

It Must be Fair

The nation goes today to mini polls. Whatever may be the results from today's polling they will not have any direct impact on the present power pattern of the government. Nevertheless, today's conduct of the polls will have a tremendous bearing on the government's moral authority to rule. Anything resembling Magura must not be allowed to repeat or the government will have a hugely dented credibility profile.

The Prime Minister has issued directives to local administrations and law enforcing agencies to maintain strict neutrality in conducting the polls. She enjoined on them on Tuesday at a Chittagong meeting of officials to abide by the rules without fear or favour.

The Chief Election Commissioner has also assured the nation of the most careful preparations for the polls and expressed his resolve to thwart attempts to undermine it with all power. But at the same time there has been a continued stream of complaints from the opposition about increasing terrorism in the constituencies. JP candidate Zafar Imam has withdrawn from the race from his Laxmipur area complaining about just such a menace. BNP yesterday accused that the ruling party was using local administration to get its candidates returned.

Small detachments of foreign election observers as also teams of monitors formed by Dhaka-based diplomats will be down there to see things for themselves. Their view of today's performance of the parties will carry a lot of weight not only with the international community but also with our own people.

The political government and administration cadre are not the only party to today's fare. And any party to it can wreck it if they so choose. So much depends on a peaceful, free and fair polling at the centres today that the thought of it cannot but make one uneasy and nervous. The nation has been paying a high price particularly for the last two years and in fact for the last two decades only to ensure regular elections and a free and fair vote. The struggle has ended in a success that is yet so very fragile. The nation must relentlessly plod on to a situation where caretaker governments would not anymore be necessary for ensuring fair polls. Let us not have a contrary situation where even holding of by-elections cannot be left to the government.

The most important concern for today is that whatever the developments on scene, government must not be provoked and it must be a hundred per cent fair and be seen to be so. Notwithstanding the possible ugly incidents here and there, only this will save the nation's as-yet unbegun preparations for meeting the new century, the new millennium.

Over-reaction by the US

Tuesday's missile attack on Iraq by the US naval and air forces has been quite an equanimity-breaker. The sensitivity Washington claims to have shown to the Kurds in Iraq may be appreciated but that cannot be enough of a justification for playing at will with the sovereignty of a country. President Saddam Hussein, according to the US administration, can be a monster but the Iraqi nation deserves equal respect for and inviolability of its territorial integrity like any other nation in the world.

We refer here to America's turning a blind eye to the repression and subjugation of Kurds in Iraq's neighbour, Turkey. The creation of a no-flying zone and a Kurdish safe haven is intended to secure a strong US military presence in the area. The US concern for the Kurds' welfare would have been above controversy had the US spotted the problem long before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The US and its allies are just keen to protect their own economic and strategic interests in the Gulf region.

President Clinton has ordered the attack — one that has taken not only us in this part of the world but even his own people by surprise. He might have considered it politically expedient before the presidential election in the USA to opt for the military offensive. What has been forgotten is that the move has trivialised the sovereignty of a country. This, we reckon, could prove unhelpful to the credibility of the only superpower's global role and status. The other thing overlooked is the ripple effect of this attack in the region in particular and in the Muslim world in general. The attack will give a big handle to the Muslim fundamentalists everywhere. The Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine may have received a further setback. An anti-American and anti-West feeling will help fuel the Muslim fundamentalism which has already witnessed an alarming rise in many Muslim countries. So we urge the US to earnestly try a political solution to the Kurdish problem via the UN Security Council.

Women's Rights?

Papiya Sultana Ruby could just be the name of a college-going girl next-door. But one with the same name has made us face some of the harshest aspects of our social reality. This 23-year-old fair-of-mien young woman waits to sell one of her kidneys — just to give her three children a life without hunger. One cannot sell one's kidney either over the counter or as a vendor. What will she do in the meantime for the upkeep of her family? She has left her husband behind for the man is a terrorist and lives a fugitive's insecure life. So? She has started driving the rickshaw. Passengers shy of her, nobody likes to be seen taking a ride on a rickshaw pulled by a woman. Her intake, as a result, comes to half of what a man driver gets. Still her Taka 40 a day is much better than the Tk 600 she used to get from a Garments factory. She rents a shack for Tk 400.

Her third child is only a month old. Should she be driving a rickshaw now?

