

Congratulation

Several congratulations are in order. First, a hearty one to the Awami League for capturing the highest number of seats in the 7th Parliament. Just six short of absolute majority, the AL is assured of forming the next government as Jatiya Party has already officially conveyed its support for AL to the President. The AL goes into the new parliament with a far stronger showing than did the BNP with 140 seats in '91. The final vote count is an unambiguous verdict of the people for the AL to form the next government. AL's coming to power marks a bouncing back of the party that led the nation in its War of Liberation after 21 years in virtual wilderness. It was toppled from elected office through an army putsch accompanied with the brutal murder of its chief, and Founder of the State of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with most members of his family. Since then the Awami League was subjected to the most vicious and effective vilification campaign that we had ever seen in this part of the world, though part of it was based on the justifiably condemnable act of introducing one party rule and closing down all independent newspapers. The victory of Awami League is not solely a positive vote for the party. Part of it is a negative vote against the inefficient, considerably corrupt and highly arrogant rule of the BNP, this the new ruling party will have to constantly keep in mind if it is not to repeat the same mistakes. The vote is also clearly for a change. The lackluster performance of the BNP over the last five years have led to a desire to see a new party in the helm of the country's affairs.

Congratulation is also due to the BNP. Given the fact that traditionally the party in power usually loses, and that it had to relinquish power in the face of a prolonged and concerted opposition movement, we think it has fared well. It comes into the 7th Parliament far stronger than AL did in '91. With 116 seats to its credit it will be a formidable opposition by any account. However whether it will be a responsible one is still an open question. Our congratulations would have been far more robust if we could carry the news that BNP has accepted the peoples' verdict and that it will play the parliamentary game far better than AL did in '91.

Finally we would like to congratulate the Election Commission and the caretaker government for an excellent job done.

The Reckless MP Hunt

Where is Golam Sarwar Hiru? Where has he gone? Or has he been kidnapped? Perhaps he is hiding himself quite advisedly. Whatever it is, we hope he will be out of the harm's way and surface in good time to do his swearing in.

Why has Mr Hiru turned into a hero of the day, specially in the power-hungry eyes of one reckless party? Golam Sarwar is the newly-elected MP from Barguna-2. He is the only successful candidate of his party — the Islami Oikya Jote. For BNP he perhaps seemed to be a lonely lamb out in the wilderness. In manifest desperation they first claimed in a press briefing that he had joined BNP. Later, the press release was amended to say that he had extended his support to BNP. On Tuesday Islami Oikya Jote categorically said that their man hadn't done anything of the kind. They termed the BNP claim untrue, misleading and motivated. In the meantime Mr Golam Sarwar Hiru got lost to both to his own fold and to those after him.

But why should BNP be on the prowl? What do they need a lone supporter for? Or the support of Jamaat's threesome? Are they just that much short of going to power? They have brought down enough ridicule on their head by their antics to entice JP and playing the Biswas card. Now they are after Hiru — madly and so foolishly. Why? In their last stint of governance too, they went scandalously about enticing one from the Jamaat fold.

The Hiru episode strongly smacks of union council politics where whole bunches of elected people are put under pressure to join a big party. The law against defection or floor crossing was enacted no doubt to ensure a safe sail for the electorate to know, and be sure, where their 'elected' person stands. It acted very effectively against trading in MPs — people's representatives selling themselves to the highest bidder.

The nation wants Mr Hiru to come out and speak up. Is it within his power to support BNP — from outside — ignoring his party's contrary decision? Can he, if he so wishes, join BNP now that he hasn't been sworn in? The situation is not at all clear.

Saving Chandpur

The talk of saving Chandpur from the erosion of mighty Meghna and the insidious Dakatia by way of engineering undertakings should by now have become a joke. For how long is that important port town being eaten up by those rivers — and in big weighty morsels? Like Sirajganj or even predecessors to that Noakhali and Begumganj, Chandpur is being lost to waters over decades. Governmental efforts to save it has at best been half-hearted. Why? Are there quarters that would benefit from a continuing erosion? It is reasonable to fear so.

A grand plan to secure Chandpur once for all would need a huge pot of money. Does that amount daunt the government and it goes on hobbling with its patchwork of strengthening bits of the bank?

