

An Untenable Position

THE Election Commission has decided to hold elections to Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi city corporations in the first week of December, 1999. The specific poll schedule is likely to be announced anytime now. As for Dhaka City Corporation, a case being pending with the High Court on delimitation of certain wards of the metropolis, election to the DCC would have to wait. But in any case, as the law demands, elections to all the four city corporations will have to be over by December 27.

Elections to the 463 upazillas, which are regarded as the focal-point of an off-discussed decentralised local self-government system, are due by December 28 as per the relevant law.

The opposition's position has remained inflexibly dismissive about this forthcoming electoral process. They have been consistently rejecting the Election Commission's invitation to attend meetings called to discuss election schedules with their inputs solicited in finalising the same. While they are not attending any CEC-convened meeting they have made it clear on the other hand that if the election schedules were announced 'unilaterally' they would be left with no choice but to boycott and resist the polls. There are constitutionally binding deadlines for these elections and if these have to be held on time then the schedules do need to be announced accordingly, what with the opposition not attending the CEC meetings to finalise the timetable.

The opposition could say that all of these things followed from their basic decision to boycott "all elections" under the present CEC, Abu Hena. They have cried hoarse demanding Abu Hena's resignation, almost going back to his conduct of 1996 elections otherwise regarded as free and fair by independent observers. Subsequently, it has been alleged that he failed to 'neutrally conduct' most of the 21 by-elections held so far. Our point is simply this: since none from the opposition has gone to any constitutional authority with evidence in hand to prove their allegations against the CEC, their non-participation in poll-related discussions might well be construed as an attempt to derail the electoral process. Yes, the opposition should, by all means, demand safeguards for a proper conduct of the elections but they cannot keep from the process the electorate, to the last man, wants them to participate in.

Marauding Mourners

THE heinous act of hooliganism staged in and around Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on Monday had a familiar ring about it. More often than not, we have seen similar mourning processions turn violent and go on a marauding course, damaging public and private property, not to speak of the injuries inflicted on innocent people. In the death of Monir Hossain on Tuesday last, allegedly caused by professional negligence of the on-duty doctor, his fellow students of Dhaka University certainly had reasons to be bereaved and infuriated about. However, the way they gave vent to their emotions is sheer vandalism which certainly does not behove the students of such an educational institution of high esteem as Dhaka University. We condemn their irrational and irresponsible behaviour.

Surely, they could have approached their vice-chancellor to get an investigation initiated into allegations of callous indifference to an emergency patient. Also, the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC), the highest regulatory body in the country, could have been contacted. True, the Council does not quite have an effective record in this regard, most such allegations of malpractice having fallen by the wayside for 'want of evidence.' Nevertheless, that would have been the reasonable step for the students to take under the circumstances. Unfortunately, the mourners, out of tune with the solemn sentiments for the dead, did just the opposite going berserk to ventilate their anger and frustration.

Having said that, we cannot help notice a discernible influence on their behaviour of the troubled time the citizenry as a whole is going through at present. With most of our institutions failing to cater to public interest, the very fabric of respect for them is alarmingly on the wane. What we are seeking to draw the attention of the social think-tank to is the fact that the very concept of institution is gradually falling apart. It is not a good sign for the civil society. Maybe, it is time we went beyond treating these outbursts as stray incidents and tried to fathom their social implications so that these can be rolled back.

Curse of Power Failure

FREQUENT interruptions in the supply of electricity to industries in and around Dhaka city have terribly upset the owners of industrial units. The situation has become insufferable due to several power dislocations in a single day.

It transpires from the DESA version that PDB, the supplier of power to DESA, has been generating less electricity than required and asking DESA to make do with the short supply. The DESA, on its part, is not sympathetic to the industrialists' request to give priority to the mills and factories in matters of giving them relief from loadshedding. A lot many owners of small factories in the industrial estates have expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration to The Daily Star staffer over the highly erratic power supply. They rightly felt that this led not only to damage of the plants and machinery but also an enormous drain on the raw materials imported at a huge cost to the foreign exchange reserve. The report cited examples where the owners either shut down their factories or sold them out. Apart from the maladies of job loss and fall in the output, the owners of these industries are thrown into an uncertain future as many of them are likely to turn into bank defaulters for no fault of their own.

