

The Best Choice

There could not have been a better instance of reason and foresight emerging from a milieu of impending chaos: Inder Kumar Gujral as the next Indian Prime Minister. Just at a time when the more practical and peace-loving people both in and outside India was fearing the resurgence of the fundamentalist forces following the unceremonious and bizarre Congress decision to pull the carpet under the feet of the Deve Gowda-led United Front government, the think tanks of the 13-party coalition have shown great sagacity in coming up with a resolution which is reassuring both for the spirit of secularism and good neighbourly relationship in the region.

In this regard, a word of praise needs to be uttered for President Shankar Dayal Sharma who in a move that caught everyone by pleasant surprise yesterday, insisted on being provided an assurance that the Congress would not withdraw support for the coalition government before the next election. With the party that quite inexplicably gave birth to almost a political crisis, complying with the President's demand for the guarantee sooner than later, Mr Gujral, who served with great distinction as foreign minister in Deve Gowda's ten-month-old government, looks destined to be sworn in today as the 12th Prime Minister of the largest democracy on earth.

With the breakthrough in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship as notably manifest, among others, in the 30-year Ganges water treaty yet to sink in the psyche of people and politicians of both sides, the fall of the Deve Gowda coalition government which undoubtedly established the image of being the most sincere of all governments as regards improvement of bilateral relationship since the days of Desai, was indeed a very unhappy augury. For once, it seemed we were destined to return to our status of what Mr Gujral himself once termed as prisoners of past; and experience tells us how time-consuming and costly it is to win freedom from the spectres of our past. We thank our stars to have seen such a prospect of regression averted.

Not only for Indo-Bangladesh relationship, the emergence of Mr Gujral at the executive acme of India should also usher in a new era of cooperation in the region. A pioneer in track-II diplomacy even when not in power, Mr Gujral has always been the champion advocate of normalcy in the relationship between the congenitally inimical neighbours India and Pakistan.

With the background of a diplomat committed to the cause of peace and progress, Mr Gujral looks the best bet to address these outstanding issues. How far ahead he can get India and the region to jettison the vestigial baggage of the past is something only future will be able to tell. For the time being, however, we congratulate Mr Gujral as the next Indian PM with the hope that he will give our optimism the best service he is capable of providing.

The Homesick Millions

More than two million people left for home in the interior on the eve of the Eid. This is a grand manifestation of a charming, oriental way — and extension of the joint-family bondage which is dithering on its way out. It is a yearly gathering at the ancestral home for the sons and daughters of the home. These millions haven't yet quite uprooted themselves from where they grew. And they are taking pains to keep their roots alive.

Bikrampur had a unique distinction in the whole of the subcontinent as a *pargana* giving birth to thousands that led British India in education and other professions including law and science as also in service. This was not a fact found out from the books. When the *festive* season approached, whole families, thousands of them, started to descend on small and riverine Bikrampur from all over India — and even from abroad across the seas.

It is very gratifying that our city people haven't turned their back on the poor old houses and seniors left behind. Can this be true that their continuing village connection is proving good to the villages? Do the people from the capital help set up schools and clubs and run them? Do they bring into the villages a lot of printed material along with the fashions the younger ones bring from the capital?

Bangladesh is a cosy little place. All of Bangladesh, excluding the megacities, is fast becoming a sprawling suburbia. With the big cities growing beyond capacity to unhealthy proportions, there is bound to be an opposite rush to the villages — of the refined and well-to-do lot. It took decades for such a pattern to set in the US. In Bangladesh this can come sooner than one can think of. The millions that get mad to go to their village *remains*, may be only for a day, have possibly not given up their past and roots. If the villages could only offer jobs, many of them would rather be there and the villages would start to live again. There is no other way to save the cities and the country as a whole.

Atrocious

On the eve of Eid-ul Azha, young Ayesha had all the pride and privacy of her womanhood robbed at its dawn in the most horrifying and medieval manner one can think of. The sixteen-year-old from a village in the hilly parts of Chittagong was literally lifted by culprits who barged into their hut at the dead of night and after tying and gagging the mother and almost instantly overpowering the feeble resistance of the younger brother took the girl to a nearby field for the enactment of a barbaric orgy of lust.

