

AL to hold direct party election

Inner party democracy is the need of the hour

WE welcome the decision by the main opposition Awami League to form its new central committee by holding direct election in the long awaited triennial central council to be held in December. We view this as one of the most important signs of democratization within a political party. We had witnessed in the past that since early eighties, the central committee including the party's Secretary General was selected, in most undemocratic manner, by the party chief. Though delegates from around the country turned up in full force to participate in the councils, but in the end, it was left to the party chief to make the final decision. Therefore those, who may not have been the right person for his or her designated post, got elected, probably because the person was a favourite of the party chief. Thus the trend to please the hierarchy and gain top positions in the central committee became the norm even though the selections created displeasure among the grassroots leaders and activists. We have criticised this practice and repeatedly called for a change in the system, but all in vain. Therefore the recent major shift in party policy comes as a happy surprise. We hope that this step is not only for public consumption and that the party is sincere about establishing and practising democracy within its fold.

This step will diminish the 'yes men' from the party, who until now had been more powerful than the others. It has been more than unfortunate to witness our national leaders giving eloquent speeches on democracy, but not being able to practise the same within their party. We hope this would be the beginning of a new era in party politics. We would appeal to all the other parties to practise such democratic policy as well not for just their sake, but also for the sake of the country. At the same time we would urge Sheikh Hasina to maintain this practise so that democratically elected leaders could carry the responsibilities of the party on their shoulders.

Rajuk in the dock

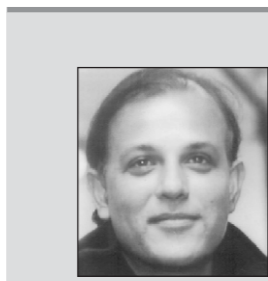
The plot allocation irregularities syndrome

AS more details on irregularities in plot allocation for the much-talked-about Nikunja residential project come out in the open, one wonders what actually holds the government back from taking comprehensive measures to rid the Rajuk of corruption and mismanagement. Whenever the city development authority undertakes any residential project, reports of gross irregularities in plot allocations pour in from all corners. Nepotism, favouritism, bribe, you name it; every known corrupt practice comes into play. The print media has unfailingly exposed irregularities in plot allocation besides running in-depth reports and scathing editorial comments on rampant corruption and pervasive mismanagement in the Rajuk ranks. Unfortunately, successive governments, for reasons best known to themselves, have never gone beyond such knee-jerk reactions as suspension of one residential project or the other, termination of services of one official or the other, etc. No government has ever tried to get to the bottom of the problem, as corruption and mismanagement have spread their roots deeper into the Rajuk.

What the official inquiry has so far unearthed about irregularities in plot allocation for the Nikunja project has a familiar tinge about it. Plots for people who have not even applied or own more than one residential plot in the capital or doubly compensating a select group for the government's land acquisition whereas many victims have gone uncompensated have been major features in every residential project Rajuk has undertaken so far. The inquiry into irregularities in Nikunja plot allocation is not unique either. It so happens that every time there is any allegation of corruption, the first thing the government does is form a probe committee. Almost invariably the probe committee takes more time to look into the allegations and whatever reports or recommendations it sets forth is neither made public nor followed up.

The point we are trying to make here is that the Rajuk has completely lost its credibility and unless there is a major shake-up whereby the corrupt elements are got rid of and a system of transparency and accountability is established it would never be restored.

On aid and image



K.A.S. MURSHID

ASK a simple question and you will never get a simple answer. The chances are that if you ask a complex question your answer may turn out to be quite simple. Let us start with a simple question: do we need aid? Well, yes and no. On the one hand we certainly need foreign aid to finance a large part of the ADP while at the same time it is correct that often 'unworthy' projects get included just because cheap funds are available. In other words such projects would never be chosen if the government had to fund it from own resources. So, do we need aid? Well, as I said, yes and no!

I recently witnessed an interesting conversation between a visiting dignitary and a Bangladeshi development expert. The dignitary asked a difficult question: 'What development impact does ALL the money we give to Bangladesh have on its economy? Does it really make much of a difference?' Our development expert gave us the benefit of his

profound wisdom: 'Well, the money is stolen by corrupt politicians and government officials'.

Visiting dignitary (VD): Really? What is the mechanism for stealing? I mean the aid money comes in for a specific purpose, let us say. How is it stolen? Can people just take it and put in their pockets?

Development expert (DE): Yes, exactly! They just take the money and put it in their pocket (making

irritating). I smiled wryly.

