

All Eyes on EC

THIS paper has already expressed concern over the conduct of the Tangail-8 by-election in its editorial Wednesday. We have raised questions about undesirable official influence before and during the polls, particularly deliberate attempts by a section of civil servants, who were expected to play a neutral role, to act as agents for the ruling party candidate. There were reports of important ministers making their rounds at the constituency, speaking in public meetings and offering government help and assistance to electorate which are akin to intimidating voters for their support to the ruling party nominee.

The adviser to the prime minister Dr Malek is alleged to have stayed there for quite a long time before the polls influencing the electorate and the personal staff of the prime minister, who are not political activists but civil servants, reportedly lent additional support to the AL contestant. These persons were ordered to leave the constituency only the day before the election. Why did the EC take such a long time to order them out of the place? The EC, as a quasi-judicial and independent body constituted as per the provisions of the Constitution, should be powerful enough to take actions on complaints and in important matters should act *suo moto*. But in this instance, in some matters, the EC acted on directive of the higher courts, thereby losing valuable time or, in other words, gave ample opportunity to the ruling party to influence the voters and disturb the process of law through government functionaries and leading ministers.

We believe the EC has so far failed to play its constitutional role in this particular case. However, now all eyes are on the EC as to how it treats the complaints filed by one of the contestants — Kader Siddique. It is expected to uphold the constitutional obligations and play a fearless role in such an important matter. If EC fails in its duty of conducting free and fair elections, the entire process will be questioned and the EC is likely to lose its credibility to the electorate which will be most disastrous for the entire process of elections. The absence of the Chief Election Commissioner at the constituency before and during polling in a very important by-election can also be construed as a major error of judgement on his part.

There is still time. By investigating the complaints seriously, fearlessly and transparently, the EC can still restore public confidence in the process.

A Pleasant Surprise

SO much have we seen our 'leaders' hurling abuses and directing indecent innuendoes at each other, inside the parliament and out on the streets, that hardly do we expect decent and civilised behaviour from them. And when they do show the slightest sign of sobriety, a rarity indeed in our political culture, we are taken by utmost surprise, if not sheer disbelief. It is unfortunate that politics has been taken to such a low.

In other democracies of the world, the home minister's visit to Sadeq Hossain Khoka, currently recuperating at a private clinic from multiple rubber-bullet injuries he sustained during the November 8 hartal, would have been treated as a casual affair. Here, unfortunately, it is an exception. The home minister's sceptical and sardonic reaction upon receiving reports on Khoka's injury is the norm, not his courteous gesture.

Nevertheless, it is indeed heartening to see the minister breaking away from the deplorable practice and letting decency come into play. His pronounced concern and good wishes for a fellow member of parliament make us believe that maybe some decency is still left in our politicians. Conversely, we were rather disappointed by the BNP leader's response, although understandable given the predicament he has been through. He could surely have risen above his grievances and reciprocated the minister's gesture. Here again, unfortunately, our unhealthy political nuances prevailed.

We do not want to make too much of the home minister's courteous gesture, nor do we want to ignore it. We would like to remind our politicians, especially the ruling party stalwarts, that ideological difference does not preclude respect and decent behaviour. As for the home minister, our expectation is for renewal of such noble gestures instead of reversal to harsh language he has hitherto shown prowess in using.

A Leader to Emulate

Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani (1886-1976) was certainly one of his kind — a politician who had dedicated his whole life for the cause of the down-trodden; a religious leader who had never used religion as a political weapon; a leader who had no fascination for power or lucre; and, above all, a person who had been incorruptible throughout his life. His 23rd death anniversary yesterday came as a reminder of the vacuum his departure has left in our political arena, a vacuum that will never be filled.