A Tk 10-crore town protection work was launched in July '95. Of the allotted fund only Tk 2.40 crore has been made available for disbursement over the last ten months. And the rainy season is now taking over stopping the job for months and negating much of the headway made in the past months. This is at once a silly and very disquieting situation. A town, more so a port, isn't something you get on order. It is an inseparable part of the history and economy of a land. And, lest we forget, it is home to a million souls or thereabout — who have given their lives for generations to build this up. It is as such criminal to let one such port town go down the Atlantis way just because it is not Dhaka or Chittagong.

Public Opinion in a Society in Transition

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad and Nilufar Banu

There is no tradition in this country of social and public opinion research for generating public opinions, perceptions and views on important social, economic and political issues to help develop an interaction between the people and the policy making processes. Indeed, in a society in democratic transition, it is important that citizens understand and accept the responsibility to take an interest in public issues

progress to take place the two processes must be compatible and reinforcing. In Bangladesh, however, there have always been severe tensions within and between the two processes, resulting in social upheavals and conflicts from time to time. Economic growth has remained limited, poverty wide and deep, adult illiteracy over 65 per cent, and infant mortality rate 77 per 1000 live births. Also, except for parliamentary elections, there have been no other means of involving the people in the governance process. Local government has not been developed in an effective manner. Power has mostly remained vested in the central government and bureaucracy. The political leaders often pronounce that people are the source of all political power. Indeed, they are — constitutionally. But an effective arrangement has not been made or, in other words, democratic institutions have not been established at appropriate levels of society, to enable the people to exercise that power in a free and fair manner.

There is also no tradition in this country of social and public opinion research for generating public opinions, perceptions and views on important social, economic and political issues to help develop an interaction between the people and the policy making processes. Indeed, in a society in democratic transition, it is important that citizens understand and accept the responsibility to take an interest in public issues. At the same time, it is also important that facilities are created for them to be able to carry out their responsibility. Opinion polling exercises should encourage

ordinary people to think about and take a more active interest in social, political and economic matters that affect their lives. On the other hand, the survey results provide the central government and local elected bodies with access to ideas, opinions, perceptions and desires of the people for them to make more informed responses. This two way interaction can surely help strengthen the future of a society in democratic transition.

The Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) entered into these uncharted waters in this country in early 1995. It has so far conducted eight surveys — four national, three in Dhaka and adjoining areas, and one exit poll in Dhaka on the day of election. The surveys covered a wide range of issues such as newsmedia, religious bigotry, political situation, electoral prospects of political parties, economic condition, judiciary, caretaker government, performance of the police force, Beijing women conference, women's productive employment, investment climate, wages, education, health, law and order, and agricultural input distribution, which are currently among the crucially important national policy issues in Bangladesh. In addition, each survey included questions on the socio-economic background of the respondents, which will help develop longitudinal pictures on these issues. It may be mentioned here that, on the electoral prospects of different political parties, the outcome of the surveys conducted closer to the 12 June elections was largely in conformity with the actual results of the elections. The respondents are

picked from among the voting age urban and rural men and women of different occupations, applying a multistage random sampling procedure. Before launching a survey the questionnaires are pre-tested and edited as required. During the field work a back-check of randomly selected 25-30 per cent of the respondents is conducted to ascertain if the questionnaires were properly implemented. The BUP has a well trained core and field research staff. The programme will be further strengthened, as required.

Although, a large majority of the people of Bangladesh are illiterate and over 80 per cent rural, the surveys conducted have confirmed that the level of the awareness of these people about social, economic and political issues that affect their lives is quite high. True, they may not always be able to articulate their thinking, knowledge and opinions, but they can make their points in their own way with conviction. Although they never participated in opinion surveys as respondents before, they have been found to be generally very cooperative. There were, of course, some who needed convincing a bit more. Among the urban and educated respondents, however, more resistance has been encountered. But they have also been, by and large, cooperative. In each survey, only a handful of people approached declined to participate.

The lesson is that, although the majority of the people are illiterate and rural, reliable and useful data can be generated from nationwide surveys on a wide range of social, economic and political issues that should be publicly debated in a

democracy at local and/or national level. The surveys can also help raise the confidence of the respondents, who have always remained marginalized, in themselves. It has been gathered that, in many cases, after an investigator had gone to a village and interviewed some people, others came to know about that and the questions asked became subject matters of discussion among the villagers. So there is a spread-effect in terms of both awareness raising and deepening. The results of the surveys so far conducted have been disseminated through newspapers, making the reports available to concerned persons and organizations, discussion meetings, and BUP journals *Prodoyut* and *Unnayan Bitarka*.