Women are now an accepted force in road and house-building activities — they are cutting and carrying earth and crushing stones. Perhaps they could as well come in a big way to rickshaw driving. While that hasn't yet come to be, Ruby is being eaten up by desperation. Something must be done for her and for all like her that come to knowledge. Women's rights organisations should take her under their wings. She must indeed be rewarded with a suitable income in recognition of the fact that in her dire situation she has not abandoned her children or her dignity.

THE institution of Election Commission is a statutory body in all democratic countries and is empowered to wield immense administrative and other election-related authority in a designated sector during some specified periods. In status and respect, it enjoys the standing of a High Court. For political parties and their candidates, its de facto significance is even greater.

Yet, this constitutional body has often been subjected to vicissitudes of fate, specially in our country. It is, however, the umbrella of this august body on whom devolves the primary responsibility of shaping its destiny and building its image. We have gained experience of a really effective and impartial Chief Election Commissioner perhaps only once, during the tenure of Justice Shahabuddin's caretaker government in 1991.

A few years later, the same person transformed himself, according to the then opposition, into a timid and ineffective official during by-elections, specially in Magura. The present Chief Election Commissioner has been fully aware of these predicaments, and knows even more pitfalls associated with his high office, right from the very outset of his assumption of charge. Despite his long and creditable record as an astute civil servant, he has not been able to remain above criticisms during the 12th June election

and, to put it mildly, committed mistakes, according to the BNP. After all, the Chief Election Commissioner being a human is not infallible and must, like other mortals, learn from trials and tribulations. But it is not enough that he learns; it must be seen by the people that he has learned.

The purpose of this article is not to make a detailed evaluation of the record of the deeds of the Election Commission during the past general election. On the day of by-election to 15 vacant seats in the parliament, the Election Commission is most politely and firmly reminded of its solemn responsibility to ensure a free and fair election. It must not only act without fear and favour, but must try to maintain harmony between words and deeds.

It does not take a Sehan, the Chief Election Commissioner of India, to do marvels in setting the electoral path in India straight. Nor one has to match the grandiose scale of a De-Silva, the veteran Election Commissioner of Sri Lanka who steered almost a dozen national elections over a decade, amidst full endorsement and public appreciation of both government and opposition parties.

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What is really warranted for our Chief Election Commissioner is to demonstrate boldness, fairness and righteousness during his stewardship of these by-elections. We are all aware of the possibility of the nature of fine irregularities and rigging in polling stations which would normally evade



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

the sight of foreign and non-local election observers. But from sons of the soil it is not possible to hide all facts, even if some of which are difficult to prove under law. It therefore enjoins upon the Election Commission to take appropriate preventive measures, as far as possible, and not to confine itself to mere remedial ones.

To recapitulate, two of the cases during the last election continue to agitate minds of BNP activists. Firstly, the seven

officers, members of the Civil Service, who had associated themselves with the cause of the opposition before the 12th June election and publicly declared to have done so, were posted as Deputy Commissioners and ipso facto returning officers responsible for all types of election activities and returns. The BNP protested vehemently and

could easily be implanted. These deliberations should not necessarily tarnish the reputation of these persons as officers of the Republic and prejudice against their future progress in service. But this has no doubt caused serious misgivings in the BNP circle, who genuinely felt that their election performance would have substantially improved in some forty constituencies supervised by their officers. Despite declaration of the BNP Chairperson repudiating these officers, human frailties and susceptibilities could have played its role, even in a subconscious manner, in guiding their activities.

Secondly, when a delegation from the BNP met the CEC a few days before the last election and demanded removal of some administrative officers in certain polling stations because of their blatant and repressive support for the opposition party, the CEC observed that similar complaints had been filed also by the Awami League in some other polling station, demanding removal of the concerned administrative officers. In order to be fair on both sides, the CEC agreed to transfer officers from both places. The pledge still remains a pledge and was

demanded their transfer. The Election Commission as well as the caretaker government paid no heed to the forceful BNP demand, and decided to keep the officers in place, even though there existed no dearth of undisputed and able officers to replace them at short notice.

One cannot help wonder why such marked and disputed officers were given important election duties, when satisfactory alternative device was available and

One appreciates the decision of the Prime Minister not to visit the vacant constituencies before election. All of a sudden, her decision to pay a flying visit immediately on the eve of election contest is expected to be raged, has caused much interest or concern to many. The declared purpose was to attend the functions related to the anniversary celebrations of Lord Krishna, the Hindu deity. She also addressed an important government official during her visit. It is natural that the head of a government would carry out both these functions under normal circumstances. Yet, following massive transfer of officers all over the country within a span of two months, addressing local officers on the very eve of election and visiting minority inhabited areas there at the same time appear to be too coincidental.