Rape as a steady pattern of repression on women has become a diurnal reality in today's Bangladesh. With a law enforcing agency which has quite a few problems of its own both from the logistical as well as motivational points of view, it would be an exercise in inanity to call, let alone expect the guardians of law to completely rule out the recurrence of such incidents, but it is quite practical to expect the law enforcers to go after the closely spotted accused in the most vigorous manner.

Let this incident be not a part of the longish catalogue of unfinished cases of repression against women.

Local Government and Bureaucracy: Meaningful Interface

by Hossain Zillur Rahman

A specific aspect of the feebleness of local government bodies vis-a-vis administration is that the powers and responsibilities of the former are invariably defined in general but vague terms while the powers of the latter are enshrined in specific and precise terms.

REFORM initiatives on local governance need to bear in mind two critical ground realities. Firstly, elected local governments at the union level have been a remarkably regular presence since independence. Secondly, weak local government has not meant any major void in local level development activities since Bangladesh has witnessed a rich variety of central government and NGO-supported programmes in this field. Thus, it is not primarily from any considerations of political or developmental vacuum that the question of local governance gains its current urgency.

Local government needs to be strengthened not primarily to substitute for NGO efforts or to assist central government project implementation. Local government cannot be seen mainly as project implementing agencies. The prior issue of project formulation, the quality of project choice, and better reflection of felt-needs are the larger concerns which provide meaning to the discussion on strengthening local government. Effective local government represents first and foremost a political process at making and ensuring institutional and developmental

choices; they should not primarily be visualised as implementing arms of supra-local entities.

Empowering union parishads may not in some critical sense imply a higher interface with local administration. Discussions on such an interface are frequently premised on a distinction between regulatory and development functions within administration. 'Regulatory' functions — police, magistracy, judiciary and land administration — are commonly kept out of the purview of reform debates while the focus is mainly on 'development' functions. Yet, experience shows that the regulatory organs described above have an enormous influence over lives at the local level and in many ways define, restrict or disrupt the institutional momentum and growth possibilities of local government bodies such as the union parishads.

The issue here is not only one of commonly understood administrative limitations of

union parishads vis-a-vis its developmental mandate, but of a larger problem of negative externalities generated by the core regulatory organs for the judiciary, police, and land administration.

In such a context, local government reform cannot meaningfully be restricted to development functions but must simultaneously move beyond to regulatory functions and address dysfunctions within existing regulatory processes. If such an expansion of the agenda is easier said than done, a moot issue is whether the more meaningful alternative may not be to shift the focus from the interface between local government and administration to the autonomous development of local government bodies.

A specific aspect of the feebleness of local government bodies vis-a-vis administration is that the powers and responsibilities of the former are invariably defined in general but

vague terms while the powers of the latter are enshrined in specific and precise terms. For example, the general power of the union parishads is to maintain law and order but the specific power in this context lies with the magistracy and the police in terms of powers of arrest, bail, etc. At the ground level, it is always the specific power which carries the teeth while the general power is more a mere declaration of intent.

The specific sociology implied in the distinction drawn between general and specific powers in many ways lie at the root of the enfeeblement of local government bodies. Such enfeeblement is compounded by certain oddities which attach disproportionately larger attention to representational issues at the expense of jurisdictional issues. Yet, elections by themselves cannot generate the 'empowerment' of local government bodies. The jurisdictional issues have to be addressed in the very terms. Whether the goal is au-

tonomous growth of local government bodies or enhanced interface with administration, an associated but no less crucial issue is the quality of representation. Negative attitudes of the bureaucracy towards local government is in no small measure fuelled by the negative images bureaucrats hold of elected functionaries. To an extent, such negative images may reflect bureaucratic prejudices but notwithstanding such prejudice, the quality issue demands independent attention.

There are three sets of issues pertaining to quality. The first has to do with existing procedures of election based on simple majority and how well this reflects the popular will. A review of electoral procedures around the world suggests this is a significant area for reform. The second issue has to do with screening measures to keep out negative candidates. If screening is to keep out negative candidates, the third issues concerns the more pro-active

concern of improving the quality of choice available to the electorate.

Lastly there is the related issue of quotas for women and the poor. While a quota to enhance representation of women is a move in the right direction, the merit for any quota for the poor is much more questionable. This is precisely because the category of 'poor' is not made up of durable social characteristics which are inherently mottoritable for examples such as caste. In such a case, the representational opportunity afforded by such quotas is greatly susceptible to manipulation and tokenism as indeed has been the case in the past. The more valid approach here is the social mobilization of the poor, with enhanced participation in local government as one of the core goals of such mobilization.