For the last three years we have heard a lot about failure of the previous government in terms of power generation and management of power distribution in the country. It is high time the criticism was replaced by performance.

IF there were a nuclear Doomsday Clock for India and Pakistan, we would have to advance its hands by two minutes after the Pakistan coup.

The clock has registered many nasty advances since 1974, especially in 1998. Kargil took it forward by two minutes with India and Pakistan exchanging veiled nuclear threats 13 times. We are now just two to three minutes before midnight.

With the coup, a crucial assumption about the low likelihood of an India-Pakistan nuclear exchange has collapsed—namely the integrity and rationality of ruling establishments. Generals who can plot against one another (as ISI chief Khwaja Ziauddin did) and overthrow elected governments, can also provoke, panic, or pull the nuclear trigger.

This should induce sobriety in Indian responses. Instead, Indian policy-makers and -shapers have gloated, indulged in self-congratulation, and ridiculed Pakistan and its people. Beneath their declared willingness to deal with all regimes in Pakistan, whether civilian or military, lurk many calculations. The main calculation is how to use Pakistan's crisis to court Washington by invoking "cross-border terrorism".

Our Foreign Office was wrong to pooh-pooh Pakistan's troop withdrawal announcement and reject an "unconditional" dialogue. Today, tension defusion is all-important. Gen Musharraf's intentions do not matter.

Any pullback is unreservedly welcome and in India's interest. New Delhi would have won the Pakistani people's goodwill by making a positive response. Instead, under the Islamophobe BJP, it has acted pety.

Some of our Pakistan-baiting analysts have argued that military rule is no big deal; it is Pakistan's "natural" state. The army was merely guarding the Two-Nation Theory.

This analysis ignores the Pakistan's—wobbling, and indecisive, yet definite—steps towards democratisation during the past decade. It portrays mis-governance as fundamental failure of democracy. Rather than analyse the crisis' roots in leadership failure, it declares Pakistan itself unviable.

This view assumes that a state founded on religion must remain so forever. This is belied by history. Twenty years after the Islamic Revolution, Iran is transiting towards pluralist, liberal democracy.

A premise beneath Pakistan's "unviability" is that Islam and democracy are incompatible. This is communal non-

Military Coup in Pakistan

Why Indians Should Not Gloat

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

We must remember — and Pakistan is an extreme-case reminder — that democracy is not about elections alone. It also involves fundamental liberties, legal entitlements, robust institutions, free debate, unshackled media, and accountability. When these are weakened, democracy can erode, even collapse.

Secular democracy is not about politicising one particular religion, but about separating religion from politics. If Turkey or Bangladesh can sustain democracy, so can Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the army did not intervene to defend the Two-Nation Theory. Mr Sharif tampered with its line of command. Resentment surfaced during Kargil. His decision to withdraw the Mujahideen sharpened tensions. His more recent meetings with some Corps Commanders precipitated the final act: mid-air dismissal of Gen Musharraf, who struck back.

Mr Sharif's misgovernance was monumental. His Cabinet hardly met. The National Assembly did not pass a single legislation under his rule. Corruption and crony capitalism reached new heights. The army had to collect electricity and water bills.

The coup is a terrible setback for the Pakistani people. We must solidarise with them. They have lost democratic rights, the Constitution stands suspended, and the military is

back interfering in public life. Pakistan seethes with severe economic inequalities, ethnic tensions and rising fundamentalism.

Both the PPP and Muslim League have been tried twice, and found wanting. There is no alternative on the horizon.

This crisis comes in conjunction with the swearing in of a hardline government in India, and a global setback to nuclear disarmament. Mr Vajpayee belongs to a viscerally anti-Pakistan political current which believes in Akhand Bharat.

Such currents have fomented exclusivist nationalism, militarism and jingoism in both countries. These, in turn, promote mutual hostility. This vicious cycle must be broken. The BJP-led government is least equipped—and willing—to do so.

