

The Present Political Impasse: The Way Out

by Enam A. Chaudhury

After creating a congenial environment for staging a meaningful dialogue, the ruling party, holding the reins of the government, should seriously and properly invite the opposition to a dialogue through a letter and indicate that the agenda would be to discuss ways and means for ensuring free and fair elections at all levels and to restore a democratic tolerant atmosphere the maintenance of which will be responsibility of all political parties

Ctg Polls: How Prudent?

WHAT is the government up to? Does it want the Election Commission to properly and meaningfully hold the Chittagong City Corporation polls or just make it go through the motions of an election without any substance to it? The opposition's boycott of the election is now spearheaded by a hartal call for 36 hours in Chittagong on December 13, the day fixed for the submission of nomination papers. On the same day there will be a countrywide morning to afternoon strike to protest the unilateral electoral process. Already the ruling party activists and those of the opposition have drawn the battle line and seem certain to be eye-balling each other on January 3, the scheduled date for polls. The run-up to the election itself cannot be violence-free as the opposition stages rallies and demonstrations while the ruling party activists try to foil these. The whole of the port city is certain to be on red alert with a massive presence of security forces, including the Army and BDR, visualised at every step of the way, especially on the poll day.

With such circumstances of provocation and intimidation besetting the atmosphere, the very fundamental premise of an election, namely expression of public will or posting a free choice is bound to be missing.

Add to this the fact that it is the month of Ramadan. The point here is this that the turn-out cannot make for any credible election. And such narrowly based electoral result has never helped any government either. Remember the 15th February, 1996 election where government party loyalists had to do ballot stuffing in desperation and yet it proved such a costly farce for BNP. The last three by-elections held amidst opposition boycott saw a less than desirable turn-out of voters.

Seized of some of the issues raised above the Election Commission had duly approached the government for an amendment to the pourashaba act to permit a relaxation of the stipulated dates. But the government turned the request down leaving us with but one impression: It is forcing an election down the throat, regardless of how credible it will be. We urge the government to pay heed to the EC's counsel for the good of the country. Though belated, a way out of the mire should still be possible if there is a will to search for it.

Poor Pollution Patrol

WHILE an ever-thickening blanket of smog over the capital bears a strong testimony to an administrative failure to curb air-pollution, the special mobile traffic unit such as the one this paper on Friday front-paged a report on (Pollution patrol in peril, December 10) speaks of indifference to the very issue. Why have the authorities installed such an undermanned and underfunded unit to monitor and detain air-polluting vehicles remains anyone's guess. The mobile unit, apparently comprising a few DMP constables and officials from the Department of Environment and BRTA, is a laughing stock, to say the least. While most of the vehicles ignore its signal to stop, those which do simply get away with an easily removable sticker and delibe warning seal on the route permit. Even worse, the unit appears unable, or unauthorised, to take any punitive measures against defaulting vehicles, even in the case of fake driver's licence and other documents. Besides, the traffic sergeants do not appear forthcoming either in its assistance. On the whole, there is no reason whatsoever to believe that the unit would make any difference in the air-pollution scenario, unless, of course, the authorities decide to reinforce it by way of assigning more power and authority.

To make things work in this direction, the authorities must invest more in the unit, in terms of logistic and manpower support, that too, not in quantitative but qualitative consideration. There should be involvement of people who can exercise their authority on the spot. In other words, the unit needs quite a few sergeants on duty to muster respect and, even, fear from the recalcitrant among drivers of auto-rickshaws, maxis, tempos, minibuses, trucks, etc. Besides, there appears to be a serious lack of co-ordination between the agencies involved. Above all, the unit must be allowed to work without fear or favour. To that effect, it must enjoy maximum administrative support all the way, from the road to the court.

Watch the Prices

WITH the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, the customary rise in prices of some selected items, both spices and vegetables has started being noticeable. Onion, pulses and cucumber have been the normal casualties almost every Ramadan. The general trend of prices being stable at an already higher plane, gram, flour, dry fruits, spices and various other types of flavouring items became dearer on the first day of Ramadan. Along with these, puffed rice, a very popular Iftar item with young and old, rich and poor, baffled everybody by registering a price rise of ten taka per kilogram — a phenomenon that can hardly be explained.