Dr Zillur Rahman Khan is the Survey Coordinator, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). The original article was presented at a workshop hosted by The Asia Foundation on March 10-11 for government donors, and NGOs on 'Elected and Administrative Local Government Relations.' This version has been specially prepared for The Daily Star.

The Trail of Corruption in the Sub-continent

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

FORMER Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto had the lesson of her own lapses. Not upon the irreparable damage done by her husband Asif Zardari to her career.

It may be recalled that Benazir Bhutto was sacked by President Leghari on grounds of total inefficiency, mismanagement of administration, wastage of public money and corruption, nepotism and favouritism etc. Coinciding with her fateful dismissal, the arrest of Asif Zardari on yet-to-be-substantiated grounds of killing or threatening to kill his political and/or business adversaries, Benazir's personal image sunk into an abyssal quagmire with little chance of retrieval.

Her appeal against presidential order of dismissal also did not move the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The order was upheld and swinging between two options of either to contest the February 3, 1997 election or to boycott it, she had at last filed her party's nominations. Such halthearted decision could hardly repair the breaches that surfaced in the rank and file of her Peoples Party. The intervening period between her unceremonious dismissal and the election on 3rd February, 1997 was so brief that she could not collect herself and start mending the fences. On the other hand, she found herself pitifully ensnared in her domestic front. For a couple of days she had to pass through almost an unending nightmare. She moved, as it were, heaven and earth to locate her husband or his whereabouts. Zardari was picked up by plainclothes policemen and taken to unknown destination. All these malevolent situations would naturally block her desirable attention to her party affairs and to the election campaigns.

The result was a foregone conclusion but never was so devastating in anticipation. Of course she had a premonition of embracing eventual defeat but neither she nor anyone of her party including her myriads of well-wishers at home and abroad could imagine such a massive dimension. However, Benazir Bhutto appeared to have absorbed the shock when she accepted the humility and instantly declared not to go for any movement against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League. She seems to have realized that it would be no use to go for such a movement when her party has been rendered an almost microscopic minority in the Parliament.

Ms Bhutto's express standpoint, on the other hand, appears to have been a direct inducement noticed in Nawaz Sharif's maiden, post-election observations. He said, *inter alia*, that he would not nurse any malice or vindictiveness against his political opponents. He would rather, run his government by consensus with the opposition or for that matter, with Benazir Bhutto on all national issues. His offer appears to have been a welcome change from the hitherto very strained relationship between the two. Bhutto's response too has been, as of now, very positive and without any string of reservation. Still then, her loud wailing and public implorations for release of her captive husband could be a distant political strategy at assuaging any possible vengeance by Sharif's government. Time will prove if her current overture was a deliberate and preemptive exercise to that end.

Ms Nawaz Sharif's return to power with an almost absolute majority has been equally startling as the defeat of Benazir Bhutto. He himself was surprised. 'This victory is unexpected. I did not expect such a big victory' — was his immediate reaction. Indeed, it was a landslide victory for him and beyond his expectation as per his own version. Nevertheless, it has become crystal clear that Nawaz Sharif was conscious of his shortcomings and even not wholly true, of the charges of corruption, favouritism and nepotism that made indelible imprints on his personal profile. However, he could heave sighs of relief that his voters were not swept away by such ignominious undercurrents.

The political scenario in the sub-continent in respect of individual politicians has been more or less same. In the earlier days following partition of India the leaderships in independent India and Pakistan did not show much of moral degrada-

tion. It could be possible that most of the politicians of the time belonged to the feudal aristocracy who were more power-mongers than money-minters. And those having higher education and enlightened parentage belonging to upper middle class only enjoyed liberal patronage of their respective party leadership. The lesser ones had to remain contented with the residual part of the whole dispensation. There was hardly any glider from any quarter. The element of 'big business' played its inevitable role as in other parts of the world but without any notable trace of personal aggrandizement.

From mid-sixties and onward things began moving in an eerie manner in consequence of the disappearance of the old guards from the political scene.

