

Summit Expectations

The atmosphere preceding the 3-nation business summit, all set to be held in Dhaka on November 23, is fast getting laden with expectations. The air of expectancy is about an institutionalised impetus being on the cards to be provided to tripartite economic cooperation involving India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in a creative, extended and complementary application of the SAARC Charter. If these three nations can steer clear of the interminably defective political cross-currents in their relationships, a model will have been set for sub-regional cooperation to freely and rewardingly commence across the South Asia region.

Bangladesh's floating of the idea at the Male SAARC summit and her eventual success in bringing together historically inimical India and Pakistan to be our guests at Dhaka in a refreshing bid to forge a cooperative swathe of trade and investment in South Asia do us proud no doubt; but our pride is only exceeded by the honour India and Pakistan are doing to themselves and to the cause of healthy regionalism by agreeing to participate in the event despite their prime ministers' pressing circumstances at home.

The summit objectives catalogued by our Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad are very convincing, but all of these would require a robust backing of shared political will to be achieved downstream. It can be assumed that a part of that political will is already in hand by virtue of their express willingness to work together for private sector — public sector networking aimed at institutionalised cooperation. But while this itself has to be durable beyond the domain of theories, there is a deeper need for separating politics from economics on an intra-regional basis. Bilateral hang-ups should no longer be allowed to derail the quest for economic cooperation as that will be grossly out of tune with the global trend for economic predominance over traditional political sensibilities. Everywhere political prejudices are receding into oblivion before the high tide of economic groupings for mutual benefits on a scale not known before. Should we be left behind.

Water Crisis

A leading vernacular daily went front page yesterday showing how people in an area gathered around a bursting WASA pipe. What an appalling juxtaposition of images! While city dwellers are throwing caution to the wind for water from anywhere out of sheer desperation an unconscionable volume of water is literally going down the drain everyday due to mismanagement.

There is no doubt that water crisis in today's cities is an inevitable result of unabated demographic growth. But look at how the people entrusted with the job of water supply and management have made a mess of it. Add to this the total lack of coordination between all relevant agencies. How can one put up with the fact that one reason of the depletion of water sources is the indiscriminate growth of the real estate sector with an attendant pilfered consumption of water by the apartment owners? How could the policymakers forget all these evils while putting their precious signature on those projects?

Sayedabad water treatment plant is no doubt a little source of optimism in a vast barren desert. But that oasis is likely to be of any assistance in quenching the thirst of this city of teeming millions only after the year 2002. That is still a long way off. What will happen to city dwellers until then? From what an WASA official revealed this fifty per cent shortage in the demand-supply reality will be the prevailing pattern. We are exasperated at the smug and 'nothing doing' reaction of the WASA officials. Lest they have mistaken inefficiency, non-deliverance and corruption as the only way of the world we would like to remind them that water is one of the basic and fundamental rights of the tax paying citizen as far urban amenities are concerned. There may not be any easy solution to water crisis but we have not witnessed any urgency in the authorities to bring about a semblance of order in the whole state of affairs either. What about curbing the systems loss which according to the WASA officials themselves is presently going at a mindboggling high rate? Has there been any measure in this regard?

Fundamentalist Eruption

After Algeria, Egypt now. Fundamentalism is showing its dirty fangs. It is a shame that the harrowing butchery in which 69 foreign tourists were killed on Monday in the Pharaonic city of Luxor, was the work of fanatics calling themselves Muslims or that Islamic fundamentalism has taken that horribly bloody toll — for Islam, as we understand it, is based on the elevated concepts of peace, tolerance and harmony. The quarters responsible for this weird massacre in the 4000 year old temple of Queen Hatshepsut cannot be Muslims.

The point of concern is these grounds are those given over by the forces of secularism and progress, democracy and justice in an appealing attempt to show themselves as not being irreligious.

There has lately been a kind of Islamic resurgence in fiercely secularist Turkey — a resurgence of religion in politics that is. But things are not likely to be on a collision course there. In Algeria government and the urban elite are finding it hard to cope with fundamentalist violence as a large section of the plebeian masses do not reject the violent Islamist course. There was this same tension in Egypt for years but never expressed in Monday's bloody terms. How will they contain these eruptions?