All this happened despite a steady supply of the commodities in the markets of the city which leads to the apprehension of unholy machinations by some unscrupulous businessmen and hoarders. Onion prices have been troubling the consumers since the floods of last year. Even a couple of weeks before the Ramadan, onion prices suddenly skyrocketed for no earthly reason except for the greed to make a windfall before the large quantities of import arrivals. In a market free from supervision of any kind, people are taken hostage by the corrupt importers, wholesalers and retailers. The government must in concert with the consumers' associations mount an effective supervision of the spiralling prices of some essential commodities throughout the year. The anti-hoarding laws must come into full play. The consumers' must organise themselves to combat the onslaught of dishonest business practitioners. Unless they do so at the community level they will continue to be short-changed.

THE nation has noticed with deep interest some suggestions emanating out of the intelligentsia regarding the way future elections can be held in the country and the possible solutions of the present political impasse that has created a critical situation. Executive Chairman of BRAC Fazle Hasan Abed, and Former Foreign Secretary Faruq Choudhury have come forward with some ideas and Mr. Faruq Choudhury recently enumerated a few concrete proposals in this regard in the Prothom Alo, a leading Bangladeshi daily. That created quite a stir and there were comments on the proposals by Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Former Vice Chancellor Mr. Maniruzzaman Mian and Mr. Monam Sarkar. It is very interesting and encouraging that three eminent persons, generally held to be representing the current major political thought processes in the country, occasionally confrontational in nature, welcomed and in general terms agreed with the main ideas contained in the proposals. In the Daily Star also Mr. Mostafizur Rahman recently wrote on the same subject and his ideas were also in the same line. The current situation obtaining in the country and these expressed views would lead one to think that the nation is weary of the present dismal state of affairs and would like to urgently see a way out — to look for light at the end of the tunnel.

This, however, would be possible only if there is a consensus among the ruling party and the opposition regarding the ways to solve the critical problems facing the nation. Time is fast running out. So long, it could perhaps be possible for the Awami League to sit with the major political party — the BNP — and thrash out the problems. Now with the alliance of the political parties in opposition becoming a reality, the ruling party will have to deal with the combined opposition which would be a more difficult task. It is quite baffling as to why, in spite of verbal assurances, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina never seriously took up

But dialogue, there has to be. There has to be discussions and consultations to find out ways of avoiding bloody confrontations, of shunning destructive hartals, of re-establishing shattered confidence in democratic process and elections. After the Tangail by-election fiasco, one point stands out as incontrovertible. There cannot be any election under any government with ruling party participating in the same. These have to be non-partisan caretaker government taking charge of the situation during elections — in their results are expected to be credible to an acceptable degree. The same arguments that the Awami League and its

proposal of a dialogue and as a matter of fact, did everything possible to ensure that this should not take place by, inter-alia, personally maligning the leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia in a crude and unacceptable manner and subsequently justifying her act by saying that every one has the right to behave in one's own cultural pattern.

However, the way she invited the leader of the opposition for a dialogue seemed to be more of a crude joke and did not quite, to the best of our knowledge, fit into the generally known cultural pattern or norm of any civilized individual or community. The Daily Star in its editorial comments on November 25 called the Prime Minister's expression of willingness to extend invitation for dialogue "an impulsive and casual unravelling of a game plan to make a dialogue offer to Begum Zia" and thought this to be a "dramatized and inherently light hearted move", and many others thought the same way. It is high time that it is realized that politics in our country, or for that matter, anywhere else, is too serious a matter to be dealt with such flippant wantonness.