What exactly is our record with respect to the utilization of foreign aid? As always, the answer is usually boringly complicated. I have had the occasion to examine the question of aid utilization a couple of years ago when I looked at aid-financed projects, such as embankments, roads, schools as well as 'soft' projects like training programmes, safety nets and

during the course of my investigations: flood gates that would not open; embankments that were too high (low) or erected in a flood-free area; roads that avoid the main village to end abruptly at the residence of the Minister's 'permanent home address', and so on -- the usual stuff really and nothing there to write home about. It would not be fair to say however, that anything remotely close to the 80 percent

figure for a poor country like ours, it is a far cry from some of the figures that have emanated from some very respectable members of my profession. Perhaps they have been able to devise a far more accurate methodology than I have. It is even possible that their information set is much richer than mine is. What other explanation can there possibly be?

So this brings me to my next

inquiry is unlikely to be complimentary. In defence I would merely state that no REAL harm is intended as the exaggeration tends to be 'ornamental' in nature, intended to hold the attention of the audience -- and if that warrants a slight dose of self-defamation, then so be it!

And at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. There is sometimes a tendency to confuse and confound the difference between reality and rhetoric. For example, there continues to be endless academic discussion of 'the meaning of poverty' in its 'many dimensions' and how best it should be addressed. While these are very worthy discussions to have, there is always a slight danger that talk becomes an end in itself, and talking about poverty almost becomes a substitute for actually DOING something about it. Ultimately, however, reality comes crashing in, as it is usually in the habit of doing. So if my friend the DE is prone to exaggeration, so be it -- I can live with that. As the comment of the irritated diplomat proved, even foreigners aren't as glib as we sometimes take them to be. Let me state plainly what I mean: if it is our image that worries us so, the answer must surely be to change the reality on the ground rather than cry 'traitor' for speaking out loud or even too loud. On the other hand if you find yourself somewhat irritated, rest assured that you have my full sympathy.

Dr K A S Murshid is an economist and Research Director, BIDS.

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

Clearly, we have many faults and we are not particularly shy of talking about those, either amongst ourselves or with foreigners. Indeed, it seems we like nothing better than to talk about our faults, especially with foreigners -- this is an act that seems to give us intense pleasure. I would not want to speculate about the origins of this instinct, as such an inquiry is unlikely to be complimentary. In defence I would merely state that no REAL harm is intended as the exaggeration tends to be 'ornamental' in nature, intended to hold the attention of the audience -- and if that warrants a slight dose of self-defamation, then so be it!

appropriate hand gestures).

I looked on aghast while the DE continued: 'You know, the General Secretary of the Economic Association presented a paper recently in which he showed that 80 percent of the aid was misappropriated, one way or the other'. So, there we were, faced with impeccable statistics from an impeccable source. Who were we to question the veracity of these facts? Noting my acute discomfort, a senior diplomat seated next to me whispered softly 'sometimes your compatriots can be very

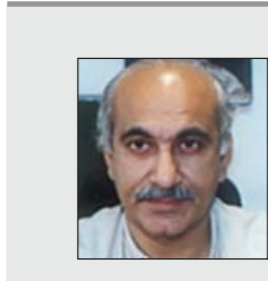
improving educational quality in primary schools. Now it goes without saying that if you steal 80 percent of the funds of a physical infrastructure project, for example, then the height of your flood protection structure would be only two feet instead of ten, or the width of your road would be two feet instead of ten. In other words, it is highly likely that many such projects would exist in fiction only or even when actually in existence, would be completely dysfunctional. I must say that I have run into all kinds of horror stories

figure was in evidence. In general, my view is that most projects are able to deliver (including Food for Works programmes) although clearly there are inefficiencies and wastages. Even the leakages associated with the Food for Education programme (that has come in for much criticism in recent months) was unable to hit the 80 percent mark! The extent of the wastage will vary from project to project and from case to case no doubt, but generally it is unlikely to exceed 30 percent. While even this is a large and 'unaf-

question: Do we sometimes overstate the negative things about ourselves? Is it also true that we take intense pleasure in being self-disparaging? If so, why? And finally, does it matter?

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The other opinion



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is one opinion poll which is totally accurate, without any margin of error, devoid of any imponderable variable, and above criticism. It is called an election. There can be no two opinions, as it were, about the results of an election.

The history of elections can rarely have seen a period such as the one we witnessed in the last few weeks. In the last six weeks or so, all the three names dominant in the news have won elections: Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and George Bush.

