

Speed up Electoral Reform

President Shahabuddin Ahmed has suggested formation of an all-party watchdog committee for each polling station to facilitate free and fair conduct of general elections. His suggestion definitely gives an improved option compared to the existing provision for polling agents. The Election Commission (EC) and other independent bodies looking for an effective and flawless election system might find merit in this. The president's suggestion apart, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) has also come up with a few recommendations for reform of the election laws. All these demand careful consideration. But any serious attempt at electoral reform must involve the big political parties of the country. Till now the ruling party and the opposition BNP have shown little interest in such a reform process. The reason is best known to them. The EC's attempt to involve them in the exercise has failed to elicit any prompt response.

Clearly the EC has made a timely move. A daunting task such as the electoral reform has to be taken in hand well in advance so that chances of any unforeseen setback or error can be avoided and everything gets ready before the next general election. We all know how the ID (identity) card project fell through last time. If the political parties fail to co-operate with the EC now, the preparation of ID cards for all eligible voters of the country will be delayed again. We will not be surprised if the political parties then blame the EC for not taking up the job on time. And we understand that the ID card will be an important factor in the whole process of electoral reform.

We repeat our demand that a national data base be developed not only for the sake of elections but also for a number of other practical reasons. Apart from easy identification of a person, it will store the basic as well as wide-ranging information about him or her. Imagine the advantage of such a centrally stored information repository. It can be used for all important purposes starting from employment to health care to criminal investigation. Of course, like all other facilities, this can as well be put to abuse by unscrupulous and indiscreet people. Personal confidentiality has to be strictly protected. Access to it against the wish of the person concerned can be granted only by a court order.

Eluding Power Plants

Foot-dragging has been reported on some important short to medium gestation power plant schemes in the private sector. This delayed state of affairs is utterly disappointing because in the first place the plans drawn up against the impending backdrop of an exigency precipitated in the power supply position by an unprecedented breakdown in March this year. Secondly, these were in response to a growing criticism among potential foreign investors that so long as we failed to set the erratic supply of power right they would be least interested in committing funds to industrial projects in Bangladesh. In fact, both the record low industrial production and the uninspiring flow of FDIs into the country could be largely put down to this inadequacy in our basic infrastructure.

The private sector power projects on a dithered course relate to four barge-mounted plants with a potential generation capacity of 400 MW. Originally due to be ready in October this year, they seem inexorably headed for non-commissioning the following summer when the demand will have soared exactly by that megawatt figure — 400.

As for the ground-level 300-450 MW Meghna ghat power plant with a longer gestation period of three years or so, it is very upsetting that even the technical appraisal remains incomplete and that the process of awarding contracts is being inordinately delayed.

We should at least have the four barge-mounted power plants ready before next summer. The Ashuganj-Bakhrabad gas re-linking for stable power generation has been a good step. Let this be followed up by commissioning the barge-mounted plants at an early date.

For this and more to happen we want the virtually non-starter power cell to be immediately functioning paving the way for an signing of agreements with foreign private companies, so that they are bound by contractual obligations to complete the projects within a specified time-frame.

Self-rule, Rickshaw-style

In misgoverning civic life we are touching a new low. This is both amusing and worrying. In addition to the unlicensed rickshaws we now have the self-licensed variety in a reportedly high number—50,000 according to some DCC officials.

Variegated rickshaw owners' and operators' associations or unions are issuing number plates to the non-mechanised three wheelers as a self-appointed authority in contravention of the Rickshaw By-laws, 1973. The trade unions are alleged to be charging a fee of Tk 250 to 300 for each act of illegal authorisation.

Even a union parishad for Sultanganj area has issued such licences in complete disregard for the Dhaka City Corporation, a bigger elected colleague of the former.

While cases of illegal registration were filed with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court and the latter sent these for investigation by the local police stations, some traffic policemen admitted that they were accepting the trade union authorisations as valid receive anyhow. They see no reason for stopping this practice so long as they do not any contrary instructions from their higher-ups.

This is a pity. If the DCC and DMP cannot coordinate on such a matter one wonders what grim prospect lies ahead of the metropolis. Do take this as another reminder for a city government in Dhaka.

Corruption and Bureaucracy

What is ironic is that although there are some honest individuals in many departments they have to live with the stigma of their departmental corruptions.