After the nuclear watershed, India-Pakistan relations have decisively changed. Two months ago, India ignited a new arms race with its "Draft Nuclear Doctrine", which calls for a huge, open-ended, arsenal. Pakistan will try to match this. This will further stoke mili-

tarism.

The U.S. Senate's rejection of the CTBT is a big setback. Despite limitations, the CTBT would have created conditions conducive to nuclear restraint. Without restraint, India and Pakistan will persist with nuclear preparations.

The CTBT failure signifies a larger reverse under the US Republican right. The whole global agenda of nuclear arms reduction is liable to suffer. This will strengthen hardliners everywhere.

All this underscores the perils of India's myopic response to Gen Musharraf's dialogue offer. Pakistan is bursting with tension. It is in India's own long-term interest that it does not disintegrate into a Nuclear Somalia.

Making a dialogue conditional upon withdrawal of "cross-border terrorism" is a retreat from the Lahore process and India's post-Kargil pledges. Questioning Pakistan's intentions leaves New Delhi vulnerable to the charge that its own intentions are not honourable.

Our policy-makers are today repeating the grave error they

committed in the 1980s by refusing nuclear talks with Pakistan, branding all its seven different proposals "insincere". Their calculation is devious. Some of them see in the coup an opportunity to trap Washington in its rhetoric of democracy and raise the "cross-border terrorism" pitch. New Delhi is looking at Pakistan through the prism of Indo-U.S. relations, thanks to its deplorable agenda of establishing an exclusive relationship with Washington.

This diverts attention from the stresses on Indian democracy. Institutional erosion, corruption in public life, and growing elitism have made our democracy vulnerable. Its health is far better than Pakistan's, but cannot be taken for granted. It has to be nurtured.

We should not be smug. The main reason the Indian military has not meddled with civilian authority is not that this society is inherently anti-militarist, but that our Establishment understood long ago that in a plural, diverse society, you cannot sustain any institution unless you take the bulk of society with you.

Today, our politicians don't do this. Their failure should worry us.

We must remember — and Pakistan is an extreme-case reminder — that democracy is not about elections alone. It also involves fundamental liberties, legal entitlements, robust institutions, free debate, unshackled media, and accountability. When these are weakened, democracy can erode, even collapse.

Winning the Vainglorious Seat in the Club of the Rich and Powerful

by Abdul Hannan

Bangladesh to be effective in the Security Council must follow a truly independent and robust foreign policy, its small development profile notwithstanding. If the reaction of Bangladesh to some recent international events is any indication, its foreign policy is weak, hesitant and not sufficiently forthright and categorical.

WE are happy at the recent election of Bangladesh as a non-permanent member of the Security Council. It consists of 15 members including five permanent members — United States, Britain, France, Russia, China — and 10 non-permanent members elected for a two-year term based on regional representations from Europe, East Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Bangladesh was earlier endorsed as a consensus choice by the Asian group for the vacant Asian seat in the Security Council after Japan and Cambodia withdrew in favour of Bangladesh.

By announcing the election of Bangladesh, the General Assembly gave its approval which was formally after the decision of the regional group. Only when the regional groups fail to agree on a single consensus candidate for a particular post, election takes place in the General Assembly by secret ballot to decide the winner among the contesting candidates. Bangladesh won over Japan in the voting held in the General Assembly for the Asian seat in Security Council in 1979. It lost the contest with Malaysia in 1988. No such voting took place this time in the General Assembly as Bangladesh was the consensus nominee of the Asian group for the vacancy.

The unanimous choice of Bangladesh by the Asian group for the vacant Asian seat in the Security Council undoubtedly was a success of Bangladesh diplomacy, more precisely of the effective performance and able and persuasive negotiating skill of the diplomats posted in our permanent UN mission in New York, who interact on a daily basis with the international community represented by 188 member states in the UN committee meetings.