All right, the elections are hardly alike. In Saddam's Iraq, a second opinion has always been fundamentally injurious to your health. But for some reason the world's most famous dictator found it necessary to throw some kind of moral veil over his regime with an election that gave him 100 per cent of the vote. This was only a marginal improvement upon the past, since Iraqis had traditionally insisted on supporting him with 99 per cent of the vote, so Saddam's popularity in effect increased by only one per cent. But I suppose this complete national unanimity behind the dictator was meant to send a message to someone somewhere that you messed around with Saddam at your own peril. That someone somewhere could not be the Iraqi. The citizens of that unfortunate nation got their message some two decades ago. Was that message meant for George Bush? If so, it should have been formed differently. A 100 per cent vote is too silly an idea to travel anywhere. Saddam may have

friends in the west who are not enthusiastic about the Bush Doctrine for Iraq, but that is not because Brother Hussein deserves to win the Nobel Prize for both Peace and Literature.

Both George Bush and Osama won legitimate elections. Bush's victory was obvious, and will have substantive consequences for the world. His political campaigns of the past year have created a particular mindset in a majority of the Americans, and the rewards are evident. Osama bin Laden and 9/11 created

close either. Where Osama evokes a visceral and emotional response, Saddam Hussein is the more rational enemy. A regime change in Baghdad would mean a profitable shift in the manipulation of vast reserves of energy. It would also complete a chain that would extend direct American control from the Caucasus to Kazakhstan.

The United States takes its role as policeman of the world seriously. It has some half a million troops stationed across the globe, from traditional post-World War II centres

an assertion that the United States has placed a marker on the next energy market.

Iraq is the odd man, or odd power, out. It was not meant to be so. Saddam Hussein was quite a favourite of the American establishment when he provoked Iran into a long, deadly and ruinous war in the Eighties. Saddam was supported by Saudi-Arab money and American hardware. As is well known, George Bush's vice president Dick Cheney is an old hand at making money out of Saddam's Iraq. But Saddam,

between these antagonists of the last quarter century. Do not expect a dramatic makeover of relations, but do not underestimate Iran's desire for a regime change in Baghdad either. Iran's reasons are not the same as America's. Iran has long believed that the Sunni minority of Iraq has denied the Shia majority its due political rights.

But there is a greater irony at play, which has not been recognised sufficiently. Saddam has serious competition on the Muslim street and bazaar. His name no longer

Prime Minister with the help of a secular force like the Pakistan People's Party. How long this hero will remain in public affections is impossible to say. But even if it proves ephemeral tomorrow, it is a fact today.

There is little doubt that George Bush has radicalised Muslims into anti-American postures. The sweeping victory of an Islamist party in secular Turkey is a dramatic instance of the emerging mood. This does not mean that the Islamist party has become an Osama clone, but it has been boosted by the changes taking place in the Muslim mind across the globe. Change is never equal. It must do its work on existing conditions and not all conditions are equally receptive to it. A forest may sprout in one climate and only a bloom in another, but you know that the seed has taken root.

The only certain thing is uncertainty. No one knows the consequences of minor plays, leave alone something as provocative as a war between Anglo-American forces and Iraq. No one knows the meaning of either victory or defeat. Will an American victory over Saddam release a new Kurdish nation that brings Turkey into the war as it seeks to protect its geographical integrity from Kurdish encroachment? Will Iran extend its arc to the Shia regions of Iraq? How much closer will that bring Iran to the borders of Israel? Will the rising tide of sentiment against political Islam tempt extremists in Washington to dream of partition in Egypt and Indonesia?

Uncertainty is a swamp with many sleeping crocodiles and alligators. The United States of America is passing through a phase of its history when it is too powerful militarily to be defeated by anyone, except itself. More empires die of suicide than defeat. As America negotiates its way through the swamp of uncertainty, it might remember that the world may have but a single superpower left, but it has more than one opinion.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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a defined and powerful enemy for America, its first real enemy since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is always more useful if the enemy has a face, and as long as Osama's face was visible on the screen a mass mobilisation of the American mind was easier. But after the victory in Afghanistan Al Qaida disappeared into the shadows and Osama went into oblivion: the enemy became an idea rather than an army. George Bush transferred the American angst very adroitly towards a face it could identify, that of Saddam Hussein.

