

Suggestions to Heed

The CEC's first workshop session with divisional commissioners and top district officials has proved useful in a significant way. It has signalled the emergence of an effective election machinery. A check-list for ensuring fair voting is in hand and coordination between agencies has been given a fairly good start.

What is more, after taking the weather from a select group of DCs and SPs, the Chief Election Commissioner, who seemed to have some reservations about the law and order status at one stage, is now convinced that it has 'improved considerably'. His rather upbeat mood is caught in these concluding remarks he made: "My anxiety is gone, I feel very much inspired now (by the good prospect of a fair election)". We share the CEC's new confidence.

We also have a good deal of appreciation for the guidelines the chief Election Commissioner has given to the DCs and SPs. He has urged them to get in touch with social and opinion leaders, including UP chairmen and members, and devise the ways and means of ensuring an atmosphere congenial to fair polls. This effort can neither be perfunctory nor routine; it has to click this time. The law enforcers' boldness to arrest terrorists and recover illegal arms will not be enough of a clincher. This has to be underwritten by the political parties who need publicly to disown the hoodlums.

Some DCs and SPs have made a few concrete suggestions. These deserve to be heeded because they are the crystallised opinions of weather-beaten and election-veteran officials of the government. It is their experience with the previous polls that has wizened them in a perspective where, as the CEC himself has said, "There is no alternative to making the election totally acceptable to all."

Let's pick up three of their brain-waves. The proposed restriction on movement of motorised vehicles on the election day is a good idea because a thing like a Pajero jeep has become a symbolic purveyor of musclemanship and perhaps of weapons. Zonings would need to be done there — we guess. Yes, we believe, even the licensed arms need to be deposited with the thana authorities temporarily given the stigma some of these have taken on. Up to a point, we would like the elections to wear a festive look, subject to expenditure control.

Israel on Wrong Foot

Israel's mortar attack on a United Nations base in Lebanon — in which more than 100 civilians got killed and another 100 were wounded — has come under serious scrutiny at the UN Security Council. Neutral analysis of the incident shows that the attack was deliberately carried out on the UN installation. The Israeli positioning on the incident indicates that there was indeed a foul play. At first, Tel Aviv flatly denied its part in the raid and put the blame on Hezbollah Guerrillas against whom Israel's wrath is public knowledge. Now she admits her involvement but blames it on wrong mapping for the action.

Experts at the UN, however, are convinced that Israel could not have made a hay-wire choice of target, for its sophisticated radar system was capable of giving a clear and precise picture of the location — unless of course the weather was unusually foul.

What is more significant is that at the time of the attack an unmanned reconnaissance plane was detected flying nearby. So the conclusion about the motive of Israeli attack leaves little scope for doubt.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres has had his reasons to give an impression of toughness against the Hezbollah Guerrillas after their bomb attacks inside Israel, particularly before a general election. But extending the offensive to Lebanon, an independent state, and targeting the UN base at Cana have no justifications whatsoever. Consider the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's earlier gesture of goodwill to Tel Aviv whereby it had dropped the 'destruction of Israel' clause from its charter. What an Israeli response now to that most conciliatory Palestinian move!

Does Israel want to subvert the peace process? If it does not, it must give up its old ways of aggression.

Of City Vermin

A Reuter report says that the Rumanian capital Bucharest, once known as the Paris of East Europe, is now being pestered all over by stray dogs, there being one such for every ten residents of the city.

That isn't why the city has hit the headlines. The human population there has been very badly outstripped by that of the rats — 10:1, to be precise. Bucharest's enemies seem to be strangely metric-oriented — the cockroaches there number 200 for each Bucharestanian. And mosquito half that at 100:1. To be so grossly outnumbered by vermin certainly pushes that place out of the world's most fancied cities.

The strength of Dhaka vermin has not been computed and no one has thought of doing so till now. Without any chance of being controverted let us assume both cockroaches and mosquitoes to be only ten times over the Bucharest ratio with two thousand of the former and 1000 of the latter being there in Dhaka for every man. That would give us 16 billion cockroaches and 8 billion mosquitoes.

The Dhaka populace has been pining for the arrival of a messiah who would deliver them from the bites of the flying menace. They do not mind the cockroaches perhaps because these do not bite. But these are equally unwholesome as neighbours as are the mosquitoes — if not more. There are places where a cockroach dish is a sought-after delicacy. One could get rich quickly by exporting whole cockroaches or dried ones or powdered and cockroach juices and flavours.

Dhaka, to be a city and a worthy capital at that, must be free of all vermin.

Politics and Economics: Stay Apart, for God's Sake

Since we have established a democratic system, to sustain and promote this cherished institution both people and political parties must cooperate. All political parties, specially the major ones, may come to an understanding among themselves so as not to make any political movement, which will cause heavy loss to the economy on a national scale.

