

Towards Democracy

This is going to be a long day today. A day of days. An exciting count down over, the nation goes to polls today. A big turn-out at the centres, a day of unimpeded and free voting. At the end of the day equanimous acceptance by all of the counting and announcement of results — and we will have crossed an important yet very elementary hurdle to self rule by an independent nation. We shall consider ourselves lucky, if today's proceedings yield a convincing formation of government and smooth transfer of power. Why lucky? Because elements of unpredictability still loom large over the whole thing. Largely because of the presence of very large quantities of arms in private hands and some of the parties not being averse to have a recourse to them.

We had a good run-up but a decidedly poor quality of campaigning. The mean postures and utterances in the campaign have pushed the main contenders further apart and sharpened their existing conflicts to near fatal levels. Vile lies, understood as such by all including their pedlars, have been shouted as election mainstays by top leaders, compromising the prospect of this nation having dependable leadership in the near future.

And let us be very clear that this day is not going to be the all or end all of this polity, as contenders of the top job have made it out. This smacks of lust for power — the mighty breaker of the inner strengths of emerging states and long living societies.

Today's polls, regardless of whatever verdict it returns, is here to bolster the props of democracy. The nation is yet to live fully and its freedom has to grow, both in form and content over all of future — and today's election will be a very important step in these directions.

This day holds a great potential for the nation's good. And it is also a test for the nation — and the nation shall pass it in spite of contrary performance by some.

The question today is not of who will govern but how will they govern. Corruption and private arms together with a pathetic lack of comprehension of the challenges of the new century have severely reduced the powers of all parties to deliver even a woe bit of what they have promised. It will now take the whole nation to get the nation out of the woods. And let the nation elect those that will involve the whole of our people in that task. That cannot be done without democracy. Towards democracy then!

Minority Vote

The minority communities in some areas of the country are facing a most hostile situation in which they are discouraged — directly or indirectly — to exercise their fundamental right of voting. Some quarters consider it expedient to keep the members of the minority community away from the polling centres today. Such threats and intimidations are in fact nothing new. But never before the issue was seriously taken up for a redress.

Happily, different bodies have expressed their strong condemnation against this evil design resorted to by certain quarters. Even the administration is quite alive to the situation. In one such incident the local administration has played a most creditable role. For long 22 years the minority communities in a large area of Chittagong could not exercise their franchise. When this was brought to the notice of the concerned police officer and the magistrate, they together took a personal initiative to ensure that the voters of that particular area can cast their votes without being intimidated. Arrangement for special police patrol have been made.

We do not know if local administrations elsewhere have taken similar steps to allay the minority communities' fear. Policing by the administration may give some comfort to the victims but this is not enough. If a sizeable portion of the voters cannot exercise their voting right, the democracy we all want to establish in our society loses its meaning. Let the minority vote casting be ensured everywhere. If there is the slightest possibility of trouble relating to voting by the minority communities, do not hesitate to call the army, who will remain stand by, to remove that possibility. Apart from that anyone found guilty of intimidating should be meted out appropriate punishment so that no one ever tries to play the trick in future.

Well Done, Police

The CID police, Chittagong, have unearthed a fire-arm factory in Naikongchhari, Bandarban. Twenty-nine firearms, including nine light machine guns (LMG) were seized in the raid. For the police this is a major success against the illegal arms manufacturers, no doubt. The good work done by the Chittagong police only a couple of days before the election can have a positive influence on the voting process in the area.

However, one lurking question will be there: for how long has the factory been manufacturing arms and what are the receiving points of those arms. If the arms have reached gangs engaged in causing troubles on the election day, there is much to fear. If the other possibility of the weapons reaching the Santibahini is true, we have another kind of — and perhaps no less — a problem. The fact is we are confronted with a dangerous situation either way.

That the know-how of manufacturing sophisticated weapons is acquired by the forces inimical to the country's sovereignty or democracy is most worrying. The report does not say if the operators of the factory could be arrested. If they are not, they will soon open another clandestine factory in the forest. So, our suggestion is that the drive against manufacturers of illegal weapons be stepped until the operators are caught and any further possibility of illegal manufacture of weapons is removed once for all.