One standard answer is by good benign effective governance. For fanaticism feeds on dissatisfaction over unacceptable material condition. Two — and this is important — this can be effectively fought culturally. In the land of the Pharaohs they have a tremendous scope for that.

And both these apply so very aptly to our conditions.

Why Not Involve Political Parties in UP Elections?

As long as the current system of electioneering remains at the UP level, chances of holding 'free, fair and peaceful' elections would remain a utopian dream.

THE country's Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) appears to be ready to hold the upcoming Union Parishad (UP) elections in a free, fair and peaceful atmosphere. Reports suggest that he has not only appealed to the political parties to extend their cooperation for this purpose, he has also warned the potential 'trouble-makers, law-breakers and terrorists' of 'dire consequences' in case they attempt to spoil the show.

According to the statements made by him on Sunday last, the trouble-makers will be dealt with severely — no matter what party they belong to. Similarly, numerous reports everyday suggest that the government is equally ready to ensure 'free, fair and peaceful' elections. Under such a concerted effort — where neither the government nor the Election Commission would allow any deviations from 'free, fair and peaceful' elections — the elections should take place in a 'free, fair and peaceful' manner.

Unfortunately, if the records of previous UP elections are any guide, it can be safely stated that chances are very high that the actual happenings in the upcoming elections would be no different from previous ones. All of those elections had been marked by hundreds and thousands of reported and unre-

ported cases of violence, rigging, result manipulations, and other kinds of unfair and corrupt practices. In most cases, the law-breakers and trouble-makers went scot-free — although never the Election Commission or the power-that-be forgot to warn 'stern measures' against them.

If that's the record, what happened in the meantime to expect that this time around things would be diametrically different? That the candidates will behave according to the prescribed rules? That they will limit their election expenses in accordance with EC rules? That powers of money, muscles, and connections will not have a free hand? That the government officials — who would be responsible for managing the show — would be neutral? That the police and the other security forces — that will be responsible for maintaining order — will not bend the rules in favour of those who can pay them or protect them?

The fact that the Election Commission as well as the government have to come up with similar kinds of statements as before — that they won't allow any unfair means — itself suggests that holding UP elections

in a 'free, fair and peaceful manner' is not an easy job. The fact that the EC has been consistently warning 'trouble-makers, terrorists and law-breakers' — irrespective of political affiliations — of dire consequences, itself indicates that the political parties are squarely responsible for most of the troubles on the way of holding 'free, fair and peaceful elections' in the country.

Why the political parties cannot participate actively in the UP elections? Is there any constitutional bar on the way? How do you promote political party-led democratic culture in the country without allowing active involvement of political parties at the grassroots level? Moreover, if the parliamentary elections cannot be held under the EC in a 'free, fair and peaceful manner', what are the rea-