It is an irony that all governments, quasi military or democratic, over the years, have gloated over the success as an indication of trust and confidence of the international community in their governments and have attempted to reap the most of political dividends out of it. But needless to say that the image of a country, in the ultimate analysis, is de-

termined by the course of its domestic and foreign policy performance and not by rhetoric. If the political leaders promote democracy, good governance, accountability, rule of law, social justice and human dignity and wipe out corruption, attend to environmental concerns and pursue a forthright and principled foreign policy, they will only strengthen and support the hands of our diplomats to enhance the image of the country.

How effective can Bangladesh be, winning a seat in the rich and powerful club whose image and reputation, prestige and honour has been tarnished and sullied by its inaction, indecision, paralysis of political will, and lack of ethics and transparency? The pledge in the UN charter 'we the peoples determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war' has not been fulfilled. The Security Council entrusted to ensure international peace and security has failed to prevent more than 160 wars and failed to save more than 20 million lives. Some aggressions and misbehaviour in the Council's book are much worse than others. The intervention by the Security Council has often been selective and of double standards.

The Security Council dithered and prevaricated to endorse military intervention to stop Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing, atrocity and genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo. It stood by while one million people were killed in ethnic violence and massacres in Rwanda. It failed to prevent the death of two million people in the Cambodian killing fields. It failed to save the lives of about three million Bengalees killed by brutal atrocities of Pakistan

army in 1971. It, however, intervened in East Timor to facilitate its independence from Indonesia, but it remains a mute spectator to Russia's ruthless and savage attack on Chechnya. It has remained indifferent to enforcing a UN resolution for a plebiscite in Kashmir to allow the Kashmiris exercise their right of self-determination and is impervious to the continuing terror and repression let loose in Kashmir.

While there was languid response to Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran, the Security Council sent a multinational force to vacate Iraqi aggression in Kuwait. The Security Council vetoed a majority resolution in 1982 calling upon Britain to pull out from Falklands island under its occupation and claimed by Argentina as it is situated at its backyard.

The imposition of arms embargo against all states of former Yugoslavia by the Security Council was discriminatory as it gave heavily armed Serbs an overwhelming advantage over the Bosnian Muslims and the Kosovar Albanian majority. The continuing sanction and oil embargo on Iraq has caused untold humanitarian distress and sufferings to the Iraqi people on account of shortage of food and medicine. The Security Council turned a deaf ear to demands by former President Mandela and the Nigerian opposition for oil embargo against Nigeria for flagrant human rights abuses by the former Nigerian military ruler Sani Abacha. The litany of dashed hopes and failed promises by the Security Council is large. The Security Council today has lost much of its relevance.

The Security Council was

crafted to pre-empt potential conflict situation and contain wars through preventive diplomacy. But it was never perfect. Its authority to act and intervene decisively has always been hamstrung by big power rivalry and conflict of interests. In post cold war era its quest for peace has been distorted by separate agenda or lack of them by the permanent members who look upon the Council as an instrument to exercise their power and influence and further their political, economic and strategic interests.

The big powers have reacted to each individual conflict situation according to their threat perception. The Security Council, the international emergency number 911, the much vaunted international fire brigade has often reached the scene of accident to collect the debris of death and destruction and not to extinguish fire. Its achievements at best have been peripheral to the denouement of conflict resolution after much blood has been spilled and millions of lives lost. The international community must address themselves to the questions of reforming the Security Council in order for it to be able to deliver in a world whose needs and challenges have changed beyond recognition. In a post cold war era of cultural diversity the Security Council will be increasingly called upon to respond to the challenges of tackling the shattered landscape of separatist tendencies, ethnic and sectarian disputes within artificial state frontiers.

Of late, several attempts have been made to reform the Security Council by its expansion by adding five more permanent seats — for Japan and Germany and 3 for regional representations from Asia,

Africa and Latin America. The squabbling contenders have already joined the fray. But the main contention is not the expansion of the Council but how the Council can effectively act as a mediator in conflict resolution. Expansion will not make any fundamental difference to the nature and character of the existing power structure of the Council. What is needed is a qualitative and systemic change to improve its delivery and performance and not merely a cosmetic change by adding a few more seats. The congenital weakness of the Security Council is endemic in its command and control structure. A new Security Council must redraw its road map to recovery of its image by renouncing the veto power of the five permanent members which is an anachronism and a residue of the imperial past and is inconsistent with the UN charter's enunciated principle of universalism of membership — one member one vote and sovereign equality of all states. Consensus and not veto should be the modus operandi of the Council.

