

## Get to the Bottom

The Mafia-style murder of the Awami League ward commissioner A S M Shahabuddin who was a key player in the coming elections in his area is a most ominous development to say the least. The quick arrest of five suspects speak well of a new found efficiency of the police under the caretaker government. But this process will have to be taken to its end very quickly so that the public feel a renewed sense of confidence in participating in the elections. The arrested persons are alleged to have all well-marked political identities. If those identities are true, and if the murder of Shahabuddin can be proven to have political motives then we are talking about a new threat to the coming elections that the caretaker government must crush with an iron hand. We are also talking about a new desperation in politics which may lead to other such crimes by the same elements.

Prior to coming to power of this government, there was another murder of an AL ward commissioner. We still remember with horror the murder of six AL workers at Lalbagh following the present Mayor's electoral victory. These two political murders, along with several others that are not overtly political but may have some such connections, remain unsolved. These facts have led to a gradual erosion of confidence in the power and capacity of our police to protect us. In fact such happenings induced a serious questioning of police intentions leading to accusations of a partisan use of this agency. Under the caretaker government the police should work totally unencumbered in getting to the bottom of Friday's murder. Politics appears written all over this murder, and as such all political parties must co-operate with the police in resolving it. If armed cadres of a political party, as has been alleged in a section of the media, are found to be implicated with this murder then that party should immediately take a public position of condemning the act, expelling and punishing everybody even remotely connected with the incident. If the central leaders should have reasons to suspect that local leaders or election candidates may in some way be involved then the former should have the moral courage to go before the public and expose all such elements and cleanse our politics of such murderers. When it comes to political murder, more than an election is at stake. The moral health of a nation is called into question.

We urge the caretaker government to do everything in its power to expeditiously investigate this murder, catch the criminals who did it and give exemplary punishment to protect the coming elections.

## Israeli Verdict

Likud party challenger Benjamin Netanyahu's victory over the incumbent Labourite Prime Minister Shimon Peres sounds almost like a technical knock-out win for the former. He has won by such a narrow margin that the outcome of the slanging match more than giving him the glory of a success has actually highlighted the deep division — pretty much in the middle — of the Israeli society.

Having got less-than-an-effective mandate, Netanyahu can not possibly think of pressing ahead with his extremist policies that had formed his electoral plank and won him an edge of support over his rival amidst suicide bombings by the militants. But this hardly detracts from the fact that a people as sharply divided as has been evidenced at the polls in the manner they voted is clearly so far from making up its mind on peace and co-existence with the Palestinians. Contradictions in the Israeli society with only help exacerbate the division in the Arab society. If Intefadeh and Hamas-type bloodshed is not to resume, the new leadership in Israel ought to stand guard over their own excesses.

There are reasons to believe that the Middle East peace process has advanced far too much for a reversal now. If Netanyahu sticks to his campaign promises about lifting the freeze on Jewish settlements, not withdrawing troops from Hebron and obstructing the eventual creation of a Palestinian homeland with Jerusalem as its Capital he would then be playing into the hands of militants on both sides. From his position of authority, he is likely to behave responsibly. Campaign rhetoric was another matter.

Netanyahu may not like Israel's international standing and her economic prospects to dwindle through any negative approach to the peace process. That is why he had a spokesman ally the fears by assuring "he was deeply committed to continuing the peace process with the Palestinians, and all of Israel's neighbours."

## Avoidable

It is seldom that traders go public with grievances against law and order people. When they do, it should make us sit up and take note. A news agency report carried in this paper yesterday reveals that businessmen in Chuadanga chagrined at the hassle they were allegedly being put through by the local BDR personnel issued a 72-hour ultimatum to the district administration for a redressal of their ordeal. At the end of the deadline they plan to gherao the DC's office and call a hartal on top of having already stopped the supply of commodities in the area.

The traders have clearly mentioned who they were being harassed by — the 28th battalion of BDR camp at Jatarpur, about three kilometres from Chuadanga. We demand an early inquiry into the incident to find out who is at fault and where does the root cause of the friction lie.

In border areas the line between surveillance against smuggling and making allowance for normal economic activity should not get blurred. In the name of stepped-up vigilance, and in ironic contrast to contraband slipping through the fingers otherwise, a certain arbitrariness is shown by the local authorities resulting in public inconvenience. This should be avoided.

# Few Facets of Fertilizer Market

It appears that while projecting the demand for fertiliser in Bangladesh, only crop activities are taken into due consideration. But recent evidences tend to show that urea fertilizer is also used for non-traditional agricultural enterprise and quasi-industrial process.