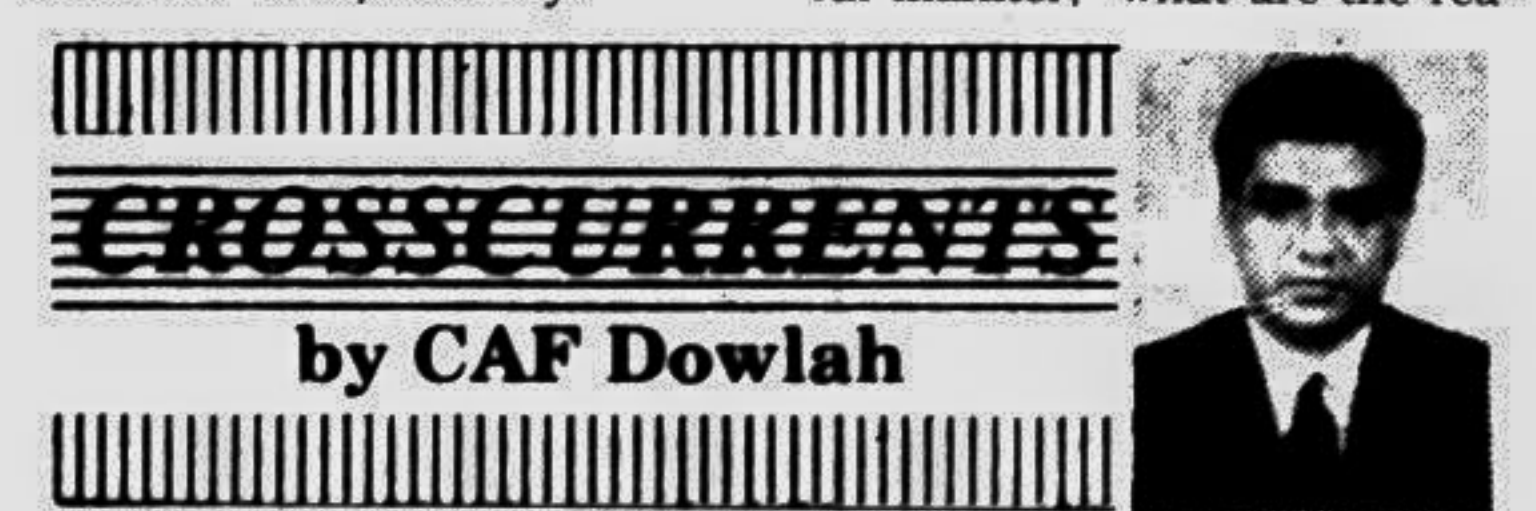
The point is, as long as the current system of electioneering remains at the UP level, chances of holding 'free, fair and peaceful' elections would remain a utopian dream. The UP elections are not only mere elections — these are occasions for renewals of social and family relations and connections, these are occasions of upholding traditional bonds, orchestrating political polarisations, and demonstrating family-progeny dominations. These are almost always bitterly fought — in many cases these are fought with blood as well as sweat, with money as well as power, and with rising guts as well as glory.

Anybody having any practical idea about these elections would know how helpless the administration could be in dealing with such fiercely fought elections? The administration, under the present system of governance, routinely fails to confront law-breakers, terrorists and trouble-makers, who are, in most cases, sheltered by powerful political forces. Under the present socio-political-administrative set-up, it is simply impossible for the administration to be colour-blind. How can it do justice to

its commitment to neutrality in such a situation? Where is the civic society or the legal framework to protect the civil servants from the caprices of the power-be? How can the EC guarantee that the administration will function neutrally? What can it do if they don't? More importantly, what did it do when they didn't in the past?

It is, therefore, wrong not to allow the political parties to sponsor candidates at the UP level. There is no constitutional bar to it. Moreover, in many democratic countries, including in neighboring India, such local elections are routinely held under political party sponsorship. There are certain advantages associated with it. It helps the people — at grassroots level — to know what party stands for what kind of people, what party stands for what kind of programmes, and above all, it provides the people with an organized opposition at grassroots level to keep an ever-vigilant eye on the performance of the winning candidate.

Moreover, the administration will be less able to manoeuvre election processes or outcomes, if major candidates are associated with major political parties. Under the current system the people are deprived of all of the above, and many others that are not mentioned here.



by CAF Dowlah

What have the nation done lately to tame down the shrew — the political parties? If the political parties are the at the roots of all evils — what has the EC done lately to make them respectful to its rules? Reportedly, the EC has asked them to keep the UP elections out of their partisan politics. Isn't it illogical to ask for their cooperation, without allowing their involvement in the UP elections?

sons to believe that the UP elections would be so under its supervision? Are the Union Parishads — that represent one of the best democratic traditions of the country — so unimportant that they can be literally administered by bureaucracy, and their elections can be safely entrusted with the EC that is almost always tough on framing rules, but weak on their enforcement?

ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Reforms Needed for Reliability and Effectiveness

by Mohammad Abdul Jalil

Only legal measures are not sufficient for democratisation of the state and the society. The reality of life is that there is no alternative to an organised role of the people and an enhancement of their consciousness for safeguarding democratic rights and their proper exercise.

end of Ayub Khan's rule, the absolute victory of Awami League in the 1970 election and the emergence of Bangladesh through the great liberation struggle created opportunities for giving an institutional shape to democracy and electoral system. The people's representatives elected to the constituent Assembly of '72 composed the Constitution of Bangladesh.

