for people like me who enjoy a good laugh when it doesn't mean building a 1,000-mile fence along the Mexican border or making jokes about women being admitted to The Citadel.