Majlum Jananeta (the leader of the repressed) is certainly the apt epithet for a man who had always been among the deprived majority of the society, working relentlessly for their socio-economic emancipation. It was love for the people not power that pegged him on and people's love for him was his strength. His ability to mix with the commoners and mobilise them was simply phenomenal and it came from his intractable pursuit of people's politics. The devotion and commitment he showed while working for the masses are uncommon. Never deviating from the principles in which he believed and which would have made the life of the working class better, he fought relentlessly. And this, of course, is a glaring example of caring for those for whom "politics" is meant.

The history of our glorious struggle for liberation will be incomplete if his contribution is not acknowledged. He was there in every movement leading to our independence and once we were independent, he was still there out on the streets and among the commoners rallying for their rights. In him, we had the dazzling example of a man whose sole mission in life was to work for the socio-economic welfare of people.

Government's Offer of Political Dialogue

Holding an Olive Branch or Attempt to Foil Opposition Movement?

The best way, to get out of the current political impasse and to establish credibility of government's intention would be to unilaterally declare a time schedule for holding an early general election, combined with election to city corporations and upazillas under a new Chief Election Commissioner.

sition political parties and their movement went on unabated, rather became intensified. BNP led opposition political parties decided upon holding road marches to different destinations in the country as a significant adjunct to the peaceful methods of a democratic political movement. The government could not or did not attempt to foil such attempts. But a similar peaceful method of a sit-in demonstration in front of the Secretariat was thwarted by violent machinations of the ruling party.

This followed a series of other repressive measures. Many of the processions held by opposition political parties, especially during hartals, were marred by police action and attacks by Awami hoodlums accompanying police squads. At least on one occasion, people were forced to leave BNP procession, except for a few members of the parliament, by the police. BNP supporters were not even allowed to assemble in front of their Party headquarters. Later, they and their leaders were prevented from entering the office, which was locked by the police, with inmates held captive without lawful authorities. Finally, three BNP leaders.

MPs and former Ministers were shot and injured by police action while leading peaceful processions in the streets of Dhaka.

What prompted the Prime Minister to propose, one wonders, what she deliberately held back from and also prevented others to initiate for so long a period, which was strangely marked by intensifying repre-

motive of the Prime Minister is reinforced further by two subsequent events. Firstly, the remarks of the Home Minister in the parliament, with the absurd suggestion that the bloody injury sustained by the BNP leader and Dhaka's mayoral aspirant Sadeq Hossain Khoka MP which was inflicted by police firing was, in his opinion, fake and stage-managed with

lant police and ever-inquisitive journalists and photo-journalists who accompanied them?

Similarly, another very unfortunate incident occurred. Prime Minister made highly objectionable and most vilifying remarks about the person and the personal conduct of the leader of the opposition. The remarks were not only unparliamentary but its underlying suggestion was obnoxiously mean, debased and most unbecoming of even an ordinary citizen of the country. This episode raised so much of commotion, criticism and condemnation that even many of the Awami League stalwarts, both in the party and the media, became fearfully apprehensive.

They alerted Prime Minister of her gross mistake and warned her against recurrence of such utterances. One respected and veteran journalist from abroad went so far as to comment that the Prime Minister should learn to hold her tongue, which is her worst enemy. The other, a bright and celebrated columnist, affectionately cautioned the Prime Minister not to indulge in such rhetoric. He also prescribed to her the nature and subject matters of her statements and comments.

People then keep on wondering if the Prime Minister is really serious about holding a constructive dialogue with a view to solving the political impasse, why should she let the atmosphere so vitiated that her declared intention becomes suspect. The corresponding repressive action, indiscriminate detention and institution of false cases as well as personal vilification of opposition personalities obviously gave a wrong signal to the opposition and to the people who would now tend to believe that the real objective of the government is to show a conciliatory gesture to draw sympathy of the people by a clever publicity stunt and to hinder the growing tempo of one-point political movement of the opposition.

The best way, therefore, to get out of the current political impasse and to establish credibility of government's declared intention would be to unilaterally declare a time schedule for holding an early general election, combined with election to city corporations and upazillas under a new Chief Election Commissioner. After all, the same Awami League government had earlier made a statement, demonstrating favourable consideration to hold parliamentary election before schedule. Has the situation undergone substantial change so as to reverse that policy? Even it has to some extent, supreme national interests warrant the ruling party to hold on to their commitment and help pave the way to democracy.