It is evident that politics and economics are highly interdependent. Without one, the other is hard to flourish. Politics and politicians provide the necessary guidance as to how to run the economy. In the absence of some measures of economic prosperity, on the other hand, politics cannot flourish. Again, without political stability, no economic progress can be achieved.

In this light, one may analyse the political and economic developments in our country during the past two years. In this period, due to certain political movement the country's economy received a serious setback. The total loss, only in the garment industry was estimated at around Taka 7,000 crore. Irrespective of the veracity of the estimate, all agree to the fact that the loss to the economy was immense in the short run and almost enthrall in the history of Bangladesh. At the same time, they also agree to the fact that the loss was avoidable, only if the other party agreed to its political demand.

It is not the purpose of this article to apportion blame on one political party or another for the staggering loss to the economy. Both sides can and have advanced apparently cogent arguments in support of their claim that the other side is to blame. Only history will tell who is right. One thing is, however, certain that the general mass of people do not wish to undergo again such suffering and sustain so much social and material loss as they did in the past two years.

A political objective has been attained, no doubt. Both sides claim victory. The former opposition leaders assert that the changeover to the caretaker government was, in fact, a fall of the government precipitated by a mass upsurge for realisation of a popular demand. The former ruling party contends that their victory lay in their completion of the normal tenure of five years before handing over power as ordained by the constitution, to a legally constituted caretaker government. They had no intention to stay in power for more than five years, as provided in the constitution, before the next parliamentary election. And so they did.

Whoever may have won, the people — the general public — were the ones who lost. This is gauged in terms of loss of income, employment, business, industry, investment and so on and so forth. The first two may perhaps be overcome by effecting a short-term recovery. But loss in the fields of trade, industry and investment have a long-term effect not only on the national domain but more so in the form of loss of confidence in particular of our economic and financial partners from abroad. The garment industry, the principal foreign exchange earner for the nation, with its consequent long term ill-effects on the economy. Indiscriminate and large-scale destruction of public property is another case in point. A highly sophisticated and expensive signalling system imported by the Bangladesh Railway at a cost of about Taka 25 crore as well as a number of railway engines and carriages were destroyed. Such criminal acts of vandalism did not serve, to say the least, the general interest of ordinary citizens, who would ultimately be required to pay for these items a second time for replacement. The public buses and other forms of transport became common targets for destruction for which, again, the general tax payers have to provide funds for repairs and replacement. To undertake such activities became necessary, it became clear, for holding the so-called 'spontaneous' and 'voluntary' hartals. In fact, the threat of destruction and arson caused shop and factory owners shut

their doors. Similarly, the fear of assault, broken cars and damaged public transport kept the general public home and contributed to the 'success' of hartals, seizures and the non-cooperation movement. One cannot, on the other hand, deny that some were indeed motivated by ideals to participate in such activities, but the number of such activists and otherwise interested persons were quite small.

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Again, never in the history of Bangladesh even during the liberation war and the preceding all-out and a really voluntary non-cooperation movement Chittagong port was closed or kept non-operational. This time it happened not only causing revenue loss for the government but also by completely shattering faith and confidence of international shipping in us. It blocked exports and also essential im-

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normal tenure will evidently prove immensely beneficial not only to the political parties themselves but will also be much helpful in setting up a democratic tradition. The merit of the formula lies in providing the much needed political stability in the country as since non for economic prosperity by way of building confidence and establishing credibility both at home and abroad for our industry and business houses.

In support of the suggestions outlined above, one may look at other countries. These need not be the highly politically stable and rich nations like USA, UK etc. Let us look at some of the industrially developed countries conducted a substantially long history of political instability. Since the second World War, Italy witnessed a turnover of about 55 governments formed precariously, mostly in coalition. Till the commencement of the 5th republic in 1958, France had so many changeovers in government that it gave rise to a joke that every French man would cherish the hope of becoming Prime Minister at least once in his life-time. The reports of frequent fall of government in Japan even now is quite infringing.

Despite all these political crises, political parties in those countries conducted their movements in a purely democratic manner. They did not take it to the streets and certainly committed themselves to no action which had ill-effects on their economy. They kept politics and economics apart and prudently did so. Even in our neighbouring country like India, political rivalry and movements did not cause economic loss on a national scale. We therefore, have a lot to learn from them for our own use and benefit.

The big question now poses itself as to who is to tell the cat. The political parties are currently engrossed in their legitimate pre-election activities. The caretaker government may consider this task outside the purview of its legal and constitutional mandate. Even then the government can indeed contribute a lot from behind the scene. The general public have no forum as such, except some liberal minded parties as well as social and non-political organisations. These, along with this business community, are the organisations which can take some bold initiatives. Besides, the most important of all who can play a decisive role in moulding and expressing public opinion is our media, especially newspapers and journals. They are capable of preparing the ground well, if they will, and some good Samaritan may then come forward to act as the catalyst for promoting a worthwhile cause in genuine public interest.