WHEN one talks of corruption, one has to understand what one means by it. Whether in its form it exists in the society whether the society feels the need to eradicate it, and if it does, then what measures can be adopted to eradicate it. Some of these issues will be addressed in this short article. To start with, how does one define corruption? Any willful deviation or violation of contractual obligations in a covenant to promote personal interests of the violating party can be treated as corruption. To state it more simply, if someone is appointed to a paid public position (or to a position of any other institution, semi-public or private) with contractual obligations to preserve and promote public interests (or the interests of the institution) but while enjoying that position of profit, instead of promoting public interests (or the interests of that institution), he/she uses his/her power and influence to promote his/her self-interests, then he/she is indulging in corruption by violating the terms of his/her contract. The same definition could be applied to the elected officials as well.

Existence of Corruption in Bangladesh Bureaucracy

In a recent round table discussion on Corruption in the Government Bureaucracy organised by Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), Dr. Khuliquzzaman, BUP chairman, presented some results of their country-wide public opinion survey on official corruption. The survey was conducted in April 1997 selecting a sample of 2197 individuals from 60 districts of Bangladesh. Among the respondents, 28 percent were from urban and 72 percent were from rural areas. These two percentages, by and large, represent the country's urban, rural population distribution respectively. From the point of view of sampling methodology, the investigators followed a questionnaire method and it looked like the sample was reasonably unbiased since the participants and the districts were selected randomly. There are some technical questions about the survey which should not bother us here. However, the findings of the survey were quite astounding. The government departments considered to be corrupt by percentages of respondents (given in parentheses) are shown as follows: police de-

partment (95 per cent), customs (91 per cent), income tax (90 per cent), Bangladesh Secretariat (82 per cent) and, quite surprisingly, judiciary (77 per cent). Since it leaves out other individual departments or ministries like health, education, cooperatives, industry, commerce and others, it would not be possible to develop a complete hierarchy of most corrupt to the least corrupt branches of the administration. But the most important ones have been pin-pointed by the respondents based perhaps on their own experiences of dealing with them. According to these percentages, police is the most corrupt, followed by customs, income tax and the government secretariat, and the percentages of people identifying the most corrupt ones are in the very high range, from 82-95 per cent. What is still more surprising is to notice that 83 percent of the respondents felt that corruption was a major obstacle to development and 62 percent thought that government officials were mainly responsible for all corruption and bribery in the country. These findings reveal some extent of widespread corruption in the country's administrative machinery and the people's honest perceptions about it. No matter how hard the officials and employees may try to hide and cover up their corrupt practices, ordinary people do get to know their real faces. What is ironic, however, is that although there are some honest individuals in many departments they have to live with the stigma of their departmental corruptions.

Implications of the Findings

Some implications of these findings are worth noting. First of all, if police department, which is the law enforcement agency of the government, is thoroughly corrupt, then no government can effectively control the law and order situation in the country. Lawlessness, terrorism, extortionism, robbing and raping cannot be brought under control because the police is corruptible. Black money, gun toters and musclemen will control the social order. This seems to be what is happening in Bangladesh these days as evidenced by the increasing number of terrorist activities, like killings, robberies, rapes and

toll collections. Police is not of much help to the innocent citizens. What follows from these is that the government of the day cannot ensure peace and security to the ordinary citizens which is supposed to be its first responsibility. Secondly, if police is corrupt, no police investigation would be reliable since money and muscle will influence their reports. That means, justice will be at jeopardy, law will not work properly and anarchy will prevail everywhere. Fear of terrorists and gun toters will control the life of the people. Society will be in the grip of the criminals. Will such a society be liveable? Will development mean anything in such a society?

Finally, corruption in customs, revenue and other departments dealing with trade, industry and other economic activities will have a crippling effect on the development process of the country. This needs some explaining. Consider the

trader finds it worthwhile to produce or import some goods in the expectation of some price which consumers would be willing to pay for those goods, and no deviation from it would be possible without hurting the interests of either the producer or the consumer, then any extortion from the producer or trader by custom or other officials would disturb this equilibrium. Then either the producer or the consumer or both will be forced to incur some losses. Therefore, with that extra payment to the corrupt officials, production or trade will not generate the position of maximum social benefit.