In terms of openness and the philosophy of market orientation, the fertilizer industry in Bangladesh could possibly, said to have travelled a long distance when compared with the situation prevailing in the early and the mid-1970s. From a state controlled production and distribution network of the early days of independence, as of now, the distribution system stands fully privatized while the production system still continues to be under parastatals. The impact of the deregulation and privatization of the fertilizer market is well documented and available evidence seem to highlight its virtues. However, the fertilizer crisis of 1994/95 — a crisis that caused a hike in fertilizer prices by five times and also led to the killing of a dozen of farmers — apparently challenged the philosophy of market orientation. Another crisis, close at heel, also seems to have put the faith in grave suspicion. However, the GOB constituted a study team, comprising T H Foster and Abu Abdullah to report on the fertilizer situation with an emphasis on Urea. Some interesting observations came out of the study which could serve as eye openers to the general readers and submitted below are some of these.

## Market Structure and Scarcity

The authors seem to argue that the urea market in Bangladesh is very in-competitive in one very important sense. As noted earlier, the production of urea is a government monopoly but "unlike some market socialist models, the state enterprises producing urea are not instructed or encouraged to act like profit maximizers." According to the authors, output and input prices as well as production

and domestic sales targets are set by BCIC in consultation with the MOA and rarely reflects market clearing conditions. The distribution system of fertilizer, upto 1978-79, remained more or less in the domain of the public sector. In 1989, private traders were finally allowed direct access to factories and by 1990-91 the process of privatization got a gateway with restrictions on

lift from the factories) are in a position where they can, and do, act collectively to create "artificial scarcities" and manipulate (raise) prices to their own advantage. This in turn has led to some "soul searching" about the distribution policy for urea and certain initiatives seem to be under way which, if carried through, would amount to a return to the New Marketing System

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



private imports having been withered. According to DAM data, the gross margin accounted for 49 per cent in September 1994 and peaked at 65 per cent in December 1994. There were discernible increasing gap between retail prices and the issue prices where, allegedly, the margins were entirely reaped by the wholesalers. How? The developments, together with reports in the print media, have led to widespread allegations that the wholesalers and particularly the distributors (those who

with BCIC instead of BADC replacing the private sector in urea distribution from factories.

The report goes on to argue that evidence of monopolistic behaviours, like that of smuggling, is hard to come by. Prima facie, the number of agents involved in the whole process is reported to be quite large. The chain comprises 1,400 distributors and 13,000 wholesalers with a fair amount of spatial distribution. It is, perhaps, next to impossible on the part of 1400 distributors, lying across the country, to

hold collusion. There are few other reasons to believe that such collusion, if at all in practice, might turn out to be counter productive. First, knitting the 'animal spirit' of 1,400 dealers within a short notice might lead to greater disarray and thus ruin the interest itself. Second, as economic theory postulates, the monopolist must be sure that 'combining to restrict output will raise prices more than proportionately to the lower quantity being sold so that such action does actually confer benefits.' Third, in a regime of cartel, members are allotted quotas but at the same time, need to be watched that complete adherence is made to the rules of quotas. For Bangladesh fertilizer dealers such an outcome might be a tall-order task. By and large, according to the report, the market at the distributor-wholesaler link is functioning quite competitively.

## The Paper Market

Recent discussions on market failure seem to finger at the emergence of a secondary market for urea. This term appears to subsume a number of institutional forms, including a paper market where delivery orders change hands. It is possible

that a group of persons residing close at the gate of the factories and having good links with the top brass can get their papers processed faster and jump on to the queue earlier. They can hold on to the urea thus obtained and release these at a later date and at a higher price. According to the findings of the Report by Foster and Abdullah, emergence of a secondary urea market at the plant gates could be noticed. It is, allegedly, a creation "of the government policy which has fixed irrationally low-ex-factory prices, trade barriers (command area) and at the same time persistently ignored market signals in setting sales targets. This creates a situation of artificial shortage and higher scarcity premia which encourage rent-seeking activities."

## Supply-Demand Balance

It appears that while projecting the demand for fertilizer in Bangladesh, only crop activities are taken into due consideration. But recent evidence tend to show that urea fertilizer is also used for non-traditional agricultural enterprise and quasi-industrial uses. Such non-traditional uses e.g. for rice husking and polishing, livestock feed, aquaculture, brick firing etc. consume about 20 per cent of the total sale in the market. There is dire need for qualifying the dimension and hence arrive at an actual estimate of fertilizer demand.