The two hundred years of British rule on our land was not an unmix blessing. Even then, some good emanated. Among them were the legacy of an impartial judiciary and an efficient administrative system. Let us keep these traditions high and above reproach. This is in the larger interest of democracy and well-being of the people. Let us forget.

totally ignored. These instances are cited as a measure of caution for the Election Commission.

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I K Gujral's Visit and its Significance

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

THE four-day visit of Indian external affairs minister I K Gujral to this country beginning Friday, September 6, is more than significant in many ways. In fact, it is a visit of importance is attached to this visit from Bangladesh's points of view that there is no element of exaggeration that many eyes are cast on the outcome of the talks that the Indian external affairs minister will have with his Bangladesh counterpart Mr. Abdus Samad Azad. This will be the first high-level meeting between the two countries on political plane since new governments took over in both Dhaka and New Delhi following the change in the political landscape in both the countries.

Indian foreign secretary Salman Haider was here within weeks of the formation of a new government in Bangladesh as a sequel to the June 12 national elections but that visit of Mr. Haider, who flew in here as the special envoy of prime minister H D Deve Gowda, was more ritualistic in a positive ambience, evidently meant to send out friendly signals to the neighbouring country rather than having substantial talks on an array of issues, obviously highlighted by the water sharing problem.

Mr. Haider himself had also insisted during the visit that he was not on a negotiating mission — but was carrying messages of goodwill from his prime minister and external affairs minister to their opposite numbers here. But the visit of Mr. Gujral is different and designed to have talks with Bangladesh side on many issues. A fairly big delegation accompanies him on the visit. It is seen as quite important in India as well and this is reflected from a powerful media team that will be here with the Indian external affairs minister to cover the visit.

Mr. Gujral is no stranger here — neither he is unfamiliar with the gamut of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, its beneficial aspects as well as the complexities of the cabinet and a scholarly person enjoying sober reputation in the Indian political and

intellectual circles, he was here more than once. Interestingly, he was here also as Indian external affairs minister of the V P Singh government. Scholarly exercises like symposia also brought him here. However, this visit of Mr. Gujral to Bangladesh carries more significance than before because of manifold reasons and he is certainly not unaware of this aspect of the visit and so is the Indian side.

The expectations and eventual outcome of such visits, seen as crucial or important between nations, come in for introspection in varying degrees — from the angle of the countries concerned and even from different quarters within a country. But there is no denying that equation and personal rapport between the top figures of two

like information and broad-casting. When leaders of delegations in important talks enjoy confidence and clout of their heads of government, this is always a plus point towards making exchange of views successful as far as possible because of their individual positions. Here too, both foreign ministers have commonality in being senior members of the cabinet and in dealing with foreign ministry before and this should contribute to the Indo-Bangladesh talks billed as a "litmus test" in some quarters for two countries for the sake of good neighbourliness.

What is the main issue of the discussions that Mr. Azad and Mr. Gujral are going to have? It is the water issue that remains on high agenda for Bangladesh and all eyes are set on the kind of negotiations that are going to take place on this seemingly intractable matter. True, substantial talks on the water issue that covers not only the Ganges but as many as fifty-three other common rivers can take place and will take place within the realm of talks by the water resources ministers of the two countries.

Certainly, two countries have a lot of bilateral matters like the trade imbalance, ways to bolster economic cooperation, demarcation of land boundary, law and order along the common borders, mutual allegations of harbouring insurgency mainly along the hills of two countries etc. and such innocuous matters in the multilateral plane like further development of the SAARC, common positions in international forums to harmonise the interests of regional countries will come up for discussions. However, there may be issues also in regional and international area like CTEI, where two sides may find both convergence and divergence of opinions.

But it is the water issue that remains on high agenda for Bangladesh and all eyes are set on the kind of negotiations that are going to take place on this seemingly intractable matter. True, substantial talks on the water issue that covers not only the Ganges but as many as fifty-three other common rivers can take place and will take place within the realm of talks by the water resources ministers of the

New Delhi last year, the then prime ministers of the two countries directed their foreign secretaries to pick up the issue and Indian foreign secretary Mr. Salman Haider and his Bangladesh counterpart began talks in the Indian capital itself. Then Mr. Haider flew to Dhaka to continue the talks when such decisions like the revival of the ministerial level Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) was taken. A ministerial level meeting between two countries was very much on the cards after that meeting but it never took place much to the dismay of Bangladesh. Even it was unofficially told that water resources ministers of two countries could not agree on a mutually convenient date for the meeting since they were more busy with domestic matters like political crises and fighting elections. Then the political scenario changed in India and then almost close on the heels, in Bangladesh, Mr. Haider arrived here as special envoy of prime minister Deve Gowda carrying message for new Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

leader both inside and outside the parliament and it is only normal that every bit of the water talks will be followed with intense interest and the previous government and other political parties as well as different quarters will give vent to their feelings on the issue.