Bangladesh to be effective in the Security Council must follow a truly independent and robust foreign policy, its small development profile notwithstanding. If the reaction of Bangladesh to some recent international events is any indication, its foreign policy is weak, hesitant and not sufficiently forthright and categorical. After the military coup in

Pakistan, Bangladesh watched the situation for three days before it could come out with a semblance of a reaction by a spokesman of the Foreign Ministry and not at a higher political level. Yet, there should have been no difficulty in expressing an instant shock and dismay at the reversal of democracy in Pakistan. Its belated reaction of NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia for stopping genocide in Kosovo was disappointing when it said that intervention under UN supervision would be appropriate. The foreign office must have known that NATO was forced to intervene as UN was found wanting in view of the threat of veto by Russia and China. Bangladesh, a victim of genocide in 1971 should have strongly supported the NATO air strikes against the perpetrators of genocide in Kosovo. Similarly, the reaction to India's nuclear test was mute and wavering. It was only after the nuclear test by Pakistan, Bangladesh expressed concern at the potential threat to stability in the region. Apparently, there is no policy planning think-tank with foreign policy experts to support the Foreign Ministry to shore it up for crisis management.

Bangladesh's membership of the Security Council on the threshold of the millennium enjoins upon it serious responsibility. It can adequately respond to the challenge if it performs with its foreign policy firmly anchored by the wrenching demands of Kantian categorical imperative of morality and ethics and not swayed by the shifting strands of pragmatism or the descending primitivism of utilitarian goals and opportunism. It will then have served the Security Council well, safeguarded our national interest and raise its image and honour.

The writer is former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh Mission to UN, New York

OPINION Transparency

A Citizen

No one should have any doubt that Sheikh Hasina's government is anything but 'transparent'. Whatever action taken by her government, particularly the actions of the Home Ministry, in the streets of the city is 'transparent'. The front page of the DS of October 23 published a picture of the law enforcing agency men in action in which an unidentified civil clothed man actively participated. Similarly, during the latest hartal day, a plain clothes man with a shotgun in hand was found in action along with police personnel.

There are many other photographs of the streets of Dhaka taken by journalists where instances of armed civilians actively participated in beating up or manhandling activists of the opposition that appeared in the major dailies of the city. In the process of law enforcement to contain street agitation against the government policy and action, the joint action by police and para-military forces (BSTI) made a pledge that people associated with this organisation would be free from unethical standard of scrutiny and examinations of our products for better living to match the international standard. But holding special programmes and dialogues with experts, leading scientists and the other departments concerned on this day will have no effect unless we are true to ourselves in all aspects of national life.

Are we serious to enhance the image of our country? The only thing we need is CHANGE, in our attitude with the spirit of love for the country and nothing else.

a number of private cars; mass rapping of JU students by fellow students belonging to the party in power; disrobing of an opposition leader in a public street of Dhaka etc. Aren't these examples of her government's transparent 'established rule of law'?

These examples of mind boggling activities are unknown in the anal of an 'established rule of law...' This is unthinkable under any democratically elected government. We wonder, if the prime minister knows at all what happens in the country of which she is the prime minister?

It is quite believable that she believes what she says but from a place of ignorance for she appears to have been kept in complete darkness by some people who do not want to let her know the realities of the law and order situation in the country. To make her principle of 'transparency' completely inoperative the people in-charge of law and order nowadays started to beat up the journalists, particularly the photo-journalists so as to ensure the non-availability of pictorial proof of the law and order situation created by the same people responsible for maintaining it with the intention that PM should not know about what goes on in name of established law and order. They are so audacious that once they named a minister who, according to the police officer, ordered him to shoot the agitators, even the journalists present in performing their professional duties.