There were many associate advantages. Osama was an ideological and elusive opponent. This did not make him any less real; what could be more terrifyingly real than 9/11? But America is also a superpower with economic interests and the incumbent White House is focused on energy resources to an unprecedented degree, for reasons both national and personal. Oil is never far away from the White House; but never has oil got this

like South Korea and Germany to new points like Georgia, where some 200 Special Operations soldiers were deployed earlier this year. Why Georgia? And why is Russia so ready to pay a heavy price for the continued occupation of Chechnya, Georgia's neighbour? Both Georgia and Chechnya actually have fairly limited oil and gas reserves, but both small regions are essential routes for the pipelines that take the huge supplies of the Caspian basin to Turkey and Europe. The Russian pipeline, from Baku to Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, goes through Chechnya. Competing US companies want their pipelines to pass through Georgia and Armenia on their way to the west. The new American presence across Central Asia from a small deployment of 300 troops on the Chinese border in Kyrgyzstan, bound to increase, to a more comfortable 1,000 troops in Uzbekistan, keeping local governments in check with their presence and always an excuse for escalation if attacked

fooled into complacency by the record of American support, made the dangerous mistake of having ambitions of his own, that came into direct conflict with the plans of his erstwhile friends. The invasion and seizure of Kuwait tipped the balance in his favour, and that tip created unstable equations. Since then Saddam has, cynically, repositioned himself into a leader of the Muslim street, a pillar against neo-colonialism, raging against America and railing against the "sell-out" governments of the Arab world. The power of this reposition was first demonstrated during the war for the liberation of Kuwait, when, in 1992, despite being on the wrong side of both sense and morality, Saddam Hussein received surging support from the bazaars of the Muslim world.

The present, building confrontation is heavy with various kinds of irony. On the one side, the interests of America and Iran have begun to merge, leading to cautious, and silent strategic cooperation

evokes the emotional appeal of a Saladin giving a call for a legitimate Jihad against the foreign Crusaders. That space has been taken over by Osama bin Laden. Saddam's Saladin-equity has been diluted by Osama. Saddam is now perceived as what he really is: another dictator interested primarily in the protection of the wealth and power of his own family, clique and extended circle of exploiters. The mystique that arose suddenly in 1992 has faded. This will help George Bush. In the short run. There is after all the third victor. Osama bin Laden was the real winner of the fractured elections in Pakistan, if only because he was, for the first time, a legitimate candidate for power through a popular ballot. The alliance of mullahs who won from Balochistan and the Frontier, on the borders of Afghanistan, campaigned in the name of Osama bin Laden. Here was proof that a new hero had arrived, and taken his followers from a lost corner of the political arena to a point where their leader could dream of becoming

OPINION

Bangladesh Railway: Lines leading nowhere!

K NAFEES writes from Texas, USA

THE billion-dollar high speed electric/magnetic train for Bangladesh perhaps would serve better if it remains just a "political rhetoric". If it does remain so, then the devouring of our limited resources will just be limited to the so-called consulting expenses. Bangladesh Railway suffers from this "electric train fantasy" since the mid 1970's. There was always a plan for such "high speed electric trains" with the ruling governments. Forget about economic feasibility, just the thought of getting stuck every half an hour due to load shedding along the Dhaka-Chittagong route will derail any thought of embarking on that adventure. But, let's do little analysis just to see whether this "super train" will reach our destination or not. It was quite interesting that the revenue stream analysis of this so-called "revolutionary" project was not addressed by our esteemed Railway Minister nor by our "visionary bureaucrats" while basking in the glorifying spot light during the announcement. We have not seen

any such projection or forecasting showing the expected cost including the interest expense for the financing, compared with the expected revenue generation. Funny thing is that they totally forgot to mention what would be the target source of revenue for this behemoth project.

During Ershad regime, Bangladesh Railway introduced "Inter-city trains", which pushed this highly unprofitable and corruption-ridden organization to a total financial ruin. One of the main reasons for the huge amount of losses was due to the concentration on "passengers" to earn expected revenue. The financial report for that period showed higher "operational cost recovery" from the "Inter-city trains," but if you take the total cost including allocated depreciation and the financing cost (for the capital expenditure), then it would have "derailed" the whole project. It is worth mentioning about the rampant corruption which went totally unchecked during that period. It was financially futile for Bangladesh Railway, because you cannot cite a single major Railway surviving on "revenue derived

from passengers" alone. The main revenue comes from hauling the "freight". Even in the US, the lone passenger carrier "Amtrak" incurs loss every year, and cannot run without the life saving financial measures from the US Congress. But, look at BNSF, Union Pacific, etc. which are basically "freight carriers", are doing well financially. It is true that in US, freight revenues from long haul distances drive the margin, but Bangladesh's scenario is different, as we do not have good interconnected routes. The high-speed Amtrak train named "Acella" is incurring huge financial losses even in the high usage "North-Eastern" market. And the exorbitant cost of maintenance of these trains are not helping Amtrak's overall financial situation.

