

City Corporation election elicits fear of a mastan take-over

Will this lead to formal rule by muscle?

THE City Corporation elections are still a few beats away from full throttle campaigning and enthusiastic street politicking for particular candidates hasn't been kicked off in full. However, it has become one of the more well discussed such elections ever for the wrong reasons. That is largely because many of the candidates are identified criminals and anti-socials with many police cases against them. There is fear that this will lead to criminal laundering just like money laundering whereby legitimate criminals become legitimate law-keepers. There is concern bordering on fear that through this election *mastans* will become *halal* leaders in the neighbourhoods and a new class will emerge with both muscle and municipal clout far beyond the reach of law.

Media was screaming about the entry of *mastans* into the election fray but it was generally ignored and argued that there are no legal barriers to prevent them becoming candidates. Some excuses were also given including their past criminal records being a part of their politically correct past. However, public and media concern often delivered with irrefutable evidence has finally provoked the Election Commission to order the police that identified criminals in the electoral race be arrested. Media has however reported that it came with a qualification regarding who should and who shouldn't be reined in.

Meanwhile, it has been declared that the military will be on duty in connection with the election because certain wards and areas are extremely prone to violence and the EC's request has been taken into cognizance. Obviously, elections are more about periods of extreme violence management that is beyond the capacity of civil officials and the security apparatus has to be brought in to do the job.

But the confusion comes at a time when there are reasons to believe that public interest in this election has substantially dwindled and compared to previous elections is noticeably low. This is of course partly because the election is shorn of real contest and limited to the ruling party and a few independents. In fact, this is more about intra-party rivalry than contest between two parties.

However, the prime public concern is that of criminals becoming part of the municipal administration. What the municipal elections may do is to formalize that process when being a criminal is no crime and elections are held to ensure that they are mainstreamed into the process of governance.

We however believe that much can be won through an energetic election and on taking just a few steps by the administration the genuine candidates can participate even if that is a one-sided election. Anything may be better than seeing professional criminals elected to power.

Will somebody listen?

Proposed ban on Media at JS worrying

Access to information is security to freedom of the state

A Bill has been placed in the Jatiya Sangsad proposing to restrict media access to information relating to certain matters discussed in the parliament on grounds of confidentiality and in the interest of the state. This Bill has further proposed that those who violate such strictures will be punished by the parliament that will act as prosecution and the judge. This is a serious issue raising matters fundamental to the functioning of all the principal organs of the state.

In full, this is about reporting in the media on matters that are discussed in the House committees where administrative issues are brought in. It's being argued that many confidential documents and matters are placed in such meetings and by reporting them will affect the state and its functioning will be embarrassed. It doesn't explain how by limiting access to information the state will be served.

It should be noted as well that in a recent meeting with media leaders, the Speaker of the National Assembly had spoken out against censorship and withholding of information. His remarks were clearly on the side of responsible inter-action. One appears to see a contradiction between the objectives of this proposed Bill and what the Speaker stated.

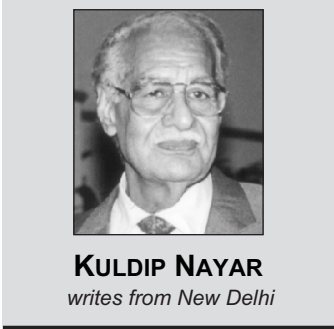
The proposed Bill has also mentioned that the media is liable to be punished for any remarks against MPs deemed to be seditious, malicious or in any way seen as obstructing the functioning of the parliament. We believe that the concern regarding the proposed Bill lies in the growing attitude amongst a section of the lawmakers who fail to recognize the role of the media as a monitor on behalf of the people. There is a confrontational aspect of this attitude that militates against the spirit of what the republic stands for.

It has always been agreed that checks and balances provide the best drive for democracy. In this case, such a Bill if passed into law will threaten that delicate relationship which ensures rule by and on behalf of the people.