# What Avails of Rhetorics on the Campaign Trail?

by Abdul Hannan

There is no difference of identity in the manifestoes of different parties and the dividing line is blurred. Everybody seems to espouse the rule of law, civil society, economic development and subsidy to agriculture and war on poverty and terrorism.

THE political leaders have launched their election campaign with speeches, manifestoes and programmes with valiant fury, verve and gusto. There is no lack of passion on issues to inflame the voters. But there is no compelling message from either party to find its way to the voters. There is no difference of identity in the manifestoes of different parties and the dividing line is blurred. Everybody seems to espouse the rule of law, civil society, economic development and subsidy to agriculture and war on poverty and terrorism. But there is a caveat — do they have the will to perform and deliver on their promises? The voters want to read the fine print beyond slogans and speeches. The claims and counter-claims look frayed at the edges. The voters want clear programmes and specifics and not mere sound bites of Machiavellian play of bizarre populist rhetorics to get endorsement.

The voters know that all the three parties while in power made short shrift of good Government, accountability and a vision of a just society. They know that all have a tainted record and none is without an unsullied past. All of them defied the most fundamental principles of democratic rule book with impunity. They know that the politicians did not measure up to their promises in the past. There is deep disquiet and disenchantment among the voters. They feel deeply betrayed. Suspicion and distrust about the politicians fester their minds. In the welter of programmes, propaganda and politicians, the poor voter is dazed, confused and confounded. He or she does not know how to sift fact from fiction, the true from the bluff and bluster.

One thing is certain — there will be a large number of undecided voters. With lack-lustre leaders without the charm and charisma of their high profile mentors, the campaign is colour less and not brash and exciting. The candidates without any personal appeal of their own, wish to cross the Rubicon radiating in the hallway if any, if their dead and gone masters or their dynastic heirs looking over their shoulders.

People have hesitation to reevaluate their trust and confidence in the BNP blamed for unaccountability and lack of transparency, unresponsive to the worries and anxieties of people, politicisation of institutions and a concealed authoritarian personal style of rule. Yet BNP came to office with a clear mandate from the people. But the mandate was not for misgovernance, incompetence and administrative ineptitude. The performance of BNP, plagued by internal feuds and rebellion, was dismal and disappointing and much less edifying. Khaleda Zia failed to read the writings on the wall and was reluctant to compromise. But politics is more about negotiation, persuasion, compromise and accommodation and not about arrogance, intransigence and stubbornness responsible for the ruin of Kings and Emperors and decline and fall of civilisations. Yet faced with assaults from the opposition movement, she showed lack of resolve and failure of nerves, caved in and was seen to panic. In the defining moment her decrepit

and discredited government was in disarray and shambles. She was in office but not in charge. Her reluctance to lead led to the fiasco and drift precipitating her pathetic retreat of her government.

BNP boasts of economic success. But what about downward mobility? The success was not universal and evenly spread but confined to a protected elite of over class surfering in over consumption under the blessings of globalisation and free market economy to the exclusion, alienation and deprivation of the vast weak and vulnerable edges of social spectrum. Ironically, this silent majority makes the most dependable constituency and always makes the right judgement. Smart politicians ignore them at their peril.

The Jatiya Party rule was overshadowed by widespread corruption, graft and scandals. Like a Mughal its leadership distributed favour and patronage at will and in gay abandon. It hijacked democracy through disenfranchisement and the ramrod of a rubber-stamp parliament.

People are deeply troubled by the lingering shadow of misrule and spoils, man-made scarcity and famine and draconian repressive and anti-democratic totalitarian measures by foisting one-party rule and banning newspapers by the Awami League government. The persecution of political dissidents by an erstwhile now dismantled para-military force still touches a raw nerve in the mind of the people who are equally disturbed by the legacy of politics of agitation and dis-

ruption, turmoil and street uprising, chaos and instability and a sinister instinct for destruction. Nevertheless, Awami League has been a party in wilderness waiting for a long time. For it this election is a question of political survival. It is natural for the party to stake its claim with a vigorous and aggressive campaign. If it comes on top of others as a single majority party, it will not be because of its popularity but because of the disappointing performance of other two parties in power in the past.

People are wary of turning the clock back by endorsing the Jamaat-e-Islami and deeply suspicious of fundamentalist excesses reminiscent of bigotry and fanaticism in Iran and Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan. While appreciating that the appeal of Islamic social justice is captivating to the poor masses, people genuinely worry that under Jamaat control, Nairobi and Beijing declaration on empowerment of women for implementation may be shredded into smithereens.