A Menu for Action: Expectations from the New Government

by A M Muhith

BEFORE we know the results of the election this is a menu for action by a sensible democratic government. This is based on feasible and welfare-oriented election promises held out by the various parties, along with some other ideas which appear to many as good and necessary. There are two basic points about all the manifestos except one (i.e., Jamaat), and those are (a) upholding of the democratic principles and norms as generally understood the world over, and (b) ensuring transparency of government operations and accountability of the government.

So what should we expect from the next government which has to take control of the ship of our state within this month? First of all, it should be a viable government, that is to say it should have the majority or form the necessary coalition so that there is no repeat performance of the Indian example. I have the personal feeling that if proportional representation is followed for the election of the reserved seats for women, there will be a clear majority party in the next Parliament and the threat of a hung parliament will be removed.

The bitterness of campaigning should be left behind and public announcement should be made about reaching consensus in broad areas of national interest. But the question of impeachment of the President for his partisan activities including alleged disturbing of stability and violating of electoral code of conduct should be duly considered. Some of the areas for national consensus should be identified immediately. My list of such areas will include: review of policy on national security and establishment of civil authority on defence matters, setting up of strong local government institutions, institutionalisation of parliamentary democracy, establishment of the rule of law and suppression of terrorism, rapid spread of education and improvement of its quality, macro-economic policy and administrative restructuring, relations with India including water sharing and trade cooperation, and solution of the festering Hill Tracts problem. It should be understood that economic performance cannot be improved without parallel political development as we have learnt so dearly from our experience of the last quarter century. During the last five years we have observed that even a propitious economic environment and macro framework cannot deliver growth without strong political underpinnings.

At the very first session of the Parliament some healthy institutions should be set up — institutionalisation of some in the Parliament and even in BNP party meetings, should be recanted. There will still be the Special Powers Act to deal with, which I shall cover soon enough. The fleets of transport are illegally obtained from public corporations or autonomous bodies and measures to close, private and shrink them will do the trick of reducing this wasteful and ostentatious style. Another undemocratic tradition of the past is still shamelessly paraded. Gifts made with public trends are advertised as gifts of President or PM like buses for students. This should be discontinued forthwith.

Some quick executive actions are necessary to ensure the rights of citizens and remove the blemish of pomp and splendour of the government of a poor country. We have so many residences of our Prime Minister. We have a fort of an office of the Prime Minister which is chilling to a visitor and gives a feeling of great secrecy and conspiracy in the handling of public business.

Our Prime Minister is beyond the reach of even the elite of the country: the Special Security Force Act of 1992 which is only a continuation of President's Security Force Ordinance of 1986) is meant for the special protection of

the PM and other VIPs and it invests the Force with unique authority. Hosting the PM turns out to be a tiresome hassle even in a private social function. Our PM and other dignitaries imitating her, notably the service chiefs, block roads and blur ear drums as they pass the busy streets of Dhaka. We have fleets of transport at the disposal of our VIPs — ministers, corporation chairmen and secretaries — which are maintained mainly for the sake of prestige and not necessity. By one singular gesture, the Prime Minister to be, can do away with all these vestiges of pomp and waste and also secrecy of public operations and descend to the level of the people.

The fort, indeed, should be an international centre. The office of the Prime Minister should be in the main secretariat of the government. Except one official residence all others should be converted into appropriate offices or rest houses. The PM should reside outside the cantonment. The obnoxious Special Security Force Act, which was opposed

military budget is still a secret and sacred cow. The security policy is still not debated in public. The military establishment functions as an autonomous government. The ISPR is a strange body, with virtually no relationship with the Information Ministry. The DGFI is a feared agency reportedly active in politics and student community. This organisation has the dubious credit of spawning two political parties under the guidance of two military leaders who assumed power with the false promise of returning it to the people. Political parties in this country have seldom played politics with the defence establishment. Instead military leaders, and perhaps a limited number of them, assured of the support of disciplined forces under them, have played politics. They have formed political parties, splintered established parties, through coercion and bribery and set up auction mart for politicians. While in difficulty military leaders have tried to cultivate political parties for their own ambitious ends.