It would seem that the Speaker when he last spoke to the media had the right ideas and those were welcomed and it seems that the new Bill has a different approach. How the future Bangladesh is constructed will depend on which road this country takes. As for us, we have made our position clear.

It's far too serious a matter to be left in the hands of the House only.

The lost leader



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

DEAR Reader, I am looking for Atal Behari Vajpayee, the person whom I have known – or at least I had thought so – for nearly 35 years. He was liberal, open and by no stretch of the imagination pro-Hindutva. He and LK Advani represented two different streams of thought – Vajpayee shunning the hard line while Advani associating himself, overtly or covertly, with Hindu chauvinist forces.

I felt unhappy whenever Vajpayee stood at attention at the RSS parades for the *sanchalaks* to prove that he was as obedient to them as any other in their ranks. Still I believed that his approach towards the RSS was more realistic than real. Sometimes he would himself say that he was a *swayamsevak*. I too wondered whether he was only a *mukut*, as an RSS ideologue once said, behind which was an embodiment of saffronised thoughts. I rationalised that he did not believe in the RSS philosophy and went along because of his past association.

I did not like his leaving the Janata, a product of the struggle against the emergency, preferring links with the RSS to a party with pluralistic ethos. When he joined the BJP I was confident that he would carry his liberal thoughts wherever

he went.

I recall when he visited London in 1990 – I was then India's High Commissioner to the UK – Advani's rath yatra to Ayodhya was in progress. I asked Vajpayee somewhat sarcastically why he had come here when the rath yatra was on in India. He said: "Those who are Ram bhakt (devotees), have gone to Ayodhya but those who are desh *bhakt*, have come to London." The reaction was so spontaneous and so transparent that there was no doubt where his heart was. I know of a stage in his

His stand that there should be either a settlement between the two communities over the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute or a court verdict is commendable. But it showed him in a poor light when he compromised with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at Ayodhya, even though he averted the confrontation.

Sending a civil servant from the PMO for receiving the two 'shilas' (stones), which would be used in the construction of the temple, is nothing by itself. But the VHP has inter-

unsparing in his criticism of Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi and the authorities when he went to Gujarat. But when he summoned Modi to New Delhi, he was lenient. He was a chief minister who had miserably failed to cope with the situation, even if the allegations of his complicity were wrong. And here was the Prime Minister who did not utter even a word of criticism in the open. The PMO was at pains at that time to tell the media in private that Modi was put on the mat. Maybe, he was.

before my eyes when at the launching of a book, he said it would be better to keep one's distance from the kind of Hindutva which was being practised by some. He was critical of Hindu fundamentalism.

But there he stopped. This is his problem these days. He stops where he should begin. His government has taken no action against the VHP or its other militant wing, the Bajrang Dal. The Prevention of Terrorist Ordinance (POTO) has been made into an Act. What for? No communalist has been detained.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Vajpayee is getting less and less convincing as days go by. The defeat of the BJP, first in Punjab, then in UP and now in Delhi, is the defeat of those forces which Vajpayee resisted first and accepted later. He can still recover lost ground by confronting the fundamentalists. Sometimes I feel as if he is traversing a path which is not to his liking but does so because he has no better alternative. He will be surprised to find the support he has once he steps out from the beaten track.

political career when he wondered whether he fitted into the BJP. I believed that he was the right man in the wrong party and that he would change one day.

But I find him changing and tilting towards the saffron forces. I can understand the pressures exerted on him within the party. I can understand his isolation. I can understand his exasperation. But I cannot understand his giving up without joining battle. He is the same Vajpayee who had picked up the phone and had told the then Gujarat chief minister Keshubhai Patel to drop the anti-conversion bill.

I feel sorry for Vajpayee when he seeks temporary solutions to the situations he should fight against.

He asked the two stones to be placed on the 67-acre land around the disputed site. He should have been firm from the beginning and sent a no-nonsense message. But he wilted. Earlier, he used to stand out in the Sangh *parivar* crowd. Now it is becoming increasingly difficult to spot him there. Vajpayee the man has become Vajhpayee the mukut.