One may, of course, argue that if the government builds a high tariff wall and the economy is made completely autarkic, then producer can charge any price which the consumer will have to pay and the extortion by the corrupt officials will only mean some internal redistribution of income. Here consumers will lose, pro-

ducers may not, but the economy as a whole will be in the grip of complete inefficiency, and the income will be redistributed in favour of the corrupt officials, not in favour of the poor who need redistributions. What is far worse is the fact that because of high tariff and high extortions resulting in high domestic prices, an anti-export bias will be built into the price system so that export sector will be uncompetitive and will shrink gradually. The consequences of such a situation is well known to the policy makers and the victims who have lived through the decades of 1960s and 1970s. Such a policy is suicidal to the country especially in the context of a rapidly developing global free market. One of the ways of reducing corruption at the customs is to reduce tariffs and introduce computerised customs clearance system with computer link-up with the international markets for rapid price check-up. However, the bottom line of what has been said above is that extortions of the corrupt officials at customs or

at any other clearing points in the government administration hurt either the producer or the consumer and the society at large. One direct consequence of such extortions is that the economy gradually becomes uncompetitive, inefficient and growth stunted. None of these consequences can Bangladesh afford to indulge in now. One side point should be cleared up at this stage. Some people argue that when corruption has become so endemic in the society, why not legalise it at 10-15 per cent but make sure that the work is delivered. This author takes the view that this would mean a complete surrender to the illegality and immorality. Because some other countries (eg. Indonesia, one is told) are doing it, Bangladesh should do it also. Once it is approved at 10-15 per cent, then at another time demand from various quarters will come for raising it to 20, 30, 40 and 50 percents and so forth. There will be no end to this process. However, more important consideration here is the simple moral argument. The basic logic here is utterly wrong. It is like arguing that since someone has murdered, I should be a murderer too. They do not see the rottenness of this logic. If such a logic is accepted, then all vices can be justified and the society will degenerate into one of sharks. People who have guns and goons will rule the society and the income distribution will be in their favour. The objectives of faster economic growth, poverty alleviation and social justice will turn into some cliches. If one wants a civilised society, corruption will have to be combated on all fronts.

How to Combat Corruption?

The very first thing that is needed is an honest, clean and incorruptible political leadership. If the political leadership has these qualities, then and only then, can it take strong position against the corrupt officials and employees of its administration, otherwise they will follow what their masters are doing. The second step that is badly needed is to introduce decentralisation and devolution of the government administration. The former implies horizontal redistribution of power like making the judiciary, election commission, public service commission, central bank, and anti-corruption

bureau etc., completely autonomous while the latter implies that considerable degree of power, including taxing power, should be given to the local governments in the district, thana and union governments with accountability to the selected authority. Third step would be to make the heads of all these institutions accountable to a Parliamentary Hearing Body constituted with MPs from all elected parties and some highly respected and qualified members taken from outside. Any corruption charge raised and documented by the autonomous anti-corruption bureau against any official either in the administration or in the autonomous bodies or ministers or parliament members should be brought to this parliamentary body for accountability and followed up with appropriate measures of punishment or acquittal. Fourth step would be to tighten the laws by introducing appropriate punishments for any violation of the law. Fifth step would be to downsize the government administration so as to make it lean and efficient. Sixth step would be to introduce an award system for the good officers and removal system for the corrupt ones. There should not be any life-long tenure system for public servants. All civil service and cadre jobs should be on a contract basis for a period of 5 years renewable for another 5 years if the service record is excellent, terminable if it is otherwise, up to a total service period of 30 years. Seventh, one would recommend the Singaporean model of treating the corrupt officials which is that if an official is found corrupt in the eyes of law, then he/she forfeits his/her pension and is disqualified for any job in the private sector. Eighth step would be to revise the salary scale of officers and employees of the government and autonomous bodies upwards to give them a decent standard of living so that incentive to corruption is minimised. Finally,

there should be a campaign to socially boycott the corrupt people by refusing to accept their party invitations and other events. One also hears of complaints from various quarters that foreign businesses and donors bribe the officials for getting contracts and projects approved and hence corruption is partly imported from abroad. If it is true, then the government should not accept those contracts and projects. It should stay clear of them.

And Then They Were Two

Millions left their homes — Muslims for Pakistan and Hindus for India — with whatever they could carry. The exodus included all: rich and poor, landlord and the landless, employers and workers, the brutal and the compassionate.

Interests of the Indian people." Cripps's elaboration in the British parliament that "we could not accept the forcing of unwilling provinces into a united India" gave out that some kind of Pakistan was on the cards. Mountbatten in an interview told me that before leaving London, he felt that there was "no escape from Pakistan." He said that he had not even heard of Pakistan until the offer of Governor-Generalship was made to him.

After arrival in New Delhi on March 26, 1947, Mountbatten started with Mahatma Gandhi but left him alone after being told that the best way would be to hand over power to Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League — a proposal which even Jawaharlal Nehru said was "impracticable." Then Mountbatten concentrated on Nehru whom he had met before in Singapore.