Interest in the survey results by political parties, government agencies, academic institutions, business houses, foreign missions, and international organizations has been increasing. But, it appears that, despite a growing interest, a culture of using the results of such surveys in a systematic manner as arguments in decision making is yet to develop. But, of course, public opinion surveys are a new phenomenon in this country. Besides the BUP, certain other institutions also conduct public opinion surveys from time to time but mainly on political issues. It must be mentioned that there are other ways of generating public opinions (through public representatives, local governments, etc.) and there are various other sources of data and information. All these should surely be made use of as far as possible. Public opinion surveys seek to fill the gaps and improve the quality of data and information; they are also

an independent source. Hence, their results can be very profitably consulted by all concerned.

While public opinion on the standing of political parties, public officers, and candidates for public offices may often be currently more newsworthy, survey results on socio-economic and management issues should serve very useful purposes in the national interest by making policy formulation processes more informed about the opinions, views, and perceptions of the people. The burden falls on those who generate such data to do so by using appropriate methods and trained personnel and presenting the data and analyses in ways that are clear and unambiguous. A demonstrated professional competence in these regards on the part of those who conduct such surveys should help build survey confidence in the survey results.

The period in which the above mentioned surveys were conducted by the BUP witnessed an intensifying political crisis. As 1995 progressed and gave way to 1996, the crisis intensified increasingly, mercifully leading to an eventual convergence and resolution of the crisis. Very pertinent and controversial issues have been addressed in the various surveys. Experience from the seven surveys so far conducted clearly indicates that, in Bangladesh, public opinion research can, among other uses, enhance people's participation in local and national decision making, improve the quality of elections, and enable the elected bodies to make informed responses, all of which should help strengthen the process of democratization of Bangladesh society.

The writers are, respectively, BUP Chairman and Director of Social Welfare Analysis Programme (SWAP); and BUP Senior Fellow and SWAP Coordinator.

The Political Honeymoon: Setting Standards

by Manzoor Hasan

The restoration of discipline or more commonly described as the rule of law means, in the first place, the absolute supremacy or predominance of regular law as opposed to the influence of arbitrary power, and excludes the existence of arbitrariness, or even of wide discretionary authority on the part of the government.

pendent on a number of variables: political and social developments; the quality of political leadership; the awareness of the general public; the existing political and administrative institutions and the quality of personnel found in them are only a few that one could cite.

A cursory examination of Bangladesh's recent past would reveal an unsettling and at times a turbulent picture. A direct result of this has been the gradual erosion of the sense of discipline from the society. Since independence Bangladesh has gone through internecine conflicts of various kind and only recently the opportunity has been presented to the nation as a whole to rectify some of those mistakes. But so far we have failed to take the full advantage of those opportunities. The outcome of 12 June 1996 elections has yet again bestowed upon the nation the awesome responsibility to address many such important issues but foremost of them will be the restoration of discipline, as defined above.

The Rule of Law — Supremacy of Law

The restoration of discipline or more commonly described as the rule of law means, in the first place, the absolute supremacy or predominance of regular law as opposed to the influence of arbitrary power, and excludes the existence of arbitrariness, or even of wide discretionary authority on the part of the government. Every member of the society has to know where he or she stands in terms of the daily exercise of law. To take a very mundane example the road-users have to be told when stopped by a member of the law-enforcing agencies the offence for which they have been stopped rather than employing bully-boy tactics on the unsuspecting. The road-users should then have a well-defined and easily accessible means of redress in reply to any charges that may have been brought against them.

The local and national government institutions, the semi-government organiza-

tions and the nationalized industries have become millstones around the nation's neck. The problem has arisen mainly due to the lack of accountability and this has been greatly exaggerated by the undue influence exerted by the politicians over these establishments. This unholy alliance between the politicians and the bureaucrats permeates from top to bottom. This has produced a state of utter paralysis and has given a handful of officials a disproportionate degree of leverage on the administration of these establishments. The few who are still performing their jobs diligently are often rewarded with bogus anti-corruption charges and constant harassment. It is, therefore, not surprising that the sense of pride and initiative has disappeared to be replaced by inertia and dead-wood. These administrative problems have been catalogued in many reports and academic studies. Now is the time to begin the process of overhauling this degenerating administration.