We fervently seek the indulgence of the PM's personal attention to the law and order situation prevailing in the country. We hope that the PM will take out some time from her official duty and busy schedule at home and abroad for this situation.

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.

Completion of 5-year term

Sir, In 1996, an understanding, for the second time, was reached among the major political parties and alliances to form a non-political and caretaker government and also to form a non-partisan election commission. Accordingly, the 1996 election was held under the said caretaker government and the securing the maximum JS seats formed the government for 5-year term.

So, this government and the election commission have the right to complete their full 5-year term without disturbance from any quarter. After expiry of the term, new non-political and Caretaker Government and new EC would be formed for another general election and the system would be continued for a several terms with a view to avoid any untoward incidents resulting loss of human lives, and government and private properties.

And as such, the present government has got the mandate for completing its 5-year term and no one should disturb the process. Any undue disturbance, conspiracy or out-governments movement by any quarter is a serious offence and should be severely dealt with.

Md Abdul Latif Khalifa, Advocate, Jessore

About Shaheed Minar

Sir, I had written a letter in the DS on 10 Oct 1999 on the above subject in response to a BSS circulated news that sculptor Novera Ahmed was to return to Bangladesh after three decades. The news said that "she was one of the architects of the Shaheed Minar." In the news item there was no mention of who the main designer was.

In the DS of 24 October there was a report on the short film based on Novera Ahmed in which the reporter has repeated that wrong information. It is written that "one interesting fact is that Novera was the one who prepared the main layout of Shaheed Minar." How does the reporter know this and what proof does she have when there is enough published and

official records to show that it was Hamidur Rahman who was the designer of the Shaheed Minar.

The Docu-Fiction film in which Mr Aminul Islam, Ms Lala Rukh Selim and Mr Syed Jahangir have given comments is truly fiction. They have presented no proof at all, but have conjectured that since Novera Ahmed was living with Hamidur Rahman she may have contributed to the design. This is a far-fetched and totally hypothetical explanation.

It such be the case then every creative genius or intellectual's friend would claim credit for the artist's works!

I have studied in detail a large number of books on Hamidur Rahman and many renowned persons such as late Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, late Professor Muneer Chowdhury, Professor Rafiqul Islam, the then Minister Ataur Rahman, Architect Doxidiades, PWD Engineer Mr Jabbar, Architect MA Jaffar and others have all testified to Hamidur Rahman's status as the designer of the Shaheed Minar. Begum Sufia Kamal especially requested the authorities to arrange a burial of Hamidur Rahman in 1988 next

to the Language Martyr Barkat at Azimpur Graveyard because of his status as the Designer of the Shaheed Minar. (Document available).

My last question is how can one make all kinds of imaginary 'recollections' without having any direct contact with Novera Ahmed? The Shaheed Minar is vital to our nation. Let us not make trifling emotional statements which cannot be proven.

Jahanara Hussain, 138 Jahanara Gardens, Green Road, Dhaka

World Standards Day

Sir, In observance of the World Standards Day, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institutions (BSTI) made a pledge that people associated with this organisation would be free from unethical standard of scrutiny and examinations of our products for better living to match the international standard. But holding special programmes and dialogues with experts, leading scientists and the other departments concerned on this day will have no effect unless we are true to ourselves in all aspects of national life.

Are we serious to enhance the image of our country? The only thing we need is CHANGE, in our attitude with the spirit of love for the country and nothing else.

Abul Ashraf Noor, House#9, Road#4, Sector#5, Uttara, Dhaka.

Are they different?

Sir, After her defeat in the election, Madam Meghabati Sukarnoputri asked her supporters to accept the result and felicitated the newly elected President Wahid. At that time her supporters were fomenting and were ready for any action leading to total anarchy. She was the most popular candidate.

For the post of Speaker in the Indian Lok Sabha the Prime Minister proposed a name which is seconded by Sonia Gandhi, the leader of opposition! We, sitting in Bangladesh, are amazed at these news. Are these countries and people much different from us?

A Reader, Dhaka - 1205