

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 Sadek 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.

Magloom 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.

PRIME Minister recently made an offer to the opposition to hold talks with a view to resolving the current political impasse. She even went to the extent of offering opposition's one-point demand for the resignation of the government as the agenda for talks, though a formal written proposal is still awaited. It is, indeed, a commendable gesture and people would much like that politicians settle their problems through constructive discussions instead of resorting to negative actions.

Despite the apparently noble efforts towards reconciliation of political divides, the statement warrants close scrutiny to establish its real intent. Prime Minister's offer came out in the wake of the current movement for realization of combined opposition's one-point demand for immediate resignation of the government. The opposition had been making several demands to redress their grievances for the past two years. They initially came out with a 4-point demand and for over a year the government remained silent and refused to respond. The Prime Minister even chided the Head of State, preventing him from taking any initiative purported to break the political deadlock.

Then, in the teeth of vocal opposition, the government went ahead with the holding of municipal election. The opposition's 4-point demand became 5-point demand, adding a point for cancellation of municipal poll results. The government remained unmoved. On the contrary, the suppression of oppo-

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 repres-

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 were put into question the credibility of Prime Minister's real intention for the offer.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

The suspicion about the real 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

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-

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 unpardonable but its underlying suggestion was obviously 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 upazilas 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.

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 with its plurality can ensure unity in diversity while enjoying freedom and independence to govern themselves 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 power 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 or resources, locally, and transfer abroad, illegally, like corrupted 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, but 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 government elected officials. The US Federal government had 542 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 (Municipal) with 137,542 elected officials, 16,691 Township governments with 118,669 elected officials, 14,721 School districts with 86,772 elected officials and 29,531 Special districts with 80,532 elected officials. (Source: 1987 Census of Government, Bureau of the Census, US Department of Commerce). The ratio of population per elected official is less than 500 in the United States.

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.

The US Bureau of the Census

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 were: 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.

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. The First tier governments at the grassroots level shall represent ten to fifteen thousand people each with a directly elected chairman, a vice-chairman and one member for each one thousand people. The next tier shall be the Regional government composed of the chairmen of the First tier governments as voting members, with a Regional Chairman and a Regional Vice Chairman, elected directly by all voters in the region. All government officials within the jurisdiction shall be non-voting members, reporting to the Regional Chairman.

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 people's governments shall be property tax revenue, sales tax and charges for service to be authorized by a constitutional amendment. Property taxes shall be assessed, collected and distributed by regional governments in their re-

spective jurisdictions with assistance from the First tier governments duly authorized by legislations of the National government. The property tax base shall include single family and multi-family residential units (including houses, flats, buildings etc.), but excluding the mudhuts, straw-huts and bamboo fencing with tin roof, agricultural land (excluding an optimum economic unit), fisheries, forest, gardens and farms, vacant cultivable or residential lots, commercial and industrial properties, road and water transports and valuable personal and other properties. The tax base shall exclude properties of other governmental jurisdictions including national and international properties as defined by the constitution and legislations. In addition to property tax and charges, the income shall include allocation of grants and loans from the national and international sources.

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

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, financial, police, military, 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.

The writer is a retired US federal government and business executive (1970-90) and a former faculty member of the National Institute of Public Administration, Dhaka (1961-70).

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.

The exit of JU VC

Sir, The sudden resignation of the vice-chancellor of the Jahangirnagar University might come to many as unexpected but not unusual. He inherited several outstanding problems, including the well publicized rape case from his predecessor, which he could not logically and with impartial judgement because of his henchmen, and probably because of political pressure. The henchmen were none but those against whom he contested in the panel election for the post of VC, and later he depended on them to keep his position intact — so he thought.

Lately, these people influenced him to make a number of selection committees for recruitment of teachers in various academic departments. Most of the members of a number of selection committees have been chosen in such a way that voters' instead of competent teachers can be recruited in future. A comparative review of selection committees formed during the last ten years or so will testify this. A detailed re-

port was published in the daily *Bangla Bazar Patrika* on 19 August last in this regard.

This has been the background under which some of the worst ad hoc appointments in the history of Jahangirnagar University have been made during the ongoing vacation of the VC. In anticipation that they could be regularised by manipulating the members of the relevant selection committees. On the other hand, a number of teachers of some departments failed to get their well-deserved promotion in the hand of such selection committees.