The contest is wide open. While everybody is certain about the result of election, its outcome is unknown. One thing is certain. No party is capable of getting 151 seats in a 300-member Parliament needed for an absolute majority to form the government. There is a good chance that in a hung Parliament there will be a coalition government. The election result in all probability will open large coalition possibilities. Jatiya Party will do better but not well enough. Jatiya Party and Jamaat may become

key coalition blocks. Awami League and Jatiya Party loath each other more than they hate Khaleda Zia who seems to be willing to line up with Jatiya Party. In this lovers triangle, promiscuity looks like a distinct possibility. Observers agree that whatever does emerge, will be a shaky coalition unlikely to last a full five-year term. If that happens, there will be business as usual all over again — a long summer of discontent, horse-trading, instability and uncertainty. Descending deeper and deeper into despair, degradation and decline.

But people do not want another fragmented, incoherent, short-lived squabbling and ineffectual Parliament. They want a breather. They want stability and continuity of development programmes. They want to recover lost time and missed opportunity. They want jobs, affordable healthcare and educational facilities and not prohibitively expensive medical treatment in private clinics at home and hospitals in Calcutta, Madras, Bangkok, Singapore or London. The people want to work in our own mills and factories and not languish as bonded labourers in factories, jails and jungles of Malaysia and the Gulf. They want security of life and the safety of the streets from organised crime. People refuse to stand by and watch with fingers crossed when even Burma until now an international pariah for suppressing democracy is burgeoning with economic growth by attracting foreign investment of three billion dollars. As Asian they aspire to leap frog for an eco-

nomic lift-off and not be left behind but catch up with the Asian miracle of tiger and cub economies in order to be able to raise their quality of lives.

The politicians owe it to them. The politics of bitter rivalries, internecine warfare and terminal haemorrhaging of incompetent political leadership has brought the country to the present sorry mess. They must make amends for it. It is a moral imperative. What people seek from politicians is a better more imaginative management of the country and widening of access to opportunity. Though much has been lost, something special remain. It is confidence, hope, faith and pride in our destiny and resilience to survive reversals. People prefer to live in the present than in the past. The politicians must leave their past behind and cooperate with the people for a turn around. The year 1996 would be the most appropriate year to turn a new leaf to build a new Bangladesh ready for challenges of the new millennium. A gathering storm has lost its steam and dissipated. The straws in the wind will disappear too. There is a clear silver lining.

Meanwhile, people will go to the hustings and vote with faith in the future. Their distrust and cynicism notwithstanding. They are willing to gamble once again. If they saw only the mud, they would not vote at all. But there are those stars up there too, however distant and faintly they twinkle. They have decided to pursue the triumph of hope over experience. They will be voting for something different than most of the same. They are voting for change. Whether the politicians will behave is another matter.

The writer is former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh Mission to UN, New York

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

## Election '96

Sir, BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, ex-Prime Minister and wife of slain President Ziaur Rahman has practically broken all the code of conduct of the ensuing election and is continuing to do so without facing any rebuke from the office of the Election Commission, or the present government, headed by a President who is a BNP follower. It's almost impossible to believe that besides accusing and abusing a particular political party and humiliating the Indian and Bangladeshi populace, she is repeatedly blaming the caretaker government for playing a partisan role with a tilt in favour of a particular political party.

As far as Begum Zia is concerned she is behaving as if she is not aware of the fact that the caretaker government is headed and is being run by the President and all the members have been chosen by him. Her sweeping remarks, criticising the caretaker government, are surely very much illogical. So why our journalists, lawyers and eminent personalities are all quiet and playing the role of angels?

Khaleda Zia, who had once claimed that only a mad person and an infant can be neutral is shouting and screaming at the top of her voice saying that the Chief Adviser is not behaving neutrally and is himself not a neutral person, if she feels that injustice is being done to her and her party in reality, then why doesn't she go to the court of law for justice? What is she afraid of? Or

doesn't she believe in our judiciary? She claimed that some people who are directly involved with a particular party are occupying the state media. She has been shrewd in trying to make us all forget that there are still several hundred persons who as political appointees (contract appointees too) are heading and rolling various government and autonomous bodies. During her 5-year rule she kept half educated (half educated doesn't necessarily mean not having educational qualifications) persons in key positions and carried on development work in such a way that the price of rice has risen to Tk 20 per kg, the price of sugar has risen to taka 40 per kg and onion Tk 14 per kg, powdered milk up by Tk 40 to 100, beef and mutton Tk 20 to 30 more, medicine by about 20%, conveyance and transport by 15% and what not? In some cases, making some of the most essential commodities evaporate into thin air is a feat only her government accomplished. In her speeches she never mentions about the fertilizer crisis and the killings involving the peasants and her government's accusation that journalists were not carrying out their duties sincerely and honestly. She doesn't mention if various crises like those involving the newspaper, the textbooks and the admission problems at educational institutions were ever seriously tackled by her administration.