It is, however, not to suggest that the root of corruption planted in the sub-continent by the colonial power and its sapling nurtured by the greedy and avaricious people here for centuries can be uprooted overnight. The conscience of the people has to be roused to build the barrier.

nario. Military rulers in Pakistan went all out for wielding absolute powers and in their efforts at consolidating and extending their rule in all conceivable civil affairs found a handful of hitherto disgruntled politicians licking their shoes. Their reward soon started pouring in vicious proportions. Such a wild galore infected even the lowest rung of the society.

The infamous '22 families' emerged eventually as the real masters. That was the beginning of the era of corruption and selfishness. Till now Pakistan is languishing with such a debasing paramour.

In India, however, politicians alone have been leading the destiny of the country since independence. Those who were at the helm of affairs during early years had unstinted personal records of patriotism, nationalism, sufferings at the hands of the British masters etc. They were a bulk of most dedicated people who were always prepared to make the greatest sacrifice of their lives for the country. Led by Mahatma Gandhi, the leaders of India showed unique respect for national integrity in all spheres of life. They were indeed incorruptible. By and large, the serenity of Indian leadership remained in its place till Indira Gandhi was in power. But it soon started waning, allegedly due to highly ambitious elder son Sanjay who used to meddle in the affairs of the administration frequently to the detriment of his mother's political image. Rajiv Gandhi died later with the slander of Bofors upon his corpse. CBI is currently making a renewed investigation and in the course Rajiv's actual involvement in the scam may or may not come up.

Subsequent to the historic emergence of independent Bangladesh, the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called upon the countrymen to help rebuild the national economy. It was an uphill task but he was undaunted. The process of rehabilitation of the industrial units which were ransacked by the Pakistanis, soon started with scanty resources poured in by a handful of donor countries.

Massive support was yet to come as many countries were delaying their formal recognition to independent Bangladesh. At such a critical juncture stopgap arrangements had to be made to manage the industries. There was a total vacuum in all the areas of development. Taking the advantage of the situation some unscrupulous people at the helm of affairs were found engaged at making their own fortunes deducing the national exchequer freely. Still then, Bangabandhu tried desperately to set the house in order and when things were gradually brightening he was killed with almost all his family members on August 15, 1975.

Ziaur Rahman though personally behaved a person of integrity the people surrounding his power base perhaps did not. His political party which was to legitimize later his militaristic civil administration was a veritable conglomerate, *inter alia*, of a number of anti-liberation elements besides a handful of disgruntled politicians deserting from other parties despite his omnipotence and almost despotic treatment of his adversaries they could curve out shadowy alleys to promote and satisfy their mortal pleasures.

General Ershad did not lose a single moment to move in. So long he was a silent observer of the hobnobbing of both civil and military personnel with the power centre. Zia being his junior in the army, Ershad could have psychological prickings to siphon him. He had no choice. Justice Sattar was forced to hand over power to him. For about nine years he ruled and many of Zia's men soon changed colours only. They received, in due course, all the earthly patronage from him. Corruption soon assumed staggering proportions.

Ershad and almost all his cabinet colleagues eventually ended up in jail subsequent to the mass upsurge in 1990. His regime was, and even today is, branded as autocratic by the opposition of yesterday and today. However, compared to the repressive measures of his time (which could be debatable) the alleged acts of massive corruption, perversion and many other worldly vices were unfathomable. Besides matters relating to money, corrupt practices of the time were alleged to have defiled the sanctity of our religion Islam even though Islam was inducted as the State religion in our Constitution at Ershad's personal initiative. And BNP, led by Begum Zia, was installed in power for the second time since 1975 after Ershad, in 1991 election. She too promised a clean administration but failed miserably. In the name of so-called 'unanyanar joar' (tide of development)

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To the Editor...

Congratulations

Sir, This is to thank and congratulate the Bengal Tigers for winning the ICC Trophy and to express gratitude and thanks to the citizens of Dhaka for celebrating the victory in a nice and proper manner. We were all in a jubilant mood and yet waited patiently to accord a warm reception to our heroes.

The extravaganza reception which was attended by many VVIPs along with our Prime Minister was organised in a grand fashion, and attended by thousands of people who after many many years experienced a joy of achievement from any sportsmen of Bangladesh.

But I was surprised that the Mayor of Dhaka city, who should have been the natural spokesman of the citizens of Dhaka city did not speak from the lectern.