Vajpayee's antennas were so sensitive at one time that he would know where to go to pacify people. Now they don't seem that sensitive. Or how do you explain that he postponed his visit to Ahmedabad for five weeks? That some consideration weighed with him is evident. But this itself indicates a change. He was

The horrified public, particularly the Muslims, expected the removal of Modi, or at least an open reprimand of a person who neither protected their lives, nor their property, let alone their dignity. Vajpayee must be naïve if he has not seen through the pattern in the pre-planned rioting. Modi would have been a chastened person if he had been taken to task in the first instance. He reportedly asked Hindus the other day to "protest." No wonder, another round of disturbances took place. A Hindu girl was stripped and killed because she was married to a Muslim and a Hindu woman was murdered for having saved Muslims. Even if Modi is sacked now, the blot will remain.

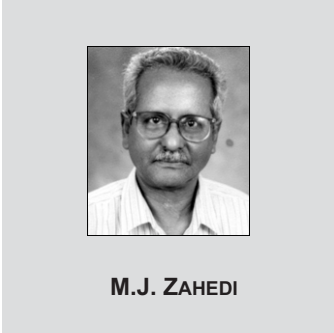
A bit of the old Vajpayee fitted

One person recently interned was Yasin Malik of the Hurriyat Conference in Kashmir. He should be tried in the open court if the government has firm evidence. The invocation of POTO raises serious doubts.

Still the same Vajpayee asked the Gujarat government to stop the VHP's provocative plan to carry the ashes (asthi) of the Godhra carnage victims in a procession throughout the country. Like Advani's rath yatra, it would have ignited communal passions all over.

Vajpayee's stint as the Janata Dal foreign minister was so accommodative that till today it is remembered in Pakistan as the golden period of relations between the two countries. He talked of soft borders although

Campaign against corrupt politicians?



M.J. ZAHEDI

AS THE DATE for elections next October is approaching nearer, President Pervez Musharraf seems to be finalizing the list of his political supporters. He is meeting politicians and parties who are ready to defend his policies and, particularly, the proposed referendum. An article in daily The Nation last week on the subject said the President seems to have chosen the PML(N) as a long-term ally. The choice is understandable, the writer said, 'as the party consists of politicians with a long record of support for military governments'. What matters to them is a share in power irrespective of whether they get it from a democratic government or military rulers. Also supporting him are very few small parties or groups who have not been able to make any dent in the country's politics on their own and hope to reach the assemblies with the support of the government.

At first the General had desired to treat the PML(Q) as the king's party. But soon he realised that it would not be a good idea to put all eggs in one basket. The thinking led him to seek the support of other parties. These included the various parties/groups led by former President Farooq Leghari (Millat Party), Imran Khan (Tehrik-e-Insaf), Omar Asghar Khan (Qaumi Jamhoori Party) and Maulana Tahirul Qadri (Pakistan Awami Tehrik). These parties' support to the government's policies is assured because they know that their future is tied up with the military regime and they are expected to fight fiercely on its behalf against the opposition. Besides, these parties have supported the idea of a referendum and they favour the government's assistance in the US-led war against terrorism.

The government however either deliberately ignored or failed to see the problems it would face for patronizing these groups. Some of them are known supporters of the status quo. It would be hard for President Musharraf to realize his goals for modernizing the society and introducing honesty in political culture. The PML(Q) represents retrogressive rural elites and has always sought collaboration with the rural bureaucracy to win elections. The question is, how will the government devolve power to the lowest level, push its various radical agendas, for example, regarding women, or provide genuine representation to the working class, when it will have to depend on people who have all along worked hard to preserve whatever is backward in the country's political culture?

The question naturally arises: how will the government justify its campaign against corrupt politicians, the stated basis for the military's assumption of power? The corrupt rural elite will invariably extract a price for their collaboration. Once in power, they will misuse authority, indulge in cronyism and ignore merit. The strange bedfellows might in the long run turn out to be a source of embarrassment. But then considerations of this type have however rarely deterred military rulers in the past from allying with such elements.