The author, a former Ambassador, is Member of BNP's Council of Advisors.

sive measures against the opposition? If she was really sincere in solving this issue through dialogue, why did she refrain from making this proposal for so long, side by side resorting to novel and harsher methods of political repression and, to add salt to injury, declaring schedule for election to city corporations? These severely put into question the credibility of Prime Minister's real intention for the offer.

The suspicion about the real

sprinkling of spurious blood carried by the victim himself. Over and above this, the police claimed that the BNP leaders were marching in the procession firing shots with guns and throwing bombs at the police, who fired back in self-defense. Who would fall for such a concocted story that a senior BNP leader was carrying guns, bombs and one or more bottles of blood while leading a procession on the first row that escaped notice of specially vigi-

For Democratic Governments of the People at the Grassroots

by M Shahidullah Khan

At least two tiers of people's governments can be created at the grassroots level with absolute delegation of administrative and financial powers of revenue raising and disbursement for the well-being of the people. There must not be any kind of bureaucratic or political interferences — unlike the basic democracies in Pakistan in the 60s, the Upajila system in Bangladesh in the 70s, and guided democracy of Indonesia.

CENTRALIZED Democracy, in the west, in the east or in the third world countries, does not necessarily ensure good government of the people, when money, influence, interest groups, corruption, human rights violation, centralized bureaucracy, discriminatory practices, voter apathy and non-participation of the general masses become visible. Central democratic structure can be affected by any kind of fanaticism, such as, racial, religious, ethnic, ideological, fundamentalist conservative, and even liberal extremes. People's governments at the grassroots levels, irrespective of the fact whether the central structure is democratic or non-democratic.

In a democracy or monarchy or government in transition with an authoritarian regime, people's governments can be created at the grassroots with complete decentralization of power, delegation of responsibility as well as authority and a total dismantling of centralized bureaucracy. And centralized structure dominated by a strong bureaucracy cannot be a responsive government of the people. At no level the servants of the public, meaning bureaucracy, should be allowed to control the representatives of the people with the excuse that the representatives of the people are not smart or enlightened enough to govern. Centralized power has a tendency to create a vested interest and a hierarchy of bureaucratic shuffling of paperwork as an embodiment of red-tapism totally unresponsive to the felt needs of the common people. The representatives of the people, elected in a free and fair election at any level, may not be able to write polished memos or notes or eat with forks and knives, but they can very well understand the problems and needs of the people and can find solutions, on the spot, much better. They cannot acquire huge wealth and resources, locally, and transfer abroad, illegally, like corrupted top politicians and bureaucrats.

American Governments

American governments with most advanced technology, talented and skilled manpower and vast resources at their disposal cannot be compared with governments in another country, by the facts may throw some lights.

There were 86,743 governments in the United States in 1992, with 497,697 popularly elected officials. The US Federal government had 542 elected officials including the President, the Vice President, 100 Senators, 435 Representatives, a resident commissioner from Puerto Rico, and one delegate each from the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. There were 50 State governments with 18,134 elected officials, and 86,692 local governments with 479,021 elected officials. Out of the local governments there were 3,042 County (also known as Parish or Borough in some States) governments with 55,500 elected officials, 19,200 City governments with 18,134 elected officials, and 86,692 local governments with 479,021 elected officials. Out of the local governments there were 3,042 County (also known as Parish or Borough in some States) governments with 55,500 elected officials, 19,200 City governments with 18,134 elected officials, and 86,692 local governments with 479,021 elected officials.

Although the US Federal bureaucracy is slow with red-tapism, they have absolutely no control or interference with any local government or elected official. Even the highest elected official at the Federal or State level cannot interfere at the local level unless there is a violation of the constitution, charter, statute or legislative provisions. The local government system in the USA originated immediately after American independence in 1776, not when they became prosperous.