Anyway we are thankful to our cricket team and also to the past national cricket players who played in previous ICC tournaments in 1979, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1992 and in 1994 without whom the tradition of playing cricket in Bangladesh could not have been established. We recall their contribution to the cause of cricket in

Bangladesh along with today's heroes.

We wish continued success in cricket in the future which would inspire other Bangladesh sportsmen and players in other games to achieve success in their field of sports.

Munira Khan Dhaka

Prizes for the Stock Swindlers

Sir, While many individuals and organisations are declaring prizes/awards for the victorious Bangladesh Cricket Team, I would like to declare the following prizes for the shamelessly notorious Stock Swindlers in Bangladesh:

- 1) 10 years rigorous imprisonment for each one of the Stock Swindlers.
- 2) Confiscation of their movable and immovable properties right away.
- 3) Freezing of their Bank Accounts with immediate effect.
- 4) Pursuing their criminal cases relentlessly and tenaciously till final conviction by the court.

Would anyone like to add

more prizes for this 'gang of common cheats'?

Jamaluddin Nilkhet, Dhaka

"Stairway to Nowhere"

Sir, It was a relief to read Anindita Sarkar's article, 'Stairway to Nowhere' in the Dhaka Day by Day column on 10-4-97.

This particular prose of Sarkar's reflects clarity of thought, acute observation powers, respect for the English language and a healthy approach to life in Dhaka city. The jibe at 'foreign tourists' demonstrates deep perception and was aptly and neutrally phrased.

This is a column that most Daily Star readers look forward to, because it bears an unwritten rule of innocent honesty with a touch of cheekiness.

In the future, I look forward to pieces of such quality and above.

S Asna Chowdhury Dhaka

Acid-throwing

Sir, Acid-throwing is a curse for the victims. Unfortunately, this evil deed — acid throwing — is going on unabated by our so-called male lovers. By doing so, the acid-thrower may find himself as a villain, but the victims find their life in jeopardy — a life which is most and always desirable than death.

How unfortunate! But who should be blamed for this?

It is very natural that any proposal of love or marriage might not result in success. Because love or marriage is something that emanates from the heart. Mere proposal and temptation cannot promote true love. It is a matter of interaction between minds and hearts.

Then, why should an unsuccessful or a disappointed lover commit such crime? It is because he is not a true lover. His feelings are rather lust.

Imprisonment seems to have become a blessing for these criminals. They should be dealt with something more than that.

Md Rajik Miah Department of English Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka

OPINION

Rickshaws and Roads

Derrick G. Farmer

I am a frequent visitor to Dhaka on business purpose, and have known the city for more than 12 years. I believe I voice the complaints of many when stating that the pandemonium and confusion caused by the proliferation of the rickshaws is fast becoming a real problem, requiring urgent remedial action.

Most of the time the traffic situation is not good in certain parts of the city, and especially when it rains, the situation becomes intolerable, for more rickshaws clog the roads.

Travelling in this densely-populated capital nowadays is a sheer waste of time, energy and money altogether, which I call a perennial problem for a developing country like Bangladesh. I believe it is about time that the government should do something about the matter — and the sooner it is done the better.

India has similar problems, and recently announced the abolition of unlicensed rickshaws in Calcutta, the last major Indian city to do so. The Calcutta City Corporation has drawn up a revolutionary plan to phase out the man-pulled rickshaws since November last and has simultaneously taken up a scheme to rehabilitate the rickshaw-pullers. News reports showed there were only 5,000 rickshaws licensed before the Calcutta police stopped issuing

permits in 1995.

However, no-one wishes to deprive the rickshaw-pullers of their livelihood, but their presence in such numbers here reveals the need for some control and also better bus transportation.

There are various options — that can be considered — as listed below:

1. Increasing licence charges, which may reduce the number of rickshaws, and introducing new licensing requirements.

2. Using funds generated from the licences to provide more buses.

3. Preventing further unlicensed rickshaws from coming on the roads.

4. Zoning areas in which the rickshaws may operate and having no-go areas, which are easily traversed on foot, or where bus is a possibility.

5. Another possibility would be to have rickshaws of different colours operating only on designated roads, or areas. On reaching the boundary, they would have to pass passengers to other operators.

Needless to say, it would be good to see some action on the declining rickshaw situation in Bangladesh, especially in its capital city.

The writer is Director of a Hong Kong based company, one of the major European garment exporters from Bangladesh.