Simultaneously, attention should be paid to parliamentary rules of business and perhaps a law for the autonomy of the Assembly secretariat. Legislative committees with permanent staff for each subject or inter-sectoral issue, as is dealt with by the executive, should be formed with the Chairman from the opposition benches. They should hold open hearings unless otherwise decided beforehand for special reasons. They should listen to representatives of the civil society. They should be attended by the ministers on a priority basis whenever their presence is solicited by a committee. All issues of policy such as Security Policy, a Memo of Understanding with the ALD group, Farakka negotiations, restructuring of financial revenues on some fixed principles. Today the budgets of all local bodies including grants and programmes assigned to them by the national government is a bare 5 per cent of the national budget. But under Article 59 they should undertake functions relating to administration and the work of public officers, the maintenance of public order (meaning police functions), and preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development. The devolution of responsibility for delivery of public services including police functions and of economic development activities to local government will perhaps call for District governments with Thana and Union Council as its bottom-up planning and actual implementation agencies.

A good framework is provided in the manifesto of Gono Forum and the structure needs to be established early enough before vested interests of MPs are created to thwart empowerment of people. It should be stipulated that at least 50 per cent of the national budget, current and development, is executed at the level of the local government. It should be borne in mind that fruitful social investment demands social mobilisation and that is not possible at any level other than the grassroots. The district government will follow the parliamentary form with the only difference that the members-in-charge of particular responsibility will have to work in committees constituted with proportional representation.

The allocation of business of government should be approved by the legislature to prevent waste and pomp and establish the supremacy of parliament. Parliamentary questions are a very important instrument for accountability of the executive. This should be restored to its glorious role and a weekly Prime Minister's hour should be introduced. Adjournment motions are another means for securing the responsiveness of the executive. Rules on acceptance of such motions should be made easier and flexible. These measures are necessary for institutionalisation of democracy on a permanent footing.

Another area of urgent action should be a piece of comprehensive law relating to a system of local government in terms of Articles 59 and 60 of the Constitution. The role and functions of the local government must be spelt out and they should be independent of the concurrent jurisdiction of the national government, who will, however, maintain national policy-making and inspection functions with no executive authority. These sources of financing should be determined and the bulk of it will be assignment from the

It should be understood that economic performance cannot be improved without parallel political development as we have learnt so dearly from our experience of the last quarter century. During the last five years we have observed that even a propitious economic environment and macro framework cannot deliver growth without strong political underpinnings.

in the Parliament and even in BNP party meetings, should be recanted. There will still be the Special Powers Act to deal with, which I shall cover soon enough. The fleets of transport are illegally obtained from public corporations or autonomous bodies and measures to close, private and shrink them will do the trick of reducing this wasteful and ostentatious style. Another undemocratic tradition of the past is still shamelessly paraded. Gifts made with public trends are advertised as gifts of President or PM like buses for students. This should be discontinued forthwith.

A deliberate effort has to be made for civilisation of the government. With the exception only about three years of extremely difficult period of nation-building and refugee rehabilitation, we have been used to martial law, direct and indirect, since at least 1958. In the last five years for the first time the defence establishment was out of politics but a civilian culture has not really developed yet. The military domain will always be somewhat different because of considerations of security and discipline, but it must be in unison with the normal society and most certainly must conform to the rule of law. The shroud of secrecy that now covers all defence affairs is without any justification. This should be discontinued forthwith.

Some quick executive actions are necessary to ensure the rights of citizens and remove the blemish of pomp and splendour of the government of a poor country. We have so many residences of our Prime Minister. We have a fort of an office of the Prime Minister which is chilling to a visitor and gives a feeling of great secrecy and conspiracy in the handling of public business.