The meeting is very timely and we will discuss all issues of common concern and certainly the most important Farakka matter, Mr. Abdus Samad Azad told me briefly about the coming talks. The water issue figured prominently in the recent elections and not surprisingly also in the campaign for the September 5 by-elections. The issue was incorporated with high priority in the election manifesto of major political parties and of course with the present ruling Awami League. The stake on this issue is obvious.

Having followed the water talks between two countries as a newsman and writer for many years, I cannot be oblivious to the complexities of the issue. For the last forty-six years the issue is being discussed and in

the process voluminous data and information were exchanged. Before liberation, the talks remained without results. After the liberation, there were both progress and setbacks in talks. Two countries also got bogged down on the mechanism to augment the dry seasons flows of the Ganges. Such schemes like construction of storages in Nepal and the 'link canal' are too well-known and need no repetition. For Bangladesh, the issue is of paramount importance since a large chunk of the country known as Ganges Dependent Area (GDA) needs minimum water for all round existence. The situation becomes precarious in the dry season. Appreciating this situation the former Indian prime minister Mr. Narasimha Rao had said India cannot want to see its neighbour starve of water.

Arguably, all issues like the flow of the Ganges and the consumption in the upper reaches within India like the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as well as the requirement of the Calcutta port will come for talks. The requirement of Bangladesh is also more than clear. There is impression in certain quarters in this country that New Delhi seeks to link the water issue with transit facilities through Bangladesh. The onus lies with the coming meeting to dispel misgivings in the daily news. The progress on the water issue can lead to confidence-building that may facilitate other form of cooperation.

In view of the urgency of the Ganges water sharing, there is also no need to link the issue with the augmenting of flows of the Ganges or discussions on other common rivers. All issues cannot come for a solution in one-go but Ganges needs substantial progress.

A meeting of the water resources ministers under the JRC should not wait longer and the foreign ministers' meeting can send out positive signals toward that direction. Mr. Salman Haider's fleeting visit to Dhaka was followed by Mr. Farooq Sohan's trip to New Delhi. Mr. Gujral's visit here should make good progress for a fruitful JRC meeting.

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.

Indemnity Bill

Sir, Your heart-wrenching appeal to Khaleda Zia to repeal the Indemnity Bill overlooked some facts. You are asking for justice for just one crime. A couple of unpunished murderers shouldn't be that shocking a truth to live with when we are granting pardons to convicted drug smugglers and letting convicted criminals sit in the parliament.

There are more current events that contribute to our national shame. Sheikh Hasina's role in the 1986 elections raised questions. And as for Ziaur Rahman, would you honestly think of the public as being naive enough to believe that Zia had no prior knowledge about the events of August 15, 1975?

I think more immediate matters about the strength of character, the integrity of our political leaders and the underlying hypocrisy in their promise of justice need to be addressed through the press. After all, it took the nation 21 years to mourn the death of 'Bangabandhu'. For 21 years, the flag didn't fly at half-mast on August 15 and Bangabandhu didn't occupy so much space in the media. We are a nation born out of the legacy of dead prime ministers and presidents. We were led to believe for the past five years that Zia was the greatest politician. Now we are about to

hear the same about Mujibur Rahman. All I can say to our leaders is, get a life. What Zia and Mujib did and what others did to them concerns us no longer.

Abdullah Al-Abed, Chameli-3, Eskaton Garden, Dhaka

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Sir, Please accept my heartfelt gratitude for your article on the above subject on the National Mourning Day issue of your esteemed daily making an appeal to our law-makers specially to Begum Khaleda Zia for repeal of the Indemnity Act. The Indemnity Ordinance was issued by Late Khondokar Mustaque Ahmed and later incorporated in our constitution by the Late President Ziaur Rahman. As President Ziaur Rahman was the husband of Begum Khaleda Zia, she may feel hesitant in pursuing her party members in the Assembly to accept your appeal — nay the appeal of the great majority of the people of this country.