The government too perhaps is not confident of achieving its immediate goals with the help of those it has chosen as allies. There are many who think that even the assistance rendered to these political allies by the district nazims (the elected head of the district setup) may fail to ensure the government to win the referendum. This explains, according to the writer of the article, President Musharraf's keenness to

seek tactical alliances with the various components of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). Leaders of the religious parties who had been arrested for criticizing the government for supporting the US war against terrorism have been quietly set free. In spite of the current ban on political activities, strictly applied in the case of ARD,

the Jamaati-Islami was allowed to hold a public meeting on March 23 (Pakistan Day). What is more, the state-controlled Pakistan Television covered the event.

Despite the speech he made at the meeting, rejecting the government's external and internal policies, the Jamaat chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad has been extended an

invitation to meet the President. And to further humour the religious parties, the PTV has been instructed, it is said, not to patronize programmes that uphold Western culture. Even educational institutions have been, it is also said, instructed to discourage musical functions.

The Jamaat is double-minded

OPINION

Get into the hard task, please

MOHAMMED IDRIS

AS our nation is not without history it is high time we broached our past and present because a memorable past and an active present ensure a better future. I am an apolitical person and man of ordinary prudence. I would therefore like to pose a few questions to those actively involved or dabbling in politics for the sake of my own knowledge in particular and of the people in general whether we should put the nation before the political leaders or the political leaders before the nation?

Do we practise politics for our selfish gains? What are our achievements in its true sense since we emerged as an independent nation in 1971? To the generation under thirty years of age the history of the great war of liberation of our country is to be told without any tint.

Now we have had a sudden brain-wave as to determine whether the portrait of Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman should be hung or not or whether the portraits of both Sheikh Mujib and Zia should be displayed side by side. Instead of giving thought to building the future of the nation, it is rather sad note that our two leaders, Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia and Sheikh Hasina, the Leader of the Opposition, have engaged themselves creating an unnecessary issue which may lead the nation to a division.

Those of us who belong to the old generation know the why and where of the liberation war which was thrust upon the Bengalis by the leaders of the western wing of Pakistan who considered themselves as rulers and the Bengalis as under their subjugation. Bengalis who constituted the majority are by nature freedom loving and do not submit to subjugation. The people of today's Bangladesh rose as one man against the Pakistani rulers. Both Sheikh Mujib and Ziaur Rahman played their respective roles according to their respective stature at that point of time.

They have gone down in history in golden letters and the people of Bangladesh can never be ungrateful not to pay their tributes and due honour to these great personalities. As reverence is a matter of mind and not to be kept in framed glasses, I simply wonder why our two respected leaders are squabbling over the display, or otherwise of the portrait of Mujib and Zia who have earned their rightful place in the national history?

Begum Khaleida Zia and Sheikh Hasina should be tolerant of the view-points of each other and follow the golden mean because their united effort is required to rid the country of myriad of problems. The outside world is taking a dim view of our leadership and its ability to manage the country.

It is my personal conjecture that if the two leaders suffering from personality clash get together to address the problem of lawlessness prevailing all over the country, they will prove their quality of leadership. Bringing the situation under control

and putting things back on track is an uphill task. The nation today is hostage in the hands of terrorists, miscreants, and hoodlums.

Bangladesh is today one of the poorest nations of the world and has been dubbed as number one corrupt country. Fighting corruption, mismanagement, insecurity of life and property, gun-toting goons, drug and women trafficking, and then planning and recasting the systems are the Himalayan tasks before the government which has not been able to show much success so far.

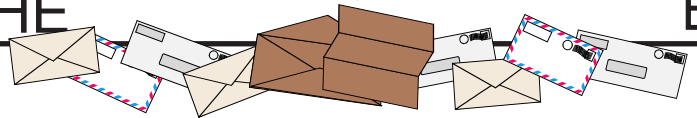
Bangladesh is today as sick as Turkey once was. But today it is a strong Turkey from sick Turkey, and why? It is because of a benevolent leader named Kamal Ataturk to whom nothing was supreme but to build Turkey for the posterity. He succeeded in his mission because he gave no quarter to sentiment or emotion and removed any obstacle that came his way to build the modern Turkey of today. Let our leaders do it for us, please.

advertisements that exist already.