With necessary amendments in the Constitution, if all the elections are held under caretaker government and during a pre-determined period, then certainly the results of the elec-

tions would be, to a great extent credible and at least, acceptable. Otherwise, it has been experienced under all governments that during elections undue influences are exerted and the permanent administrative machinery utilized by the party in power. In the recent Pabna and Tangail by-elections, ministers could not be restrained from visiting the constituencies during the elections, in spite of repeated warnings by the Election Commission. Government officials and machinery were flagrantly utilized by the ruling party and independent observers and representatives of foreign missions univocally called the election as outrageous and scandalous and in no way fit to be called a part of a democratic process. In elections under a caretaker government, at least this type of a situation would not be created.

There are also other advantages of the suggested system. If all the elections are held during, say, a one-month period, then the cost of EC and the government would be much less. The normal activities in the country also will not be frequently hampered. Political tempo, which is generally created in elections, by continuous political activities advocating the superiority of one political party over the other and campaigning for candidates of opposing political camps, keep on creating friction and tension in the society. If all the elections are held in the same period then this can be avoided to some extent throughout the period of the term except the election time. Permanent government officials in the constituencies also will not be exposed to situ-

ations during parliamentary by-elections and Municipal and Upazilla elections where they are likely to be seen hobnobbing with ruling party candidates through visiting ministers or people at high government positions. This would help creating a favorable impartial image of government functionaries to some extent.

Holding elections without participation of opposition political parties and having a non-functional Parliament do not anyway signify a democratic government. In the recent by-election in Rajshahi, in a Charghat polling centre, out of 1852 votes, only 12 votes were cast, out of which 11 were for the ruling party candidate and the 12th vote was declared invalid. In Serajonj by-election, only 61 percent votes were cast in Daliarpur Primary School Centre and it was alleged that most of these votes were also fake. In all these elections without participation of Opposition political parties the same thing will happen. The persons who would be declared elected to Parliament in a by-election or in Upazilla or Municipal elections where Opposition parties do not participate would not be considered as truly elected representatives and will not have effective acceptance. And then, in the next general elections, what happens if the Opposition political parties do not participate? A repetition of February 15, 1997?

It is now certain that the Opposition political parties would not participate in any general or by-election, and in local government elections unless the demands of the opposition are met. An election in a

democracy where the Opposition political parties do not participate in elections is a sham democracy. With a non-functioning Parliament, these type of elections which involve not only wasteful expenditure but look as a mockery of a democratic process may ultimately make people think seriously of other alternatives. This would indeed be dangerous.

I have talked informally with a few high-ranking diplomats and independent observers who also think that the type of democracy we are practising is no democracy at all. The government should not forget that making the country run through a democratic process is its Constitutional responsibility and it should seriously explore as to how the opposition political parties could be brought back to take up their roles in a democratic set-up. The government will have to immediately cease causing harassment to opposition political party activists and leaders, stop atrocities and violation of human rights and allow free and constitutional democratic activities. After creating a congenial environment for staging a meaningful dialogue, the ruling party, holding the reins of the government, should seriously and properly invite the opposition to a dialogue through a letter and indicate that the agenda would be to discuss ways and means for ensuring free and fair elections at all levels and to restore a democratic tolerant atmosphere the maintenance of which will be responsibility of all political parties. Specifically speaking the subject, for discussions, should be finding Constitutional means for installing Care-taker government for holding all elections and further strengthening of the Election Commission. There is no alternative to that if the nation wants to sustain democracy.

The author is a former Secretary to the Government and former Vice President, Islamic Development Bank, Jeddah.

Lest We Forget : Begum Azizun Nesa

A Pioneer in Female Education

by Dr M Muniruzzaman and Dr Roquia Ahmed

BEGUM Azizun Nesa, Member, Bangladesh Public Service Commission (1977-82), Joint Director of Public Instruction (1969-77), Principal, Teachers' Training College for Women (1954-69) and the first female Dean of Dhaka University (1968) died a year ago on 12 December 1998. With her death the nation lost an educationist of excellence. Begum Nesa began her professional career as a lecturer at the Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta in 1942. Her brilliant academic career and a suggestion by Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq, inspired her to join one of the most prestigious educational institutions of India. Her tenure at the College was, however, short-lived as she had to return home to Kishoreganj few years later to attend to her ailing mother. The untimely and premature death of her mother coupled with the subsequent sickness of her father also meant the end of her career at Lady Brabourne College. She quit her job and became the Headmistress of S.V. Girls' High School, Kishoreganj (1944-46) an institution from where she had started her early education. She always remembered with pride her achievements at the school where she stood first in all the examinations including the Lower Primary, Higher Primary and Secondary Scholarship examinations. But the Gold Medal she won in 1930 at a Literary Competition for an essay entitled 'Women Education' gave her the greatest satisfaction.