In his own mind, Mountbatten was quite clear: one India if possible, Pakistan if necessary. To Gandhi, he confided that he preferred to have a Central Authority with the subjects of Defence, External Affairs, Communications and possibly Food. But before long Mountbatten realised that the Congress Party did not favour a solution with even a tinge of partition in it, while the League would not accept any ties, however loose, even with a weak Centre.

It was the Congress Working Committee which strengthened Mountbatten's hand by resolving on March 6, 1947 that if In-

dia was to be divided, then Punjab must be partitioned into Muslim majority and Hindu majority zones, "since the havoc caused by the Muslims was much greater there than in Calcutta or Bihar." That meant that the Congress would be willing to accept Pakistan if Punjab, and for that matter Bengal, were divided. In fact, Sardar Patel had said in a letter to a friend those days that if "the League insists on Pakistan," India's only alternative was to insist on "the division of Punjab and Bengal."

For Nehru, the Congress

no question of either a united Bengal or a united Punjab. He was quite clear that once the division of the country was accepted, the splitting of the two states would be inevitable. However, he was still hopeful that he might be able to persuade Jinnah to agree to a minimal centre by pointing out to him that partition would mean "a moth-eaten Pakistan." But he drew a blank. After his meeting with Jinnah, Mountbatten recorded: "I am afraid that I drove the old gentleman quite mad."

The prospect of the partition

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

resolution was a stratagem rather than an acceptance of the fact of partition. He felt it was time that Jinnah saw the logical consequences of his demand for Pakistan. However, for Gandhi, who did not attend the Congress Working Committee meeting, the resolution spelled out a "partition based on communal grounds and the two-nation theory." Therefore, when the move to have an independent undivided Bengal was raised, Gandhi extended his full support. For him, this was a potential move towards restoring the unity of India, already crumbling before his eyes.

For Mountbatten, there was

of Punjab and Bengal must indeed have shocked Jinnah and he argued against it. But a united India was more abhorrent. What he was aiming at was a national identity for Muslims; in that context even truncated Bengal and Punjab did not matter. To Nehru, the logic of splitting Bengal and Punjab was obvious though he still thought that the idea of Pakistan was not quite incompatible with an all-India Centre.

All appeared to agree that there was no alternative to Pakistan. And Mountbatten presented his partition plans (known as June 2 1947 scheme) to the leaders of political par-

ties. The boundaries of the two countries would be demarcated by a committee. The princely states could stay free or join either country. Power would be transferred first on the basis of dominion status and either government could withdraw from the Commonwealth if it wished. The date for the end of British rule was fixed as 15 August — about 10 months ahead of the time limit set by Attlee in his first statement (February 20, 1947) on the transfer of power.

Mountbatten's plan had the blessing of both Nehru and Patel. Both had seen it before it was formally presented. Nehru had recognised the partition was evil but felt helpless in the circumstances (According to Azad, there was "the influence of Lady Mountbatten" on Nehru). Patel was weary of the League's separatist attitude. Two days later (June 4), the Congress Working Committee met. Everybody felt depressed at the prospect of partition but, according to Acharya Kripalani, then the Congress president, "proposals were accepted without much discussion."

Azad, however, recorded that Gandhi spoke "in favour of partition" in the Working Committee. But this was challenged by Abdul Ghaffar Khan from the NWFP who told me on February 5, 1971 that "Gandhi was the one person who never agreed to partition. He just kept quiet when he saw that both Nehru and Patel were together on one side and were keen to be in the seat of power." Azad's con-

tention that Gandhi had become a convert to the idea of partition was also denied by Mountbatten himself. He told me that Gandhi never agreed to it.

Jinnah gave an assurance to the people in the new state of Pakistan (August 11): "You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that we are citizens and equal citizens of one state"; and Gandhi said he would lay down his life to prevent harm coming to Muslims.

But the people had been left with no faith in what they said. Millions left their homes — Muslims for Pakistan and Hindus for India — with whatever they could carry. The exodus included all: rich and poor, landlord and the landless, employers and workers, the brutal and the compassionate. The worst affected were the two Punjab where migration in either direction was wholesale. Comparatively fewer people left the two Bengals although population here was much more than in the undivided Punjab. The two Bengals also saw fewer killings; Gandhi had succeeded where the boundary force had failed in Punjab. But in the two Punjab, both Hindus and Muslims on their own effected a complete transfer of populations, a possibility which both the League and the Congress had rejected earlier as "preposterous."

It was an avalanche of migration; humanity was on the move on both sides. None expected it; none wanted it, but none could help it. The two countries blamed each other as they tried to grapple with this and other chaotic problems of partition after the first few heady days of independence.