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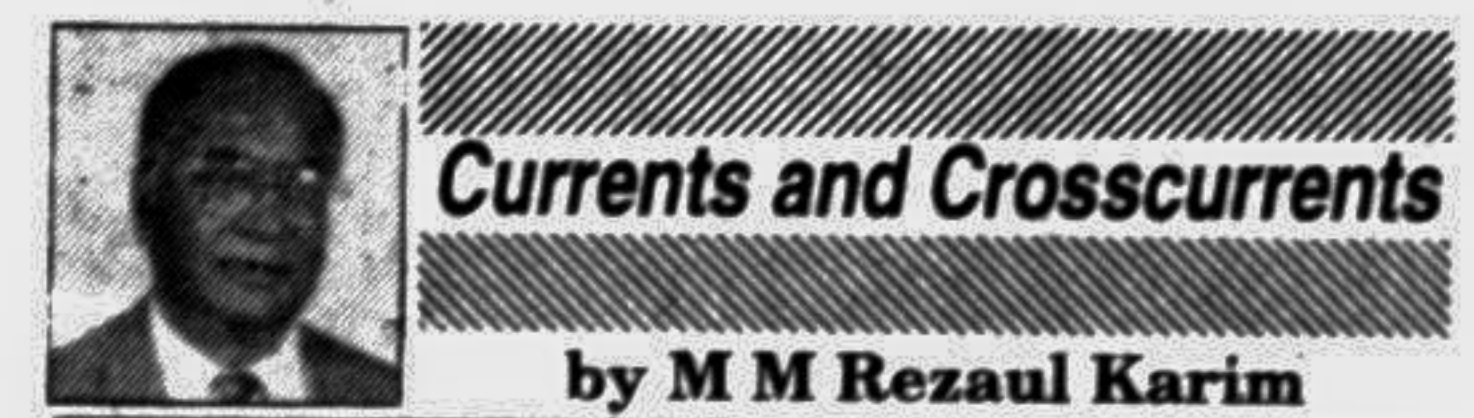
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Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

our struggle to end the British rule during the language movement and, finally, at the time of the liberation war. The latter were national movements designed to break shackles fastened by a foreign colonial power, whereas the former one, in broad terms, related to rivalry, competition and discord among groups of our own political people. Paradoxically, each of these groups strikes hard to establish people's democratic rights and to perfect the democratic system as per their own understanding of the relevant terms or by

design to seek a political advantage. A democratically elected government has a mandate to rule for a period of five years as stipulated under the constitution. In the event it is considered guilty of misuse, corruption, nepotism, etc., the responsibility devolves upon the people to withdraw the mandate in favour of another or more political parties. This sacred democratic right is to be exercised by people, ideally, every five years, through franchise by way of election. The ballot and not the bullet is the appropriate and democratic mode of expressing the will of the people.

On the other hand, one must respect the right of the erstwhile opposition to demand the BNP government to step down before the end of the tenure because of its misuse, corruption, nepotism, inefficiency and terrorism. But, everyone is well aware of the nature and extent of these crimes seen to have been perpetrated during the rule of the Awami League and the Jatya Party. The state of the economy was, in fact, much worse than during the last BNP rule. People now ask, and legitimately so, whether the magnitude of the BNP misrule was so grotesque as to justify a self-inflicted movement designed to bring about its downfall by way of causing people so much of misery and by crippling the economy. It was too high a price the people had to pay for a doubtful benefit.

Despite efforts by all concerned, the danger of violence in the coming election looms large in the minds of people. What most politicians are unable to fathom is how much their political parties are held hostage by terrorists, mastaans and possessors of unauthorised arms. During the past two decades such persons have grouped themselves into such a formidable force that obliged the political parties to be highly dependent upon them for their future and also for success in the election. Until and unless the political parties are willing and able to get over their influence, and

also the influence of black money, clean politics and democratic tradition will be a far cry in this country.

Social and economic tools for achieving political goals have been used in our country also in the past more so in the recent past. The occasions when these could perhaps have been justified were during the liberation war. Even then, all out efforts to cripple the economy as were undertaken during the past six months were avoided in order to reduce further the loss and distress of the people. Now that national crises of such dimensions should be a matter of the past, it calls for a review of our attitude towards popular participation in such movement.

Since we have established a democratic system, to sustain and promote this cherished institution both people and political parties must cooperate. All political parties, specially

the major ones, may come to an understanding among themselves so as not to make any political movement, which will cause heavy loss to the economy on a national scale.

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