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The First tier governments shall provide vocational, primary and secondary education, health care and medical services, social and family planning services, economic and business activities, roads, bridges, canals and irrigation services, crop protection, mediation and arbitration of disputes etc., in coordination with the Regional government.

The basic revenue structure of the Federal, State and local governments are Federal income tax and customs duty, State sales tax and local property tax and charges for service respectively. The property tax revenue is primarily collected by local governments. In 1987 the total local government revenue was \$116,617.6 millions out of which the Counties had \$27,361.8 millions, cities \$27,182.5 millions, Townships \$7,489.1 millions, School dis-

tricts \$50,488.5 millions and Special districts \$4,115.8 millions.

Proposed Governments at the Grassroots

At least two tiers of people's governments can be created at the grassroots level with absolute delegation of administrative and financial powers of revenue raising and disbursement for the well-being of the people. There must not be any kind of bureaucratic or political interferences — unlike the basic democracies in Pakistan in the 60s, the Upajila system in Bangladesh in the 70s, and guided democracy of Indonesia.

defined government as an organized entity which, in addition to having governmental character, has sufficient discretion in the management of its own affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other governmental unit.

A local governmental entity must have power, subject to statutory limitations and any supervision, to levy taxes, has considerable fiscal and administrative independence with power to determine its budget without review or modification by another government, to determine taxes to be levied for its support, to fix and collect charges for its services, or to issue debt without review by another government. The Special District governments are independent, limited purpose governmental units, which exist as separate entities with substantial administrative and fiscal independence from general purpose local governments, authorized by their enabling legislation to provide services as a single-function or multiple-function district. The functions of special districts are: Natural Resources, Fire Protection, Housing and Community Development, Water Supply, Cemeteries, Sewerage, Parks and Recreation, Health, Libraries, Hospitals, Airports, Education (Facilities and Buildings), Highways, Water Transport and Parking Facilities etc.

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the public about governmental operations and functions.

5. Make regular recommendations and reports on administrative reorganization and coordination of governmental agencies to avoid overlapping and duplication of functions to the National, Regional and First tier governments.

The membership of the Ombudsman Organization shall comprise of experts in legal, political, trade union, management training, social service, public administration, business, industry, agriculture, education, medical and engineering professions, both at the national as well as all tiers of the People's government levels.

There shall be a Defence unit of the army, navy or the air force attached to the Ombudsman Organization at all levels of the People's government for enforcing law and order, security and emergency services as required. The defence unit shall train local people for the defence services.

The people's governments not the bureaucracy may suspend any of their members on the basis of the findings of a standing committee of the National Government, consisting of the legislature, judiciary, members of the People's government and law enforcement authorities.

The People's governments shall be the basic units of the local government with huge responsibilities to the people. To run them effectively there shall be a need to attract talented and enlightened elected officials with full time devotion. So the benefits and remunerations of the members, Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of all tiers of the People's government shall be made very attractive. This will also help in the mobility of the talented people to the rural areas and exchange of people between rural and urban areas.

An Ombudsman Organization headed by an equivalent of the highest level Supreme Court judge, with independent offices in all regional governments shall be created with the following objectives:

1. Redress grievances of individual citizens and set up complaint handling procedures at all levels to relieve elected officials of the complaint handling burden.

2. Prevent recurrence of complaints and protect government officials from unfounded criticism through increasing their responsiveness.

3. Study, diagnose, identify and correct unnecessary management practices and procedures.

4. Establish People's Representative Training and Research Academy for orientation and training of all elected officials, conducting research and management studies of the governments and educate

on talking terms. Hence, how can there be any dialogue, reconciliation, consensus or mediation for talks casually aired through the print media or our sacred parliament? Subsequently, in such hostile environment, proposals however sincerely conceived are bound to be sabotaged. Thus, leaving the entire nation and the people feeling discarded or ignored any silver living whatsoever, gets ignored.

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