Our Prime Minister is beyond the reach of even the elite of the country: the Special Security Force Act of 1992 which is only a continuation of President's Security Force Ordinance of 1986) is meant for the special protection of

This state of affairs must be changed. First of all the DGFI should be abolished. A different kind of security intelligence agency cannot be created out of this tarnished body. Second, there is no place for an autonomous ISPR in the administration. It is the Ministry of Information that is responsible for public relations of all ministries. The Ministry with the largest manpower in the country i.e., Education Ministry does not have anything like the ISPR. Third, the practice of one-line budget for the Defence establishment introduced by Ayub Khan must give way to a publicly accountable budget. It is not denied that certain elements of it will be secret, but the plea of secrecy has been carried too far now. Finally, a national debate is necessary to evolve a security policy in the changed circumstances of the world. What kind of defence preparedness the nation should have: how should the land, water and air border be watched and protected; what should be the strategy of defence; and what should be the appropriation of resources for defence. These are essential matters for public decision. The idea of abolition of standing army and the concept of national service by all higher secondary school-graduates just cannot be brushed aside. Such national service while requiring military train-

ing will be largely devoted to nation-building activities. Economic security or environmental security are much more now than territorial security. Again the economics of huge resource application for territorial security for a few hours (as indicated by our last military ruler) in the small global village must be put to serious scrutiny.

Simultaneously, attention should be paid to parliamentary rules of business and perhaps a law for the autonomy of the Assembly secretariat.

The allocation of business of government should be approved by the legislature to prevent waste and pomp and establish the supremacy of parliament. Parliamentary questions are a very important instrument for accountability of the executive. This should be restored to its glorious role and a weekly Prime Minister's hour should be introduced. Adjournment motions are another means for securing the responsiveness of the executive.

A deliberate effort has to be made for civilisation of the government. With the exception only about three years of extremely difficult period of nation-building and refugee rehabilitation, we have been used to martial law, direct and indirect, since at least 1958. In the last five years for the first time the defence establishment was out of politics but a civilian culture has not really developed yet. The military domain will always be somewhat different because of considerations of security and discipline, but it must be in unison with the normal society and most certainly must conform to the rule of law. The shroud of secrecy that now covers all defence affairs is without any justification. This should be discontinued forthwith.

Some quick executive actions are necessary to ensure the rights of citizens and remove the blemish of pomp and splendour of the government of a poor country. We have so many residences of our Prime Minister. We have a fort of an office of the Prime Minister which is chilling to a visitor and gives a feeling of great secrecy and conspiracy in the handling of public business.

Our Prime Minister is beyond the reach of even the elite of the country: the Special Security Force Act of 1992 which is only a continuation of President's Security Force Ordinance of 1986) is meant for the special protection of

Misuse of Powers, Legalised Misdeeds, Etc

by Mohammad Yusuf

Misuse of powers results in different types of misdeeds: the ones commonly talked about are corruption in the form of illicit gains, and favouritism. But there is a third category of misdeeds which involve doing things as per laws but not in people's interest.

of the Ministry. Heads of Department and Corporation, etc., down to the level of peons exercise some powers depending on their rank and responsibility — all supposed to be in people's interest.

The system of delegation of powers to all tiers of officials of the Government is a complicated matter. Powers have to be delegated, as without the powers no work can be done. The system spreads far and wide in a labyrinthine manner, not necessarily in a diminishing scale. Parts of powers delegated to Departments and Corporations involve making their own rules about which authorities delegating the powers provide only broad guidelines. Sometimes the guidelines contradict the laws under which the Departments or the Corporations were created, giving rise to confusions which are rarely cleared.

While working a democracy, there are some very nice phrases and words, such as checks and balances, accountability, transparency, etc. To the bulk of the electorate they mean little or nothing in the Bangladeshi context.

The representatives while framing the Constitution of Bangladesh arrogated to themselves "powers to make orders, rules, regulations, bye-laws or other instruments having legislative effect" which, they in their judgement considered, are in people's interest. Some powers have been retained by the representatives, while others are delegated to Ministers and officials of the Government to run or manage the affairs of the country. When a Minister and a working

bureaucrat get together, they can do many things including a lot of mischiefs.

There are hardly any administrative controls over the exercise of powers, because those who are supposed to control it are themselves involved in the exercise. The only controls are budgetary and accounting. But these are thoroughly inadequate, as we would presently see.