As for Mr Firoz, I have the same thing to say. As a student of a business school I myself know that advertisements are 'the' most powerful promotional tools. And as about for Mr Zahid Hasan modelling for tobacco, it is entirely his choice and I do not think any of us has that much right to forcefully comment it was unethical or 'just for money'. One more thing, like Ms Hossain, Mr Firoz did not read carefully when I mentioned the word "solely" before the sentence that commercials or stars should be held responsible for an individual's bad habits. Of course these factors are influential, but they are 'not' alone responsible for that decision. The individual's mental state and various factors like influence of peers are equally responsible.

Arani Siddiqi
IBA, DU

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



We need a defence purchase policy

I would like to know what exactly the role of our army is? If it is primarily as peacekeepers, then what was the logic behind the purchases of the MIGs? If it is to defend our country against India and Burma then I have the same question, why MIGs? If it is to give help in natural disasters, then why not more helicopters?

The army's objectives should be spelled out and a defence procurement strategy should be mapped out to fulfil these requirements.

MIGs are not relevant in the disaster relief scenario, more helicopters might be. Other fighter planes are irrelevant because India's airforce is far superior and in a defensive scenario Surface to Air Missile (SAMs) would be a more cost-effective alternative. Tanks and armoured carriers are also not relevant in a primarily riverine country.

Given our limited budget we should focus and buy only what is essential.

Dorji
Dhaka

The portrait issue: A suggestion

Instead of deciding whose portrait to hang-- of Bangabandhu or Shaheed Zia or both, we can opt for an alternative, which might keep both AL and BNP happy. A law can be enacted which will allow the ruling party to hang portrait(s) of any people they like in all government and semi-government offices.

The cost should be borne by the party and not by the people. At the end of 5-year term the outgoing government will take away all the portraits and thereby disallow their opponents to damage or desecrate the same. During the caretaker government's rule all the walls will remain bare. With the take-over of

the newly elected government all new portraits will be hung.

The suggestion, as mentioned above, may look like an outrageous one. But our politicians are no less outrageous and they might well accept it!

Ahmed Zamil
IBA, DU

A country of contradiction

The news headlines of the last few days have produced some unique situations, which is actually "normal" for this unique country.

The infamous group of 22 labour organisations of Chittagong Port has declared that the Port would be closed down if any "secret" agreement is signed for the Private Port: "the reason for the closure of port is so secret that we don't even know what it's closed for!"

Sheikh Hasina has said that she would go to the Parliament for a day

just to explain the reasons for their abstention and planned resignations: "I am here to tell you why we can't be here!"

And lastly Khaleida Zia has proposed to end controversy for once and for all by displaying three portraits: "I am bringing in another controversy to put an end to all previous controversies!"

A Distressed Observer
Chittagong

Army at WASA

It is quite a pathetic civilian administration that cannot trust its own people not to steal water. Deploying the Army does nothing to address the root cause of water shortage that is system loss. Nor does it address the issue of why the police cannot protect WASA facilities or why privatisation may not solve this a persistent problem. The same knee jerk reaction to traffic problems gave us a few MPs on the roads for a while, but with no long-term benefit.

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

sible institution then let them run the whole country.

MA
Dhaka

Cigarette ad and our responsibility

In reply to Ms Hossain and Mr Firoz, I must firstly state that I am not a nicotine lover. The aim of the letter was to look at commercials and promotional activities of a demerit good from a neutral point.

Ms Hossain thinks that the reference to the Benson and Hedges Star Search Contest is irrelevant, and I would say that she has failed to recognise what importance it has in relation to the topic. As she had mentioned that the newspaper commercials of cigarettes play a significant role in increasing the number of potential smokers, I referred to the pageant as a bigger promoter of cigarettes.

One wrongdoing was not justify-