The first general election of independent Bangladesh was held in 1973 on the basis of that Constitution and the People's Representation Ordinance of 1972. The trend of military dictatorship was re-introduced in Bangladesh through the brutal killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15th August, 1975. The constitution and the fundamental rights were trampled under feet. Following in the steps of General Ayub Khan, the military ruler Ziaur Rahman first went for conducting referendum, and then for organising a political party called BNP by being in power and through using the state apparatus and the army intelligence service and thus putting on the garb of civil rule on the military rule through holding a farcical election. The same thing happened during the rule of the condemned dictator General Ershad.

Needless to say, the people of Bangladesh never accepted this without protest. The experience that election can never be free and neutral under any dictator led to the emergence of the two demands of the popular uprising of nineteen ninety. "I will cast my own vote and cast in favour of whoever I like", and "elections to the Parliament should be held under non-party, neutral, interim government." A steel-firm unity of the whole nation developed in the anti-autocracy democratic movement.

As there was a consensus regarding this demand General Ershad was compelled to surrender power to Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and general election was held under the interim government of Justice

Shahabuddin. The democratic forces accepted the results of the hitherto free and fair general election of 1991. BNP led by Begum Khaleda Zia formed government. Expectations were naturally created among the countrymen that Khaleda Zia's government, elected in the backdrop of the people's uprising, would give an institutional shape to democracy and would behave most democratically to safeguard the reliability of the election. But, before long it was found that BNP had little respect for democracy and felt that election could not be free and neutral under the 'elected autocracy' named BNP. The conducts of the rulers at the Mirpur and Magura by-elections shocked the countrymen.

Ignoble events of obstructing people from exercising rights of franchise by abusing state apparatus in the manner kindred to those practised by the military dictators of the past, application of electoral laws and manufacturing election results according to one's liking made the future of democracy in Bangladesh uncertain. It was in this very perspective that the present PM, the then leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina raised the demand of holding general elections under the supervision of a non-party, neutral, caretaker government with the objective of ensuring people's rights to vote and food. The voteless, farcical election conducted by the BNP government on 15 February, 1996 in total disregard of the people's demand added only smear to the history of our nation. Once again there was a popular uprising in the country under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina in support of the demand for holding general elections under a non-party, neutral caretaker government. There was the fall of Khaleda Zia's government and the demand for caretaker government achieved constitutional support.

The experiences I would like to precisely press on the basis of the above discussion are that

1) Military rule including different levels of autocratic rule was the main impediment in the path of democracy and free, fair and trustworthy election;

2) Electoral system could not take institutional shape and get consolidated because the continuity of the democratic system was interrupted and elections were not held at definite intervals on the basis of universal adult franchise;

3) The practice of democracy and development of democratic political culture suffered due to autocratic rule;

4) A mass psychology has developed due to the past activities, for instance of BNP in the recent past that free and neutral election cannot take place under party rule as it cannot take place under military or autocratic rule; and

5) Reform in the electoral laws is a must in order to make the whole electoral system more reliable, effective and up-to-date.

Bangladesh Awami League has its own viewpoint for reforming electoral laws, for making them more effective and up-to-date. I would consider the proposals of FEMA in that light and place those for general judgement.

The proposals brought about by FEMA require to be discussed more deeply and widely on the national level. It is better not to finalize them in one workshop. They can be deemed rather as inception of a discussion, and the final proposals or recommendations formulated later on may be submitted to the Law Commission.

2) The questions of reforming the basic character of the constitution or structural change of the parliamentary system need to be examined carefully. Separate recommendations may be formulated in this regard after discussion with the political parties, people's representatives, constitutional experts and leading intellectuals.

3) Methods of nomination for the Election Commission, its tenure, power and jurisdiction etc. also require more minute

discussion. Increasing or decreasing the power of the Supreme Judicial Council will come contextually.

4) Developing national consensus on fundamental matters will surely help develop democracy, but the idea of the rule of majority in the developing democratic system should not be undermined in the name of consensus.