Born in 1920 she was the fifth daughter of Moulvi Fazar Ali and Begum Khairun Nesa. A well-to-do law practitioner, Moulvi Fazar Ali soon realized the academic potential of his daughter. The liberal minded father and a firm believer in women's emancipation was in a dilemma whether to keep his young daughter in Kishoreganj or send her for better education to the district town of Mymensingh. Azizun Nesa, fondly called 'Buri' by her parents, her mother, herself in fact, at the time, persuaded her father to send her to Mymensingh. There was no looking back once she got admitted to Vidyamoyee Girls' High School, Mymensingh. Under the tutelage of the revered Headmistress of the school Mrs. B. Bakshi, Azizun Nesa duly passed the Matriculation Examination in 1935 with distinctions in Mathematics and Sanskrit. She subsequently passed the Intermediate Examination and was second class first in the final M A examination in 1941. Azizun Nesa never forgot the parental roles played by Dr Shahidullah and Begum Shahidullah and was always eager to acknowledge their contributions in her career. Incidentally she was the first Muslim woman in the district of Kishoreganj to receive an M A from the Dhaka University.

In 1946 when she lost her father — a respected man whose death was honoured by a holiday in the town, Azizun Nesa no longer felt the urge to stay in

school. For the next few years she spent all her energy in doing so and literally from scratch. While recruiting new teachers she also realized the importance of appropriately 'trained teachers' to the new job. In order to fill the void she herself decided to undergo the training course at the Dhaka Teachers' Training College in 1949. As usual she topped the list of successful students in 1950, thereby becoming the first female Muslim student to hold that distinction while at the T. T. College she appeared and topped the Public Service Commission Interview and was selected to be the Professor of Bengali at the Eden Girls' College, Dhaka. Later she became the Vice-Principal — a job she held till the award of a Scholarship to study in the USA. During this time she served as the first Superintendent (now designated as Provost) of the Women's Hall of Dhaka University (1950-52).

For the next two years she made the best use of her stay at the State University of Arizona, USA. Besides obtaining a diploma in Secondary Education Administration, she also obtained an M A in Education. She visited twenty different states in connection with her practical work. She gave seminars to the faculty, talks over local radio and interviews on the conditions of the female students in East Pakistan. We were very young then, but still can remember how excited we were on hearing our names on the 45 rpm gramophone records sent us as presents by aunts from the State. She had this very novel idea of recording her American experience on gramophone records. We can still recall her describing the Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Empire State Building — on top of which the recording studios were located, the White House and her experi-

ences with a Red Indian family. With full of enthusiasm and ideas Azizun Nesa returned home in 1954. A choice of jobs awaited her — a return to Eden Girls' College or to accept the more challenging job of the Principal of the newly established Teachers' Training College for Women at Mymensingh — the first of its kind in East Pakistan. She chose the latter. The college, housed in the beautiful Palace of the Maharaja of Mymensingh, was located at the center of the town near the old Brhmaputra River. From the day of her joining Azizun Nesa got down to the task of building the college. Over the years she recruited teachers of the highest caliber, built dormitories for students, residential quarters for teachers, staff and the principal. The number of students had also more than quadrupled by the time she left fifteen years later. Two persons (now deceased) to whom she always remained grateful for helping her build the college were Dr M O Ghani, the Vice Chancellor of DU and Mr M O Ghani, the Principal of Teachers' Training College, Dhaka. Her dedication, sincerity, untiring efforts and contribution to female education earned her a Tamgha-e-Quaid-e-Azam in 1966. In 1968 she became the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dhaka University. She was then the first female Dean in the history of Pakistan.