The Rule of Law — Equality before Law

In the second place, the rule of law means equality before the law. In theory and in practice every official, from the Prime Minister down to a collector of taxes, is under the same responsibility for every act done without legal justification as any other citizen. The public utility services should not become the private properties of certain so-called trade or public employees' unions where the consumers are at the mercy of the former for the connection and continuous supply of such services as gas, water, electricity and telephone. The Treasury is being deprived of the scarce revenue simply because of the collusion between the business community and the susceptible officials of such government departments as the Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue and the Port Authorities. This is theft of the highest order and the criminal law should be applied to punish those found implicated in the pilferage of public resources irrespective

of party allegiance. In some countries the ultimate sanction of death penalty is applied to individuals found guilty of committing such offences.

The Rule of Law — the Constitutional Rights

Finally, the rule of law may be used as a formula to enshrine in the written Constitution certain established rights given to the citizen, such as the right to personal liberty or the right to freedom of speech. The rights embodied in the Constitution of Bangladesh are there for cosmetic purposes, it seems; the general public has lost faith on the judiciary because they are being denied such Constitutional Rights by the Magistrates and Judges due to their restrictive interpretation of the Constitution due to the indeterminable administrative delay; due to the incompetence of the members of the Bar.

There is an exodus of students from the country because they feel duped by the education system which has fossilized into an ancient tomb of out-of-date curriculum and textbooks. No wonder the schools, colleges and universities are churning out young men and women who are neither literate nor enlightened. The general public are also being deprived of their right to the minimum health care. The state run hospitals are avoided like plague as they are insalubrious and deadly. The negligence of this high magnitude is being passed on as the patient's bad luck or God's mysterious scheme of predestination. In reality it is more closely related to the tortious liability on the part of the public health administrators and the medical staff.

The Rule of Law — The Civil Servants

It is also high time that the politicians confronted the gigantic administrative white elephant in the guise of the civil service which is pulling us away from the reforms required for the prosperity of the country. The sense of security in having a 'job for life' is greatly to be responsible for the cavalier attitude of many of the civil servants. The gov-

ernment should look very carefully at the administrative rules and regulations in order to reduce and simplify them; introduce and re-define the job descriptions; tighten up the disciplinary procedures; introduce an element of incentive which would be directly related to job performance and customer satisfaction; open up the action of the administrators to the scrutiny of the court coupled with stiff penalties for maladministration; restrict the activities of the trade and employees unions to welfare issues; reform the activities of the anti-corruption bureau and pass on the investigative responsibility to an independent judicial body; the introduction of 'charters' to protect groups of individuals, such as, students, patients, tax-payers, litigants, public utility consumers, irrespective of the nature of public sectors. Above all the office of Ombudsman has to be brought into action and the reports published are to be considered by the Parliamentary Committees and, if necessary, debated on the floor of the Parliament.

A New Beginning

It will be naive to expect that all the suggestions outlined above will be electorally popular. It may also be difficult to arrive at a consensus given the bitter political rivalry that exists between the major parties. But it is also recognized by many within and outside Bangladesh that the time has come for Bangladesh to decide its efforts to come out of the cycle of poverty and join the 'tiger economies' of the region in the twenty-first century. The politicians have to convince the general public of the merits of the new policies in order to bring about the changes. Generally, it is more conducive to initiate certain unpopular changes in the early days of the new administration rather than later in the day because in reality the latter half of any administration's tenure is more occupied with various internal and external political crises management and with diminishing time for long to medium term policy matters. The high standards have to be attained at the very outset before the bad practices creep in.

The first 100 days are described as the honeymoon period for a newly elected American President and the public and press alike keep a sharp eye on the pronouncements on policy matters. Similarly, for the newly elected government of Bangladesh, the initiatives have to be taken as soon as possible and at the highest possible echelon in order to give a very clear signal that there will be a qualitative difference with the new administration. The public expectations are normally very high with a change of government, particularly after a period of prolonged uncertainty.

Suggestions

There are some practical suggestions other than the policy areas already discussed that the new administration

could bear in mind in order to expedite the reforms required. Firstly, the Prime Minister being the first among the equal, *primus inter pares*, has to carry with her the Cabinet members, and therefore, too large a Cabinet can be unyielding and cumbersome. In the United Kingdom the size of the Cabinet has varied from around five in the early eighteenth century to couple of dozens at various times. Using up too many senior and talented Members of Parliament in a single Cabinet will also reduce the choice for future reshuffles. Secondly, the Prime Minister could supplement a small Cabinet by having an 'Inner Cabinet', sometime referred to as the 'kitchen' Cabinet, made up of some senior colleagues or unfairly described as the 'cronies'. It may be better to avoid such an 'Inner Cabinet' because of the tendency to create cliché within colleagues.