Misuse of powers results in different types of misdeeds: the ones commonly talked about are corruption in the form of illicit gains, and favouritism. But there is a third category of misdeeds which involve doing things as per laws but not in people's interest.

countries of the world? Was it not the duty of the representatives to oppose it? But none to our knowledge did it.

(2) Any representative or official of the Government placed in-charge of administration of some affairs of the Government, immediately after taking over, makes sure that he has an office lavishly furnished, properly air-conditioned, wall-to-wall carpeted and tastefully upholstered, and brand new cars with smartly dressed drivers and attendants at his disposal. Such gorgeously furnished offices were not there even during the British colonial period. Who authorised the representatives and officials to do these things for their own comforts and convenience?

They have a false notion that dignity goes with the outfit. Some years back the Chairman's room of one of the Corporations was found to have the type of furniture which was comparable to the furniture of French Emperors, at present visible in a Paris museum.

(3) Ministers and senior officials are often found to throw dinners and parties in State guesthouses and hotels to hundreds of guests involving expenditure of lakhs of Taka. They do not seem to have any

conscience. While arranging such functions the representatives forget that they spend the tax money of people 70 per cent of whom live in abject poverty.

(4) The rules of one of the Corporations recognise certain amount of pilferage by their employees. The driver of a car placed at the disposal of some consultants several years back in a Corporation, complained that he was getting poor salary compared to the other drivers of the Corporation. When asked to explain he said he was employed on a daily wage basis with a total monthly wage of about Tk. 750/- whereas the salary of regular drivers was about Tk 1200/- pm. This matter was mentioned to one of the Corporation's executives. His reply was that the drivers were known to pilfer petrol of cars. So he would make up the difference through the theft. How much petrol he was supposed to steal, was not stated by the executive.

(5) Once a senior official of the Ministry of Planning, being frustrated with low utilisation of the ADP allocation, exhorted the executing agencies of projects to utilise the allocation with the remark: "Go and spend the money. We know

there will be some wrong expenditure, but there will be some right ones too." He did not elaborate how much wrong expenditure the Ministry would accept. The examples of purchase of construction materials in June towards the end of financial year to forestall the lapse of fund are well known. It is also known that much of these materials get washed away by the ensuing flood waters.

(6) Most representatives most of the time are engaged in politics to improve their personal image and pecuniary matters by hook or by crook, rather than serve the causes of the people or the country. Ideals in politics is rarely seen these days. We are reminded of the notorious legislation about the import of motor vehicles duty-free by the Representatives in the Fifth Parliament. All the Representatives got together to pass this without any qualms of conscience.

Unfortunately our socio-political situation is so queer these days that most people consider a man as very clever when he says one thing, does another thing and apparently believes in still another thing. Such a man cannot be trustworthy. The word "conscience" is not written anywhere in our Constitution. The principle seems to be: Make hay while the sun shines.

Perhaps these matters should serve as points to ponder by the electors during the elections on June 12, 1996.

there will be some wrong expenditure, but there will be some right ones too." He did not elaborate how much wrong expenditure the Ministry would accept. The examples of purchase of construction materials in June towards the end of financial year to forestall the lapse of fund are well known. It is also known that much of these materials get washed away by the ensuing flood waters.

(6) Most representatives most of the time are engaged in politics to improve their personal image and pecuniary matters by hook or by crook, rather than serve the causes of the people or the country. Ideals in politics is rarely seen these days. We are reminded of the notorious legislation about the import of motor vehicles duty-free by the Representatives in the Fifth Parliament. All the Representatives got together to pass this without any qualms of conscience.

Unfortunately our socio-political situation is so queer these days that most people consider a man as very clever when he says one thing, does another thing and apparently believes in still another thing. Such a man cannot be trustworthy. The word "conscience" is not written anywhere in our Constitution. The principle seems to be: Make hay while the sun shines.

Perhaps these matters should serve as points to ponder by the electors during the elections on June 12, 1996.

nominations may indulge solely in money-making process instead of working for the well-being of people since they may get the impression that it is nothing but money that can make concepts like ideology and principle unfamiliar. As a result the political system is bound to receive a heavy blow.

Many of these elites who have been nominated by the various parties are enjoying a luxurious life.