

Voter ID card debacle

Probe needed to avert repetition

It is now crystal-clear that we will have to revert to the rather obsolete indelible ink-mark on the finger as the security precaution against fake voting in the next general election. The hope for holding the polls with an ID card in each voter's hand has been dashed. Frustratingly, this has happened after five years of wrestling with a voter identity card project and a wholly wasted expenditure of Tk 190 crore fattening the pockets of easily identifiable corrupt elements siphoning off a good deal of the money. The project was declared officially closed by ECNEC, or shall we say, abandoned, in June last year when it was found out that 40 per cent of the total number of voters had been left out of the ID card coverage. The truth, however, is even more horrific. Of the sixty per cent cards prepared, those which were actually distributed among voters showed inaccuracies, errors and omissions that rendered the whole exercise meaningless.

Furthermore, we have it on the authority of the Chief Election Commissioner that the existing voter ID card, sans any security mark threaded into it, is easy to copy and thus likely to be used for fraudulent purposes in an election. Hence, the CEC is said to be looking for funds to undertake a whole new ID card project sometime after the next general elections.

Evidently, with Tk 190 crore misspent on the earlier edition of the project that has gone down the drain, the government should be administratively and morally obliged to establish accountability for the money expended on it. So, there has to be a scooping investigation into the mismanagement and corruption associated with that disastrous debacle. Nobody seemed to have any conception of how to go about it in the first place, let alone deciding on the basic entries to be printed on the card. Or was it deliberately messed up to make room for money-making?

We attach great value to the voter's ID card as it is going to be the cornerstone for a centralised database capable of being used for so many other purposes than merely voting. Next time we want the project to be fool-proof both in terms of conceptualisation and implementation.

Middle East tension

Enliven the peace process

WITH two bombing raids over Iraq in the last week, the United States has adopted a hawkish posture in the Middle East. The raids were aimed at maintaining supremacy over Iraqi skies, and enforcing crumbling sanctions against that country. We urge the Bush administration to accept the reality that sanctions imposed 10 years ago have failed to dislodge Saddam Hussain, and instead have brought untold suffering for the Iraqi people. We would like to see a US policy that did not brush aside humanitarian consequences and strategised a realistic end to the impasse with Iraq.

By turning its attention to Iraq, the US has confirmed that it is taking a 'regional' approach to the Middle East. We are not convinced that this approach would best serve Arab interests, especially since it echoes a similar suggestion by the new Israeli prime minister. Ariel Sharon has been aiming to isolate the Palestinian issue and place it on the backburner of US foreign policy. This would be most unfortunate. The US must take very seriously repeated Palestinian urgings to put its weight behind re-starting of the peace process, in particular to insist that Sharon adheres to commitments made by his predecessor. More than 400 people have died in the five-month conflict, being termed the 'second' Intifada. Downplaying the precarious peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians or relegating negotiations to bilateral arrangements, would be unwise.

Secretary of State Colin Powell's seven-stop tour to the region this week has revived fears that the Palestinian issue is being sidelined, and an anti-Iraq tirade is moving up the US priority list. We urge the US to dispel these apprehensions and prevent the peace process from being thrown completely off course.

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

The other side of Operation Desert Storm

With George Bush in the White House through the courtesy of US courts, and arch-hawk Ariel Sharon's landslide victory and assumption of office as the new Prime minister of Israel, the Middle East is now threatened with apprehension of a new Operation Desert Storm... President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Yasser Arafat of Palestine now have every reason to be more worried about a bumpy future ahead.

the socialist block. The Arabs' political target of course, was the United States and the Britain because of their all out support to Israel. But no tangible effort could be made to thwart the IOC's plans, mostly executed by British and US governments. This was primarily possible because the United States concurred with the British prescription of "divide and rule" (applied by them for about two hundred years in India). The US meticulously followed one plan for Saudi Arabia and the other for rest of the Arabs, Iran and Indonesia.