In 1969 she was appointed Joint Director of Public Instruction for Women Education. As the first female Director she was entrusted with the job of organizing the female education in the country. In that capacity she also served as Chairman/Member of various National Committees, important amongst which were the National Committee for Women Education, National Federation of Business and Professional Women, Mass Education Evaluation Committee, Governing Body of Vigarun Nisa Noon Girls' School and College, etc. Apart from these she also served at various times as Chairman/Member of Secondary and Higher Secondary Syllabus Committees; Faculty of Fine Arts, Faculty of Education, Academic Council of DU etc. During her long and eventful career starting with British India and through Pakistan and ending with Bangladesh she represented her countries at various for a in the USA, UK, Japan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, India, Pakistan. On retirement from active service in 1977, she was appointed a Member of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission for a five-year period.

Begum Azizun Nesa was an honest, sincere and hard working person who never allowed the beautiful things in life to be overshadowed by the odd and the ugly. We remember even during the last five years of her life that she was completely bed-ridden and in much discomfort, on inquiry, she would always reply with a smile 'I am fine'. A religious person, an Honorary Life Member of the Bangladesh Koranic Society, she performed the Holy Hajj and Umrah in the 70s. The Editor of S M Hall Magazine named a student at DU, she loved Rabindra Sanjeet and Nazrul Geeti and was a beautiful recitor of poems.

The writers are Professor of Physics at the Jahangirnagar University and Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Dhaka University, respectively.

Chechnya Bleeds

Is Chechnya strictly an internal affair of the Russian federation? Why exactly is the present bloodshed, and when is this likely to end? Why has this offensive begun and will President Yeltsin and his Prime Minister Vladimir Putin emerge stronger from it?

RUSSIAN offensive against Chechnya is currently one of the major international intensely debated topics. In one sense, it is not an international issue as the matter is in principle an internal affair of Russian Federation. President Boris Yeltsin, insist that discussions or "unwarranted" comments and concerns on the present Russian actions in its "own republic" constitutes interference in the internal affairs of their country. At the just-concluded strategically-timed summit with Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Beijing, president Yeltsin and the Chinese leader agreed that "Chechnya" is an internal matter of Russia.

President Yeltsin was desperate to secure support on a Russian crackdown from some quarters when Moscow has gone all-out against its recalcitrant region and threatened the civilian population in Chechen capital Grozny to quit the city within a specific time or face the onslaught of the Russian armed forces. Grozny is already bearing the brunt of Russian airforce and artillery bombings for last several weeks after Moscow began the offensive two months ago. Russian forces slowly advanced from the capital from different directions as civilians were killed by Russian offensive while many others fled to neighbouring areas as refugees. As world outrage over the brutal campaign to bring Chechnya to heels intensified, a top Russian General vowed to blast Grozny to shreds before sending his troops to take the city. Eighty per cent of the city's capital is partially destroyed and now it is matter of time before the Russian army formally takes it over; and it will be folly to expect that the Chechen fighters would be able to withstand it.

The developments in the next few days in the Chechen front are unlikely to be anything unexpected, and taking over of Grozny could also be a kind of cakewalk as the Chechen fighters may choose to retreat totally for a long-term Guerrilla-type war. But the scars of present Russian offensive will be hard to die and the problem is likely to remain as a major headache for Moscow.

Is the Chechnya tangle strictly an internal affair of the Russian federation? Do the developments there warrant concerns and whether such anxieties represent interference in the internal affairs of the Russian federation? Why is exactly the present bloodshed and when is this likely to end? And finally, why has this offensive begun and will President Yeltsin and his Prime Minister Vladimir Putin emerge stronger from it? These are some of the pertinent questions that surround the Chechnya imbroglio.

Certainly, it is not as simple as the internal affair of a country for obvious reasons. The issue hogged headlines in the international press a few years ago when the same President Boris Yeltsin had sent troops to silence the revolt in the republic

but called off the soldiers after bitter fighting for a long period. After that, Chechnya was given a kind of self-rule short of direct independence. The valour and resistance of the republic and its then leader Zulkhor Dudayev is well known. As such, the affair of Chechnya is not just like another republic or province of Russia or any country.