Once renowned for its academic development and regularity, the JU has slipped behind many universities in the country. Furthermore, the last two VCs have failed to support a very potential link programme funded by the ODA-British Council scheduled for 1994-2000 presumably fearing the loss of support of a syndicate member who happened to be a departmental Chairman and a Dean at the same time, and later was one of the supporters of the above mentioned influential group of the university.

Another proposed scheme for the development and modernisation of JU Central Library submitted to the UGC more than a year ago have not seen any progress at all.

The new VC has now inherited a number of problems accumulated through the inept administration of the last two VCs. Till now, the main pre-occupation of the past VCs was to keep his chair in tact through appeasing different interest groups of students, employees and teachers. We hope the new VC will evaluate the pitfalls of being in the chair of VC. For a short term action, he should reevaluate the formation of all the selection committees formed during the past regime and take action to postpone all ad-hoc appointments made during the last six months on the basis of a thorough investigation by either the UGC or the Ministry of Education. Otherwise, Jahangirnagar University will never be free from potential danger of degeneration.

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No silver lining

Sir, Hats off to DS commentary and editorial (Nov 10) which, undoubtedly are a hard hitting reply to the repeated threats meted out to the fourth estate with the irrelevant claims of "transparency and

accountability", as if, the news media are "opposition party" vying for forming government, or pretty recalcitrant elements whom meted with proper dose of threats and cajoling will toe-the-line (i.e. Govt line).

The print media of Bangladesh as veritably claimed by the government and hon'ble Minister of Info as "free" and bound to act and remain "free" irrespective of whether it stamps on the "toes" of the opposition or the government in position, in its quest for facts. The fourth estate is both, duty and pledge bound to expose facts and/or wrong-doings of both the opposition and the party in position, at any cost. Recently, the hon'ble PM proposed to hold talks unconditionally. But the home minister, apparently, acting like an agent provocateur, successfully managed to sabotage this proposal. BNP leader, MP Khoka was hit and injured by shot gun pellet(s) to which, the home minister leveled blanket accusation on the victim themselves, as if, the BNP leaders deliberately stage-managed by feigning injury, at the same time, condoning the notorious police who are widely condemned by the civil society for unprovoked attacks on the pressmen and such trigger happy acts.

The bottomline of Bangladesh's politics is a frequent repetition of history in one form or the other. Now both the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition are not even

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 conveyed are bound to be sabotaged. Thus, leaving the entire nation and the people feeling, discarded or ignored any silver lining whatsoever, gets ignored.

Salahuddin Y Jamal
Chittagong

"7 Run over by Bus near ZIA"

Sir, The captioned news appeared in the front page in *The Daily Star* on November 1. Nowadays, this seems to be no startling news. Among killed, two were women aged 32 and 60, and other two were government employees of nearby offices.

That was a pay day, but these seven victims could not reach their destinations. A killer minibus grazed over the passengers on the road north-west of the highway — ZIA intersection — not in the designated passengers' shelter and bus-stop area, but just few yards north of that spot.

As I pass by this spot as commuter, I would say, this had happened due to traffic mismanagement. And similar

incident is likely to happen if scenario remains the same. To judge it better, one has to pass through the spot and observe the prevailing scenario. There are a traffic sergeant, few constables and a police out-post to regulate the traffic, but each one's active role is far from what is needed. Here, in their presence, one will find all kinds of public and private transports (bus, minibus, maxi, taxi, baby-taxi, truck, van, rickshaw and even private vehicles plying for extra income during return trips) cluster clumsily to load and pick the passengers up.

Some are hauled up in the vehicle, some are being pushed to pack or force out, and some are being dragged in, to load as many as possible. The passengers even climb on each other, in a most uncivilised manner, and use any opening of a vehicle to get a chance in that loading/unloading process. In that melee, passengers run helter-skelter. Are we getting civilized? Is there any reason our police personnel — having due authority and power — fail to make citizen and traffic orderly?

Specialised (Traffic) police have been deployed to regulate traffic in the capital, but for what result? In their presence, neither any stops nor any passenger waits at designated stops.

A R Choudhury
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