One or two episodes would reveal how the US and the Britain zealously guarded oil and Anglo-American control of the Gulf. For example, during the early 50s both British and American intelligence worked closely to undermine an elected and popular nationalist government of Dr Mohammad Mosadeq which was tacitly intending to take control of the Anglo American oil facilities and interests in Iran, for the benefit of the Iranians. The British and American governments mounted a secret operation to overthrow Dr Mosadeq, as London and Washington feared that the Russians would acquire Iran's vast oil reserves. It is now widely known that the CIA organized and directed 1953 coup in Tehran that overthrew Dr Mosadeq. And the British-American pampers Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlevi, then in exile, was brought back and reinstated on his peacock throne. Subsequently, the US played the master stroke and the British lost their oil monopoly, and an international consortium of British, Dutch, French and American oil companies signed a 40-year pact with the Shah for Iran's oil. The American friendly government of Reza Shah continued a corrupt regime with the help of a repressive organization called Savak, but accommodated Anglo-American oil interests. The anti-people Shah was eventually swept aside in 1979 by a wave of popular discontent. He was not offered an asylum in the US. But suddenly he died in Egypt and was buried

there. Then Iran was perceived to be beyond western control. Britain-America thought that the solution to the problem was to run a major propaganda war, and also to arm Saddam Hussein in neighbouring Iraq with whom Iraq had long running territorial dispute over access to the Gulf. The eight-year war that followed left both countries economically drained, but with Iraq in the ascendancy.

Nevertheless, it may be noted that the present day Iraq which was formally a part of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire, was set up as a separate state in 1921. Kuwait, for instance, never existed prior to 1921, had always been part of Basra province in the Ottoman empire. When Iraq attained statehood following the breakup of the empire, Britain and its allies brought about in World War-I, this territory, with its rich oil fields and vital access to the sea, was severed from it and was set up as the state of Kuwait with its super rich ruling family. Kuwait has always been friendly towards Britain and America. The background to Iraq's territorial claim on the region is now more vehemently opposed by the US and Britain than the Kuwaitis.

Despite many shortcomings, most Iraqi citizens enjoyed high standards of health care and education with a well developed infrastructure, which has been severely disrupted after the US Operation-Desert Storm the Gulf war. The war itself was a massacre, witnessed by millions of people around the world through the courtesy of CNN. The mass bombing on Baghdad and other parts of Iraq, as opposed to the laser guided type which could account for only a small percentage, killed thousands innocent civilians and children. Dams, power stations, water pumping stations, schools, hospitals, rail facilities, factories were targeted and destroyed indiscriminately. Iraq was in the ruins and disease and malnutrition rapidly became widespread. Depleted uranium in the weapons used by Britain and the US contrari-

ated the desert environment with radioactive material. Cancer, leukemia and horrific birth defects have since become widespread. Yet, through the massive hate campaign in the western media, US and Britain made all their efforts to demonize Saddam Hussein. The entire effort was to destroy Iraqi amid hysterical claims that Iraq's intent on invading Saudi Arabia must be thwarted. The then US President Bush announced in public that there would be no negotiations, which consequently made their desired war inevitable. The aftermath of Desert Storm, with about 36,000 sorties, has been as bad if not worse than the war itself for the people of Iraq.

The victors' first action was to impose restrictions on how much oil Iraq could sell, ostensibly to prevent Saddam Hussein using revenue to rearm. The Anglo-American oil interests gained control over the country's oil supplies for the last one decade, with UN imposed sanctions through British-US influence, the population has suffered severely of food, medical supplies. By 1998, the terrible sufferings of the Iraqi people was becoming known to the world and could no longer be ignored. Calls to end sanctions got louder, but the civilized US' and Britain's response was to permit a small increase in oil exports to provide revenue for import of extra food and medicine. It had become clear that arrogant and belligerent behaviour on the part of US dominated inspection teams had been a major bone of contention in Iraq. With all the propaganda of CNN and BBC the Iraqi people see the US and Britain as their enemy not Saddam Hussein.

With George Bush in the White House through the courtesy of US courts, and arch-hawk Ariel Sharon's landslide victory and assumption of office as the new Prime minister of Israel, the Middle East is now threatened with apprehension of a new Operation Desert Storm. In fact, with Bush, Sharon and Powell in power, ME peace process has once again become uncertain. Although George Bush was swift to congratulate Sharon, the other world leaders, except the Prime Minister of Britain, have expressed caution, if not outright concern about advancing the peace process and stability in the region. President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Yasser Arafat of Palestine now have every reason to be more worried about a bumpy future ahead.