Strangely, it is an astounding phenomenon that Begum Zia has been spared of all the follies, anomalies and malice

she has done to her own government. Is this what the mass want to go through?

It is about time she stopped. And someone should take up the issue. She has no right to accuse and abuse the people and the professional people.

Nahtsha Kamal  
8 Bhoghoti Shahar Street  
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## Fake voters

Sir, It is now being circulated through newspapers that in the next general election voters will not have to show the third part of the voters registration form to cast votes, which earlier was declared as a must. Now, if one's name is on the voters' list, he/she will be able to cast vote.

If it is really the decision of the Election Commission, it is very surprising and objectionable.

With huge expenditure and time consuming process voters' registration form system was introduced in which one had to give signature or thumb impression in three forms of which one was returned to them duly. We were looking forward to a free and fair election in which rigging would be impossible. But now we are apprehensive. Why the Election Commission suddenly changed its decision is a mystery.

It was observed, after the caretaker government has been formed, many people were visiting the Election Commission office to include their names in the voters' list. My question is, where were these persons when voters registration was going on? Why did not they take any step then? Why after so many days?

From your esteemed newspaper I learned that many fake applications were being submitted. One particular address was mentioned, at Dhanmondi,

in Dhaka, in 39 applications, belonging to persons of various professions, ranging from businessman to barber. I am afraid that many false names may have been included.

So, it is our demand, the Election Commission must issue orders that to cast vote one must show the third part of the registration form and those who filled up the form but failed to get the third part must prove their identity at the election booth by their signatures or thumb impressions.

Those who have become voters in the caretaker government time, Election Commission must make sure through investigation that those persons really exist. May be voter's registration forms were not issued to them. If it is the case then their names should be on a separate list and should be scrutinised to make sure no irregularities can happen.

The JS election is now only a matter of days. I hope that Election Commission will not lose any time to take necessary steps to ensure a free and fair election which is the dream of the people of Bangladesh.

Nur Jahan  
1390, East Nasirabad,  
Chittagong

## Appeal to the candidates

Sir, Through your esteemed daily, I would like to appeal to the election candidates not to paste their posters with their "innocent faces" on other's bill boards, walls and sign boards. This is certainly not their democratic right for which they are dedicated. How can they protect democracy when they themselves violate democratic norms?

A.R Chowdhury  
Rampura,  
Dhaka

# Art Buchwald's COLUMN



## In-state Syndrome

The price of a college education is rising at the same rate, as the cost of gasoline.

My theory on this is that many, but not all, students have nothing but disdain for the schools in the state where they live.

This dawned on me when I sat with a group of high school students discussing their college plans.

Dogears said he hoped to go to the University of Virginia even though he lived in Maryland.

Mary, with purple hair, said that she was doing just the opposite. She was going to attend school in Maryland despite the fact that she lived in Virginia.

"That'll cost you a bundle," I told her. "If you're from out of state, they take you for all you've got."

Dogears said, "Everyone says that Virginia has better schools than Maryland."

"Who's everyone?"

"All the kids in Maryland. My friends say that anybody who goes to his own state school should have his head examined."

Mary said, "That's the same thing the kids in Virginia say about our schools. Our universities have become snake pits."

Big Bear said, "I firmly believe that when you attend college you should go as far away from home as you possibly can. You'll never break the umbilical cord if you are within a 100 mile radius of your parents."

"What do your folk have to say about the fact that it will cost them a fortune for you not to be near them?" I asked.

Fatfingers said, "Not much as long as I'm happy. I live in Pennsylvania, but the whole country knows that it doesn't have an accredited school worth anything. I want to go to the University of San Diego."

"That's no bargain for an out-of-state student," I reminded him.

"But at least they teach you something about 'black holes' in the universe," he said.

Mary said, "It doesn't make sense. If you live in Virginia, you're a nobody when everyone you went to high school with is having a great time in another state."

Big John said, "My father attended college in Georgia and lived at home. He has carried that burden all his life."

Fatfingers announced, "I wouldn't even go to college if I had to live at home. I hate my three younger brothers."

I enjoyed the gabfest and learned a lot. I discovered that most kids won't speak to their parents unless they promise to pay for them to study as far away from home as possible.

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