However, if she recalls the steps taken by Sheikh Hasina in coming out of BAKSate in changing the form of government from Presidential to Parliamentary type then we hope she will get rid of any hesitation. The formation of BAKSAL and the change of the form

of government from Parliamentary to Presidential type was done when the illustrious father was at the helm of the government. Sheikh Hasina must have realised that people of this country in their heart prefer multi-party system and parliamentary type of government.

We realise that General Zia had to incorporate the black law in the constitution under compelling circumstances which even induced General Osmani to become the Defense Advisor of Late Khondokar Mustaque. We therefore, expect a great leader like Begum Khaleda Zia to get rid of sentimental attachment to her late husband in this matter and help the nation in unburdening its conscience by repealing the black law.

A G G Kabir, 37/1 Jashshahara, Dhaka-1229

"Is the 'Bay-Gen' free-play radio the world's first?"

Sir, With reference to the recent British High Commission press release on the above mentioned subject, I would like to furnish the following information. Operation of a Radio without using battery or electricity as a source of power supply (free-play) was demonstrated in Dhaka on 23-07-1975 by its innovator Engr. Nazmul Huda and Muhammad Ali (late).

In 1976, while in West Germany, Engr. Huda, the innovator, contacted the Raymond Lee Organization, Inc. a

USA based organization catering for the marketability of new ideas/innovations. They sent a kit (copy enclosed) for furnishing detailed information which Engr. Huda was not keen to disclose at that stage.

In 1978, a working model of the said Radio was presented by Mohammad Ali, to the National Science Museum at their request. It was possible from the presented model, though not of the quality of the original one, for an intelligent observer to get fair idea of the innovation.

In 1989, Engr. Huda sent a brief resume of his scientific research works and successful innovations including the said Radio to the Intermediate Technology Development Group UK.

Since, any such free-play Radio is known to us before the above mentioned date i.e. 23-7-1975 should we not give the credit of the innovation of a free-play Radio to Engr. Nazmul Huda and Muhammad Ali (late)?

Nazmul Huda, 38 Siddheswari Road, Dhaka-1217.

Additional bumpers of cars

Sir, A lot of letters have been published in your esteemed daily on the above subject but mostly against the government notification on immediate removal of additional bumpers from cars. Some have justified against it as these save their valuable cars from scratches of rickshaw axles. But they have not mentioned about their dangerously portending gadgets in-

juring pedestrians in crowded places. In fact these bumpers are ugly and dangerous and no where else in the third world countries (I do not mention the whole world) this kind of ugly things could be seen.

It has been presented in a way as if scratch free vehicles are more important than human limbs. If order and discipline could be brought back in the vehicular traffic then minor accidents will happen not occur. At signals cars and rickshaws will never stop in files. The second car will always stop behind the first one and the third one behind the second one. Rickshaws also follow this rule. If the road users show some patience, then orderly traffic flow could easily be maintained.

But good solutions never come so easily and therefore smooth traffic flow on Dhaka streets is perhaps more impossible than many other impossibilities. We will have to learn to live with this and cars with rickshaw scratches. But the traffic authorities should at least make sure that all ugly bumpers which protrude out of the body line vehicles, are removed immediately. Front and rear bumpers which are within the body line should remain undisturbed. Instruction for removal should however be clear so that no scope of misinterpretation remains.

Amjad Hossain, 70, Elephant Road, Dhaka.

PSC's lengthy procedure

Sir, PSC offers a few government jobs every year. But

PSC's procedure is very lengthy. First, they give an announcement through advertisement in the daily newspapers. After 7/8 months, they issue interview cards. Then written exam, viva, medical test etc. would take another month or more. This is a very funny thing. They should expedite the procedure.

Mostafa Sohel, Banant, Dhaka

Will Letters Column get its due attention?

Sir, I am grateful to those persons who had written in the letters columns supporting my views and to those who wrote to me personally in appreciation. I also thank those who noticed my letters and took the trouble to write in these columns though not agreeing with me on certain points.

But it seems that these letters are not noticed by authorities concerned, and if they at all notice they are least bothered about it. Each day hundreds of letters are published in newspapers and magazines all over the country voicing grievances and trying to attract attention to many important matters. Many learned writers impart valuable suggestions which would have benefited us greatly if the relevant authorities had been conscious. But all is in vain. It is like crying in the wilderness.

I hope the government will not remain indifferent to people's pleas and will take necessary steps to redress them.

Nur Jahan, 1390 East Nasirabad Chittagong