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OPINION

The Daily Star and the Prime Minister

OMAR KARIM

IT was amusing to read the recent article by Fakhruddin Ahmad from Princeton, joining the self-aggrandizing chorus that increasingly permeates the editorial content and frequent Op Ed page articles in The Daily Star. This presumptuous and conceited practice on the part of this news daily has been accentuated after the recent 10-year anniversary.

This quality of acute and arrogant self-aggrandizing is something The Daily Star has in common with our honorable Prime Minister. The recent divergence between the two legends in their own minds as to who asked the question regarding the possible resignation of the President is a case in point. From accounts in both The Daily Star and its sister publication, Prothom Alo, it is clear that the Prime Minister has made a faux pas. Rather than owning up and apologizing, she went into her customary vitriol. She obviously believes in the axiom, "Offence is the best form of defence," something we learned in Military Science at Cadet College.

It is a moot to see that the PM is on the offensive and The Daily Star has assumed the defensive posture, even though the newspaper has the facts on its side. How did it ever get into this situation? I strongly believe this is a result of practices of appeasement and retreat that The Daily Star has pursued with respect to the ruling culture, especially the Prime Minister. This started before the last general elections, when each major political party had to face a panel of journalists on BTV. I remember both Mahfuz Anam and Abed Khan were in that partisan panel. They displayed their latent preference by lobbying lollypop questions to Sheikh Hasina and Tofael Ahmed, with the predictable Awami League election propaganda responses. The nonpartisan, objective and dispassionate viewers, learned absolutely nothing new from the programme other than the rehash of the Awami League election manifesto, full of hyperbole, platitudes and false promises. There was no follow up, no attempt to question the misrule of the previous Awami League regime, no effort

to ask tough questions about BAKSAL and widespread atrocities of that regime and no stab at holding them accountable for the misdeeds of the first Awami League government. All of these were just glossed over to offer a platform to the Awami League for propagandizing.

The BNP question hour, on the other hand, was a different story altogether. Abed Khan was rightly and ignominiously excluded by the BNP from the panel. The panelists, including Mahfuz Anam, asked an extremely and appropriately tough set of questions. By treating the Awami League with a soft set of gloves and roly-poly lollypop queries and being conduits to their assumption of power, Mahfuz Anam and others had paved the way to the primrose path, where the ruling regime, especially the head of government, feel they can get away with anything, including misrepresentation of facts, and gross embellishment of their puny little accomplishments.

Whenever there is a crisis or when a seminal event of national proportion occurs, there is the added concern that Mahfuz Anam will come out with his archetypal patented puritanical and self-righteous front-page piece, written in archaic and puerile Pakistani inter-school debating style. The articles mainly and probably serve the purpose of enhancing self-satisfaction, self-actualization and self-importance. I am yet to see one of those so far have any tangible, meaningful and substantive outcome. The contents are as obvious and routine as the need for good governance and world peace and the indignation usually expressed amount to an attempt to foist an arbitrary standard of behaviour that has no objective criteria.

The Daily Star, along with Prothom Alo, takes great pride in professing truth, justice, fairness and being on the side of the pro-liberation agenda. In the current context, the definition of pro-liberation side is you have to be pro-Awami League and pro-India, no matter what harm Indian policies do to Bangladesh, and be a part of the mutual back-scratching society, espoused by the opportunist, duplicitous so called intellectuals,

some of whom performed dubious pro-Pakistani activities.

If you are not an Awami League partisan and possess an anti-Indian outlook, you will not be considered a pro-liberation type, even if you actively participated in the liberation war. The fact that almost 30 years after independence, we have this backdated and outmoded debate between the pro and anti liberation sides, mainly foisted on us by the so-called liberation supporters, shows how backward thinking and rearward linking a nation this is. When Vietnam is holding joint naval exercises with the US, when most forward thinking nations are looking for avenues to enhance the condition of the people through trade and other gainful economic practices, we are mired in this useless, divisive and detrimental discussion of pro and anti liberation forces. Would any good come off this time consuming and discordant exercise? Absolutely not!