5) I am at one with the idea that a more effective legal system has to be innovated for checking the use of black money, tendencies towards use of force and muscle power in election, casting of false votes, and for maintaining security before and after election.

6) A code of electoral conduct can be formulated on the basis of consensus. This code can be turned into legal compulsion and any violation of it considered legally punishable offence. Necessary laws and rules are to be formulated for this.

7) The scheme for distributing identity cards should be implemented in full and soon. So far I know, only one-third of the total number of voters were given identity cards upto January, 1996. It needs to be completed before the next general election.

8) Wherever one voter may have registered his name, arrangements should be there so that he may exercise his right to vote in the constituency of his choice.

9) It does not make any sense to continue maintaining the traditional mode of formulating lists of voters, and their renewal and scrutiny in this age of information technology. Use of computer technology for preparing list of voters is very logical and urgent. Detection of false voters will become much easy with the use of computer technology.

10) At present any one can be a candidate in the election without being registered as a voter. This should be stopped and no body should be allowed to be a candidate if he is not registered as a voter.

11) Citizens of Bangladesh

residing abroad will have to be registered as voters. They will have to be provided the scope of casting votes by setting up polling centres at Bangladesh embassies or under any special arrangement.

12) The slum dwellers and other floating population also will have to be enlisted as voters and given the scope of exercising their fundamental right of franchise.

13) Existing principles and laws of determining the borders of electoral constituencies are to be made more realistic, democratic and consistent.

14) Our opinion is that all sorts of defaulters of credit (loan) are to be declared unfit for candidature in elections.

15) There should be reservation of seats for women for two more terms. The political parties and civil society will have to take an advanced role for creating increased scopes of women's participation in all fields of life including the Parliament, administration, local government.

16) The present trend of influencing the voters through use of black-money and wealth must be stopped. The present ceiling of Tk 3 lakhs as a candidate's election expenses is no more tenable. In this regard, practical measures should be taken for 1) fixation of the ceiling of a candidate's expenses in proportion to the total number of voters, 2) submission of returns and their scrutiny and 3) transparency about the sources of income of the political parties.

17) A real reflection of public opinion in a referendum is to be ensured if one such has to be organised at any time to fulfil the constitutional compulsions.

18) The election tribunals are to be made more effective, and disposal of cases and appeals also more speedy.

But, only legal measures are not sufficient for democratisation of the state and the society. The reality of life is that there is no alternative to an organised role of the people and an enhancement of their consciousness for safeguarding democratic rights and their proper exercise. For this, there will have to be a spread of education, improvement of the standard of living and a developed and exploitation free civil society.

The writer is a Presidium Member of Bangladesh Awami League.

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.

Waste not, want not

Sir, We indeed are a wasteful nation compared to our meagre resources. That is why we are having shortage of everything; for the proverb goes, waste not want not (this want stands for deficiency). If we did not waste so much of our electricity in running air-conditioners in almost every office, increasing number of shops and every household of the rich people (they even use blankets in summer — what a waste!), then we would not have had so much scarcity of it in places of necessity — like our mills, factories cold storage, operation theatres and medical scanning centres etc.

The government should ban the use of A/C for luxury purpose since it is unable to supply enough electricity and A/C consumes a lot of electricity. It should be allowed only after enough electricity is generated to meet the whole demand of necessity and luxury. Not before that.

Many people do not even bother to turn off the tap, they just let the water run even when they are not using it! Sounds strange, but it is true. So now we are over-drawing our ground water. Maybe that is

leading to arsenic poisoning as the ground water is decreasing in quantity and getting concentrated.

Our only mineral, natural gas, is also wasted without any remorse or thought only because it has no metre. So nobody has to pay from his pocket what he wastes. Metres must be put at all gas outlets before we run out of this blessing also, because of our wasteful nature.

Our generation, as we see, has this wasteful and damn care attitude even for things that can finish up if not carefully used. But, we must teach our children, the coming generation, not to be wasteful, for at their time all the resources will be meagre still. Because our development is hardly keeping pace with times and the population growth.