The price of the tickets for this so-called "high speed train" in Bangladesh would be astronomically high just to break even. When we say the expected cost is \$1 billion, actually, we tend to forget the total cost over the years. If we say the pay back period is 30 years, then you have to factor in the present value analysis

(timevalue money/interest) for that time span. How about maintenance cost for this highly state of the art railway system? Where would the funds come from to re-invest in new technology? How about environmental issues...like, Bangladesh faces floods every year, not to mention the sabotage during Harats, which will definitely be a recurring financial catastrophe for this project! Where was the detailed analysis regarding these very important factors before making public statements by the railway minister?

What Bangladesh Railway needs is to re-focus on freight trains for better profit margins, and add a parallel railway track between cost of maintenance of these trains are not helping Amtrak's overall financial situation. Currently, we have double lines from Chittagong to Chin Ki Astana, and Dhaka to Tongi; the major part of this route between Chin Ki Astana and Tongi remains a single line (given that we did not add any lines during the last decade!). Also, we must extend the existing rail line from Chittagong (Dohazari/Hathazari) to Cox's

Bazar, which will open up a new market for Railway hauling goods to and from the Burma (Myanmar) border complemented by passenger services. That depends on our vision on the future geo-political and business relationship with Myanmar. In this world of demand and supply, business will find its way to fund projects which yield profit. Most importantly, the outsourcing scheme by Bangladesh Railway may be expanded more to facilitate private investment in this sector paving the way slowly towards privatization ending in multiple publicly held corporations operating in different segments or routes.

But, the key to success remains on the process of "transparency" while doing economic/technical feasibility studies on projects of such magnitudes. The days of rampant under-the-table dealings perpetrated by some or many corrupt leaders and bureaucrats with active help from any financing agencies must be checked through independent and investigative analysis by the mass media and concerned watchdog organizations.

A woman deserves to live with her head held high

ERSHAD KHANDKER

SHE lives in a cloistered cocoon of her own creation. She must because a certain predatory creature, driven by instinct, could impose its unwelcome vile desire on her if she is not careful. Therefore, she practices to dress in a manner to subdue her features, she learns to walk in a certain manner, sit and talk and laugh in a way which will keep her feminine faculties and features well covered so that she can be safe. But she is also endowed with qualities like compassion, love, devotion and unflinching dedication toward her family, courage and resolute steadfastness in the face of tremendous odds. And that unique role of a mother brings out all her qualities out to the surface.

The real world is a place full of the unexpected danger and surprise. The onset of puberty and girlhood and then womanhood is beset with different shades of pain, laughter, and new experiences. There is a whole new and seeder side of society that she starts to experience. All the teachings and preparedness are perhaps not adequate in the face of the unwanted and obnoxious side of certain men. The etiquette and

traits taught by her mother and senior relatives are there solely for the purpose of making sure that she does not have to deal with serious threats to her modesty. But the need to go out and study and work is there. She must make use of the facilities of education and career enhancement that society has made available. She must take her place in the society and make her contribution to social development.

In doing so, she often has to face the terrible acts of sexual harassment in public buses and markets that happen in a society like ours, which claims a predominant position of piety and respect to values! There is overt and covert sexual harassment in work places too. Modern women are stronger in will and determination, the power of preparedness that good grades and academic excellence gives her. She is confident and sure of herself. It is but a well known fact that women all over the world have almost caught up with their male counterparts.

It should surprise and shame us that women in cities like Bombay and Calcutta can safely travel and have a normal life, at least compared to Dhaka. Therefore, the argument that women have precipitated the disrespectful actions from their male

counterparts is perhaps not substantiated. In fact, it is downright bogus. In Colombo women can work and operate with safety and security. In places like the ones mentioned, women dress as they please as long as they are not indecent.

In our society, the social mechanism has no provision or rite where men get to learn that women have to be treated with an understanding of her special place in society. Yongmen for generations see their mothers being totally dominated by their fathers. This was possible because the women of yesteryears accepted this as social dictation and the way things are. Well, things are no longer as such. And the sooner men in our society learn this fact the better and there is plenty of encouraging proof that men are learning and adapting this. A note of caution though for the women in our society. Liberty should be exercised with caution. The unbounded use of freedom in free mixing and liberal dresses may have its negative consequences. The values and ways taught by the mothers in our society should not be totally chuck off and seen as antiquated. Because one must act for one's own security. Being humiliated once will haunt a girl for the rest of her life.