This is an avenue for certain vested interests to exhibit their ideological purity, their abiding allegiance to the ruling party, and polarize the nation to serve their narrow self interests. This is also a way for the liberation elements, very similar to the religious partisans during the Pakistan era, to garner and relish government largesse and favours, such as foreign trips and government contracts.

Another activity that The Daily Star and its sister publication are involved in the big way is maligning and baiting the so-called fundamentalist group. No progressive, educated and free thinking person can be fond of the discriminatory religious edict or fatwa. No one with good sense supports the mixing and mingling of religion and government. The mantra all over the modern world is the separation of religion and state. We must adhere to this principle and must not allow religious zealots to put impediment in the functioning of a modern state with their medieval ideas and edicts. So then how should we confront the religious fanatics? Through cognitive and rational reasoning and political process and not by criminalizing their activities or banning their ideological preaching. There are fundamentalists even in

the US, which has a long tradition of secularism, and constitutionally mandated separation of church and state. These fundamentalists want to turn the US into a Christian nation. Their zealotry, and all their huff and puff is confronted generally by the public, government and the media by benign neglect, unless they commit an act of crime through the missionary zeal. That has been a very effective method.

But our so-called liberation elements will not let it happen, even when the influence of the religious right has been on the wane, as exhibited by the precipitous drop in the number of Jamaat-e-Islam MPs in the current parliament compared to the previous one. Come to think of it, the religious fundamentalists and these liberation supporters have an intensely symbiotic relationship. They thrive and derive motivation, publicity, propaganda and enhanced membership, one of off the other. And unfortunately, The Daily Star and Prothom Alo have been at the forefront of yet another useless debate.

Whenever the government or the functionaries do anything wrong, The Daily Star modus operandi is a balancing act between the government and the main opposition party. The balancing act does not make a newspaper objective and neutral, it just dilutes the effect and by equating government misdeeds with opposition pronouncements or old acts, while in government, it is tantamount to almost condoning the acts of the government. In our country, the ruling party holds all levers of power and authority and has tremendous capacity and capabilities to do harm and create mischief. To put this at par with the activities of the opposition is peculiar to say the least. The main opposition party, BNP, may be a confluence of disparate, often opportunistic, elements, which often says and does things that are foolish to say the least. But they have no power and have frequently been covered by steam rolling of government oppression. BNP may also be the last deterrent against another BAKSAL and all the accoutrements. I have no doubt The Daily Star plays this middle of the road game to keep it in the good books of the govern-

ment and to ingratiate itself to the ruling party. This effectively renders all the editorial sound advice and counsel to the government as innocuous and harmless gestures that the ruling party can ignore or pay scant attention to.

Whenever the Prime Minister says anything remotely or tangentially encouraging, Mahfuz Anam has been quick to respond with a long meandering front-page piece highlighting this empty gesture as hopeful, meaningful and substantive. It may be that whenever the Prime Minister catches a cold, Mahfuz Anam is prone to sneezing. Why does The Daily Star pay such lopsided attention to what she says rather than what she does? Another nagging practice has been publishing government handouts and press releases, lock, stock and barrel, as news items, sometime as the main headline piece. The fact and the truth is that all governments lie, and ours is a pathological liar. Before anything is published as a news item, why doesn't the newspaper verify it from independent sources and give some importance to and include a different point of view?

As for the question regarding the Presidential resignation, it was an important issue and people have a right to know. It was an absolutely legitimate question. The Daily Star, rather than justifying the legitimacy of the question and sticking up for the right of a newsman to ask it, went fishing, trying to disown and disavow any responsibility for it. It did not work. The PM stuck to her guns, claiming provocation from The Daily Star. The long practices of pacification, equivocation and acquiescence on the part of The Daily Star has led to the current state of affairs, where the main victim is the truth. Chickens have come home to roost. The tendency to favour the ruling party in the guise of propping up pro-liberation elements and deliberately, even assiduously, playing the middle of the road game has resulted in this predicament. The Daily Star has only itself to blame for it.