Dr Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka

Problems and rhetorics

Sir, Problems grip Bangladesh. Problems, problems everywhere, but no solution anywhere. Whoever comes to power and whoever goes out of

power it does not matter; our problems always remain stationary for decades together.

The present Awami League government accuses all the past governments, except that of its own, of 1971-1975 of manifold corruption, irregularities, negligence of public duties, excesses and abuses of power, wastage and defalcation of public money. To some Awami Leaguers, the present government is the best of all — most efficient, dutiful and corruption-free.

Whether it is Awami League, JP or BNP, the sufferings of the people do not alleviate, their poor standard of living does not improve and the fate of our millions does not change. Only a handful of our leaders, whether in the government or in the opposition, and a section of government officers and employees continue to commit and repeat past errors, irregularities and lapses unabated whimsically and they enjoy the fruits of life selfishly without any consideration and sympathy for the sufferings and economic hardships of the people.

O H Kabir
Dhaka

Experience and service

Sir, It is a common practice in the service sector to demand that one should have prior experience to get a job. Almost all the circulars for job call for experienced candidates which imply that there is hardly any job for the freshers. Of course, experience is a must for an offi-

cer to run offices efficiently. A commercial organisation cannot run its business without experienced people and a technical organisation needs expert hands.

It is not, however, a prime factor for all kinds of jobs. If it is so, what will happen to the freshers? Freshers are intelligent enough to grasp ideas. They can be trained easily to let them undertake any job. NGOs, semi-government organisations and commercial enterprises can recruit fresh graduates and give them special training for serving particular purposes. Otherwise the unemployment problem will become too difficult to deal with. The number of educated unemployed people/young has already reached eighty lakh. If we allow this burden to increase, the effect will be too much to bear.

It is not unknown that our education is not job-oriented. It is far from pragmatic. This is an age of computer, but our educational institutions are not producing students with computer knowledge. As a result, fresh students find it difficult to manage jobs in the foreign and commercial organisations. Some voluntary organisations, NGOs and the government may establish some institutes to impart training to the fresh graduates on computer and other technical affairs at a low cost.

This kind of practice is in vogue in developed countries. The scope for government is limited in the country. So, all other organisations are requested to think of the real sit-

uation of the country and recruit fresh graduates to help lessen the burden of unemployment.

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Speed breaker or backbone breaker?

Sir, At places a speed breaker is needed to dampen traffic speed or to alert drivers (new to an area) about the potential road hazards (dilapidated bridge, a level crossing or a cross road/blind corners etc). Any school of tiny tots, near a thoroughfare, may also request Traffic Police Department to install a speed breaker side by side a traffic sign to alert motorists about crossings of unattended children.

In all the cases, the idea of installing a speed breaker is to limit vehicle speed within control. But in no way, a speed breaker should be a car breaker or passengers' backbone breaker. It should not be installed at any place of public road, by anybody with a flimsy excuse.

Moreover any authority installing a speed breaker must make it conspicuous by the required paint markings. In some places on highways and at many places of Zia International Airport, I have noticed speed breakers are anomalously high and without any caution-

ary paint markings. Especially at night, it becomes difficult (for a new visitor) to spot these speed breakers from the normal head light distance.

Besides, whatever slow may be the speed of a car, those speed breakers touch the body of a car owing to low wheel base, shock absorber and car's passenger load condition. I feel this is an unethical way of installing a speed breaker of extra height than required. Because, at night, a driver (new to the area) may make a crash landing after a take off from such speed breakers. Recently, two speed breakers of low trough and crest have been installed at the Staff Road end Railway Level Crossing on the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway (Dhaka Cantt Section).

These speed breakers are not so high and single one, but 4 to 5 trough and crests are laid abreast. These are similar to those used in Saudi Arabia.

This dampens the speed of vehicles to desirable and controllable limit in a better way. These are also low enough not to damage any car while dampening the higher speed. As an early warning if one such trough placed about 40 feet ahead of such speed damper, then it will certainly make it more effective as well safer for all motorists. I would like to bring this aspect to the notice of Traffic Police Department, City Corporations, Municipalities, CAAB and Roads and Highways Department.

A R Choudhury
Uttara, Dhaka