Gruesome: Eighteen Corpses at Three Houses

(Continued from Friday)

A fistful of cheeda, was kept soaked in a bowl of water. There were stains of blood near the bowl. I asked two or three people who ventured near us. One of the maids present there said, "Not two. Actually there were three corpses, sir. Madam was pregnant."

From there I moved to Seraniabati. No dead body was there too. Servants and maids informed us that the corpses were taken away by the soldiers. All of that house were killed at the ground floor. We found pools of dark, clotied blood here and there. The sofas carried the marks of blood of the missing dead bodies. I thought the corpses must be lying at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue and went there to collect them in the diluting pre-dawn darkness. The duty officer there confirmed my hunch but he also told me that he could not tell whose corpses they were.

I approached the morgue in charge who told me that I could take the bodies if I could identify them. They did not have the list, he added. Breathing in the stench of the dead bodies dumped at the morgue, I started looking only for those bearing bullet wounds. I found eleven bodies including the one of Sheikh Moni his wife and Seraniabati and then put them on one of the two trucks I had brought along with me. We then returned to Road number 32. There in another truck, bodies of the other slain members of Bangabandhu's family — Begum Mujib, Sheikh Naser, Sheikh Kamal, Sheikh Jamal, Sultana Kamal, Rosy Jamal, Russell were huddled together. It was morning by then. Morning-walkers had hit the roads by then.

The three houses of Bangabandhu, Sheikh Moni and Seraniabati were then put under lock and key and the keys were deposited to authorities at the

station headquarters.

The soldiers I had earlier sent to the Banani graveyard had done a few graves by the time the two trucks reached burial ground. Only four were left to be done. Some of the soldiers were inactive. The bad shape of the corpses could be another reason. The truth is there was no discipline among the soldiers then. There were few groups. Some of them were passing remarks that did not quite behave the training of the army. The bodies were reeking and some of the soldiers were not prepared to offer a hand. I then told them that it was our duty to bury the dead and to egg them on, I got into the act. It helped as others took the cue from me. Eighteen graves were dug at the seventh row of the Banani graveyard.

First Begum Mujib's body was laid to the grave. I along with my driver and one NCO handed the corpse down. Before that, I made a inventory of the

things worn by the corpses like Begum Mujib's amulet and the ring, Sheikh Jamal's ring and submitted it to the station commander. Since we ran out of the stipulated time, the last four graves were not dug well. They were only two-foot deep. We had to make do with that willy-nilly.

At around eleven, well after we had returned home, Bangabandhu's body was taken into the tantonment in order to fly it to Tungipara, his birth place. Station Commander was not in his office at that time. Since I was exhausted, I told the duty officer at the garrison, Major Mohiuddin Ahmed to go to Tungipara with the corpse.

Quater Master Nur Mohammed was instructed to buy the funeral cloth. Ten yards of white cloth was bought from the CSD store. On Credit!

Major Mohiuddin left Dhaka for Tungipara with Bangabandhu's dead body. Later I heard it from him that fear

had driven many from Bangabandhu's Tungipara neighbourhood. Few days later came in front when they saw the helicopter carrying Sheikh Mujib's dead body descending. Only the ten or twelve soldiers who accompanied Major Mohiuddin and a distantly related uncle of Bangabandhu took part in the janaaza or the funeral prayer. A detergent bar, procured from the clergy or the imam of the nearby mosque, was used for the ritual cleansing of the mortal remains of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I was told.

At around 2:30 in the afternoon, the station commander informed me that he would like to pay a visit to the Banani graveyard and asked me to be there. When we met, he wanted to know who lay where. I handed him the list. He instructed to have a fence erected around each mound and left.

Quater Master Nur Mohammed was with me. I asked him to fetch some bamboo poles

so that we could stake them in around the graves. We duly fenced the graves but they were removed later. A sentry was posted at the main entrance of the graveyard. The round-the-clock vigil was there for about a month and half. Besides, burial and visit to the graveyard were banned sine die.

Two days after this, a non-Bengali behari youth came to the station headquarters for treatment. Col Faruk was also there at that time. The youth said that a shell landed at the Geneva Camp at Mohammadpur on August 15 leading to the injury of some children women and himself. I realised it was the result of the fiery delight the killed had indulged into on the success of their operation. The wife of Bangabandhu and his family. Col Faruk held a hasty discussion with one of the doctors to have the youth admitted in the Rehabilitation Institute and Hospital for the Disabled (RIHD).