Editor's response

There is obviously a fundamental difference between how The Daily Star and the author of the above critique view the Liberation War and those who are committed to upholding what it stood for. There can be, and are, legitimate differences of view about fundamentalism and how it can be resisted. We disagree with the writer about his view on our Liberation War, and the nature and character of the pro-liberation elements.

As for our role and our commentaries we leave it to our readers to judge us. However from our hugely rising circulation and credibility, we think our readers find our position credible and trustworthy.

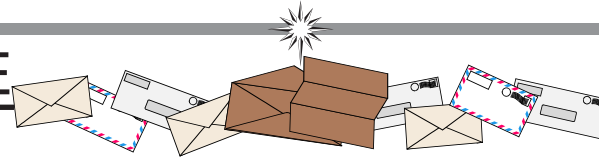
When writing such a judgmental piece the minimum that is expected is that the author gets his facts right (as we advised the PM). The writer attempts to establish the bias of this paper, and its editor, by citing the way he supposedly handled the Awami League and the BNP TV question-answer programmes prior to the 1996 elections. The author writes that, "Remember both Mahfuz Anam and Abed Khan were in that partisan panel. They displayed their latent preference by lobbying lollypop questions to Sheikh Hasina and Tofael Ahmed..." He writes eloquently about the AL TV programme and compares The Daily Star editor's apparent role in the BNP TV programme to lay the foundation of his argument about the Star's so-called bias towards the present ruling party.

However, the fact is that The Daily Star editor was not in the panel of journalists for the AL-BNP programme because the AL did not find him acceptable. How is that for a fact, Mr Karim?

As for the comment about a "self-aggrandizing chorus that increasingly permeates the editorial content and frequent Op-ed page articles" what The Daily Star would like to say is that we are proud of our services to our readers and we see nothing wrong in occasionally publishing their responses. It is a standard international journalistic practice.

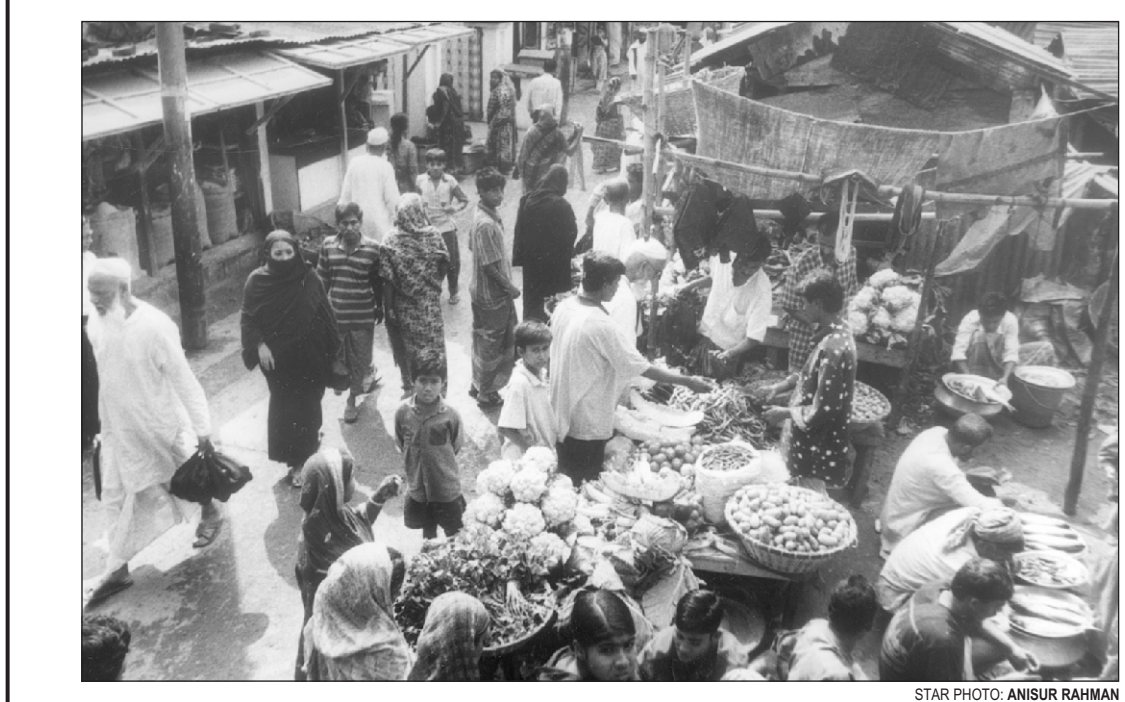
The writer has the right to state his views. We have published his critique virtually unedited because we have the self-confidence to take the bricks-bats, with the bouquets.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Illegal market flouting the law