Thirdly, the alternative to such an 'Inner Cabinet' is the formation of Cabinet committees to focus on certain important issues which could then be presented to the full Cabinet. These committees should be able to bring in state and junior ministers not in the Cabinet and experts to enhance the ability to examine and formulate policies in respective areas. Mrs. Thatcher had between thirty and thirty-five standing committees and, at any one time, some 120 ad hoc committees. The ad hoc committees are by definition temporary in nature. The standing committees are normally more influential than the other committees. These committees are serviced by the Cabinet Secretariat but do not have members of the civil service but have parallel official committees of senior civil servants belonging to the departments most closely concerned.

Fourthly, once the policies, particularly those calling for legislative changes, have been agreed by the Cabinet, members the greater should then be put before the Parliamentary Committees. The role of the Parliamentary Committees is not to be underestimated. The Parliamentary Committees normally reflect the composition of the Parliament. The innovation of the committee system (ad hoc, standing, parliamentary and select committees) is a step towards a more open form of government. It has also been described as a means to achieving greater delegation of the decision-making process. The Prime Minister as the 'first among equals' has to set the standard and discipline from the very first day to ensure that in the Parliamentary form of Government the Cabinet is the Executive and not just the Prime Minister.

The coming months and years will present a golden opportunity to develop, by practice, certain procedures which will become the conventions for future governments to follow and modify. This is also the opportunity to translate many of the election promises into specific policies. The electorate have shown immense sophistication in its voting pattern which is now being reflected in the composition of the Parliament. We await to see whether the same will be reciprocated by the politicians.

The author is a Barrister-at-Law.

To the Editor...

Traffic control: Saving many 'flowers' of Wiles

Sir, City's dire traffic jam has boomed as the most alarming phenomenon nowadays. Even it hardly spares the school-going children, especially in the heart of the capital. Wiles Little Flower School at 85, Kakrail is a stern example. Its 4000 students suffer the mess everyday. Parents, mothers, and their kids find it very risky to cross the street south to the school, even through its zebra crossing. Hundreds of cars, auto-rickshaws, buses, mini-buses, lorries, jeeps, rickshaws, recklessly rush along, from the east or from the west, for there is no proper control at either the square point —

Kakrail Square or Ramna Church Square.

Consequently, the plight turns panicky, when our beloved gentlemen seem to have been cruelly unconscious to play away their respective vehicles, at an unprecedented fast speed, disregarding children's long-awaited pass-over. It is always witnessed that two traffic police are not suffice to ensure the safe passage for the school-goers at the time. In this case, at least a provision of a special service of two traffic police at the Ramna Square, two at the Kakrail Square (near Isha Khan Hotel) and another two at the crossing point (towards school's southern gate) seems to be a must.

The school needs this generous traffic service particularly during the pass-over times of the thousands of chil-

dren, once from 7.00 am to 8.30 am and again from 10.30 am to mid-day to save nation's many promising 'flowers' from accidents.

I want to draw the attention of the authority concerned, to take proper steps and solve the problem at the soonest. *Tapas Adhikary, Wiles Little Flower School, Kakrail, Dhaka.*

"Rotary Int'l awards Hasina..."

Sir, This refers to Dr. Iftekharul Alam's letter (DR, June 15) on the issue. Rotary International is a non-political organisation but the timing of Sheikh Hasina being recognised as a Paul Harris Fellow and the publicity being hardly appeared to be non-political. I am sure a large number of

Rotarians will share my views. Thanks to Mr. Iftekharul Alam for enlightening us on Paul Harris Fellow issue. *K.T. Rahman, Sec-4, Uttara, Dhaka.*

Try 'Pepcid'

Sir, According to a study recently conducted in Boston, it has been found that the drug 'Famotidine', sold by Merck and Co. Inc., under the brand name 'Pepcid' prevents stomach acid from forming. Famotidine can treat ulcer develops from taking ibuprofen-like painkillers to relieve arthritis pain.

Medical practitioners in Bangladesh can also try the above drug on similar patients for further confirmation of the above study finding. *M Zahidul Haque, Asst Prof, BAI, Dhaka.*