President Yeltsin warded off attempts to impeach him by the opposition in the lower house of parliament, Duma, led by communists in May last. Five charges of impeachment were brought against him and all fell through. But the charge that received maximum votes was for launching the Chechnya war in 1994 and it received 283 votes whereas 300 votes were necessary for initiating the impeachment. It is evident that even in his own country the dealings with Chechnya had drawn severe adverse reactions.

However, this time he launched the crackdown after a series of bombings in Moscow and other places that left many people killed and the government blamed the Chechen "terrorists" for the violence. Earlier, these people briefly occupied parts of Dagestan republic, and were accused the "terrorists" from Chechnya from the same. True, the Russian government has every right to take actions against the people that it considers lawbreakers and responsible for terrorism. It is also plausible that any government worth its name will take a hard-

gony of former Soviet Union had declared that the atrocities in the "erstwhile East Pakistan" was not internal affairs of Pakistan. This was the first condemnation by a superpower of the activities by Islamabad, Bangladesh. The former communist giant, the other superpower at that time, had voiced concern at the genocide and this had helped the Bangladesh war to gain momentum at the international level. This act was also right if morally judged. Later prime minister Kogoyin took it to other forums. Why should, then, the Chechnya developments are internal affairs of Russia even though two cases are not entirely same? Certainly, there are common factors in both the situations. Yeltsin is the first democratically elected president of present Russian federation. He was supported and propped up by the West ending the socialist era of the great nation. Despite democracy, Russia is now facing many problems and the West is supporting it in many ways including huge IMF loans.

When President Yeltsin walked out of the European security summit in Istanbul last month in the wake of criticisms by the West on Chechnya offensive, President Clinton and other leaders were not tough with him because the former has been receiving their support in spite of differences on some matters. President Clinton spoke of Moscow paying seriously for ruthlessness against

Chechen people although Russia has the right to curb terrorism but he and other western leaders' response here fell short of what they did in similar situations of annihilating civilian population elsewhere in recent time. Yeltsin warned Clinton against seeking to interfere in Chechnya, saying his country still possessed nuclear arms. By this, he wants to whip up nationalist feelings in Russia aimed at the presidential elections even though today's Russia is much dependent on the West and mired in manifold economic and other problems. The Russian president also chose to visit China. He and President Zemin signed accords on their border issues and rejected West's use of human rights as interference in the internal affairs of a country. Clearly, democratic Yeltsin, who is otherwise vocal about human rights, conceded this to communist China in exchange of support in the offensive Chechnya which he needed badly. It is also debatable whether the UN or the OIC are doing enough in the Chechnya tangle.

But the voice of peace-loving people against the atrocities on the civilian population is low although many cannot approve terrorism. The 1999 Nobel Peace prize-winner, Medicin Sans Frontieres, and many others are appealing to end to Russian offensive and ruthlessness. Will Chechnya bleed till turning white?

In mid-1971, President Pod-

MATTERS AROUND US

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury



line attitude on the matter. But is the current war-like measures stem from solely such reasons? In their bid to silence terrorism, there may be other factors.

President Yeltsin is not, however, qualified constitutionally to contest in the coming presidential elections and he has picked up the presidency. Yeltsin wants to remain in the scene despite his falling health — and he can only achieve this goal if his political heir Putin wins the elections. But the president picked up prime ministers whimsically in the past, and abruptly sacked them. Putin is the latest and Yeltsin is keen to see that he earns popularity and stability that helps him to become the President.

The offensive against the Chechens has given him that advantage since actions against the "terrorists", particularly in the aftermath of the killing of people in the bombings in Moscow buildings, have given the impression that Putin is a tough leader. Secondly, Moscow bore grudge against Chechnya after the failure to achieve its goal during 1994-96 offensive. And this time it wants to fulfil that. The government wants to be seen as dynamic and action-oriented, and using the Chechnya issue to gain popularity it has succeeded to a great extent. In mid-1971, President Pod-