Thousands of people travel on this main thoroughfare in Pearabagh, Mughbazaar. Their movement has been seriously restricted by an illegal market that was built a month ago, right in the middle of the main road! The market is owned by local mastans who are flouting the law openly. We call upon the authorities to stop this outrage at once. Remove the illegal market. Clear up the road for the public's convenience.

ies!

I am a second year student of BSC in computer engineering at BUET. We are suffocating and suffering from delays at BUET. Three academic years have passed since my HSC, but my second year exams have still not been held. At BUET, a four-year course consumes about six or seven years of our lives. One obvious cause is the political unrest in this country, but there are other reasons as well. Each semester has 14 weeks but the syllabus is too large for us to complete within that time. Students end up demanding a three-week PL (preparation leave for examinations). At first, the authorities refuse the demand, but eventually, as examinations come closer, students become more agitated and the demand is finally met. Because it happens in the eleventh hour, students get more upset and sometimes one group will immediately start another demand for PL. This often causes the university to close sine die. All this could be avoided if the term comprised of 13 weeks and the PL of three weeks. If this were done, I am sure, no student would demand to postpone the exam. Each term would start and end on time. Another reason for delays is that we have a two-month vacation after

each semester. We, students, don't want this long break but the authorities insist! Will somebody solve this problem at once?

Saifullah, BUET, Dhaka

Hartal tactics

The hartal is a curse. We lose millions of taka and dollars every day. Whom can we hold responsible for this? Only the government or only the opposition? We all are responsible for this destructive type of politics. Our government claims to be very popular but during more than four years, in the name of democracy, Bangladesh has been leaning towards an autocracy. If that were not true, how could one explain why parliament is attended by one party? What is the necessity of the PSA (Public Safety Act) and its partisan application? We are aware that during these hartals the government party kills rivals in the name of peace in broad day light. In my opinion the majority wants hartal but to be imposed tightly, not loosely. Dr Sultan Ahmed Dhaka

Minister's Shoes

I agree with Ms Tasmina Khan Majles (February 12) about the minister's shocking behaviour. When the whole nation was mourning a train crash (February 8) the communications minister Anwar Hossain was more concerned about his shoes. The picture of the minister at the crash site riding on the shoulders of two men with a smile on his face reminds me the last days of president Idi Amin of Uganda. The episode is disgraceful for the nation.

Shamsar

Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Honest Indian police

I was travelling by public coach from Jaipur to Delhi earlier this month, at night. I was amazed to see that there was no chaos and confusion at the bus terminal. Buses left on schedule, irrespective of the number of passengers. There was no intimidation and coercing of the passengers by the transport workers, no sign of any musclemen. This reminded me of our Gabtoli and Saydabad bus terminals where the exact opposite scenario exists. Innocent and poor passengers remain at the mercy of middle-

men, pick-pockets, muggers and the un-civilised transport workers. One remains wary all the time.

As we proceeded to Delhi we stopped for refreshments at a wayside hotel. A passenger failed to make it back to the bus. About 45 minutes later, our bus was stopped by the police. They were searching for a bag that the passenger had apparently left behind on the bus. The unclaimed carrier bag was ultimately detected. The bus was ordered to wait until the passenger arrived, about another forty five minutes later. Both the bus driver and the conductor seemed to be afraid of the police. They kept apologising to the police as well as to the passengers repeatedly. I also noted that passengers boarding the bus later were charged the correct fare.

For those who travel bus in Bangladesh it will not be difficult to compare the Indian example to our own. We are no where near having an honest police force. Will our government and the police take any note of the above?

ABM Zakaria, Mirpur, Dhaka. Don't delay our stud-