

How to fund our politics?

HASANAT ALAMGIR

THOUGH we always enjoy talking bad about our politics, politicians and political parties, we should be happy to have some functioning political parties and an animated multi-party system in our country. We have built some good political institutions, which are elemental as democracy is moving from a transitional phase to a consolidation phase in Bangladesh. Political parties act as the nucleus in democratic culture as they represent the competition between societal groups and interests. We need our parties to work for forming an overall vision of the nation, fixing the near term objectives to realise that vision, and designing the means to meet those objectives. These parties should help us having a check for executive supremacy and abuse of state authority. It is through the parties, we should be able to hold our political leadership accountable to us.

Unlike those countries dominated by one party, we are fortunate to have a multitude of active and semi-active parties. In our political cohort, we have at least two big parties, which have controversial origins. The ways these parties were laid out by the military dictators to legalise their authority, and thrived on allegedly abusing state-machineries and peoples' exchequer, it appeared to some that ousting of the masterminds from power would inevitably evaporate these parties. But, they remained in existence splendidly with vigour. The older parties with their past-oriented political ideology, dependence on aging leaders, failure to realise the post-war expectation of the society, and an inability to provide glamour to the larger youth-segment of the nation helped the juvenile military-planned initially pseudo-democratic parties to sustain and thrive. At the end, Bangladesh is benefited having a strong multi-party culture. Sometimes, a better end justifies its cloudy means.

It is imperative now that we incorporate these political parties into our development efforts and nation building activities. An

organisation without a goal will not only be self-limiting, but also be destructive for others. Our parties should be goal-oriented, and are supposed to provide a sound grassroots basis for forming policy of poverty alleviation and development, and provide opportunities for our leaders to earn experience and acquire expertise in democracy-building. The parties, we elect to our assembly, should play enormous roles to the advancement of a well functioning, pluralistic party system and egalitarian environment in Bangladesh.

Like any other organisation, to see our parties succeed, we need to finance them to organise, operate and thrive. Funding helps political parties to maintain them-

Laws should be promulgated to clarify which sources of funds can be accessed, the upper limits on contribution from a single source, and which types of non-monetary resources (e.g., gifts, publication materials, free radio and TV time) can be admitted. It can further detail on how expatriate Bangladeshis can contribute, and whether people not registered as voters will be eligible to endow. The thorny issue of the relationship between NGOs and political parties should not also be left vague.

selves as organisations. Financial resources are also required by campaigning candidates who run for political offices. We have to acknowledge that parties need money, and parties need to identify potential sources of finance, and finally, the state has to make regulations making the system of collecting and disbursing of funds transparent. Failure to channel money through a just and appropriate mechanism may lead our parties to access it by engaging in criminal activities, using black money, selling themselves to businessmen, different interest and pressure groups, and even to overseas power-blocks. It is already commonly suspected that multinational oil, gas, power, automobile, technology and pharmaceutical companies have started taking a keen interest in Bangladeshi politics.

Political parties are multifac-

eted organisations consisting of multiple levels (Union, Thana, District and Central) and multiple units (the mother party and ancillary organisations for students, youth, women, peasants, doctors, etc.) at each level. With regard to funding of parties, it is necessary to specify which unit at which level in the party receive the contributions. Assigning positions at the right sphere, delegating authority, and creating a reporting structure toward the high command will create transparency in the money transfer system and yield comforts to the contributors who would like to see their money well-managed and well-spent.

A party must identify its funding sources, which may include: resources mobilised by the par-



ties themselves, such as membership fees on elected representatives of each unit and level; rent and other incomes from property, businesses and publications (electronic and prints) by the party; contributions from individuals; contributions from certain caucus, such as, trade unions, professional bodies, and large organisations and corporations.

As money corrupts us, it does so to our politics too. There is a known need to have some kind of regulation on political finance. We need to work out the compulsion the parties have to the state and the public in terms of financial accountability and transparency. Laws should be promulgated to clarify which sources of funds can be accessed, the upper limits on contribution from a single source, and which types of non-monetary resources (e.g., gifts, publication materials, free radio and TV time)

As our existing lawmakers, beneficiary of these hazards, may not volunteer in these reforms, different pressure groups within the civil society and the international donors should come forward with plans to reform political and campaign financing to help democracy consolidate further in Bangladesh.

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In absence of a functional regulatory system, our parties are taking funds from wherever and whoever they are receiving it from. Money is pouring into politics and flowing through elections without concern or vigilance. People who make these contributions to our leaders and parties, in most cases, do not share the views of the regular Bangladeshi. We end up having politicians who represent the wrong section of the society.

In such a practice, if it goes on unstoppped, money will solely decide who will be our leader. The parliamentary members, elected this way, will make decisions based on what will help themselves and their contributors financially than what is better for the underprivileged. A parliament with members, elected with heavy contribution from industries and businesses, will obstruct making regulations that promote environment-friendly manufacturing practice, safe working conditions for workers, or assure high quality in products and services created for public consumption. As relevant example, we have seen that our lawyer-dominated parliament obstructed the finance minister's plans to bring law practices under obligatory taxation system. A parliament member, who is a dealer of new cars, campaigned to pass a bill banning import of re-conditioned cars. Another parliament member, who is a dealer of cellular phones, made all sorts of efforts to ease having such a phone, leaving the complicated procedure of getting land phones unaffected.

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On February 6, Bush announced he would establish "an independent commission . . . to look at American intelligence capabilities." On the surface, at least, it seemed like the right move to make by an administration known for its obsession with secrecy and its arrogant disregard of public opinion. But when details about the intelligence commission became known, it was obvious what the Bush administration was trying to do: make a sneaky political end-run around the WMD issue by delaying the release of any findings until at least after the

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Bush intelligence commission will sidestep answering vital questions

RON CHEPESIUK

THIS year so far hasn't been a good one for President George W. Bush, Jr. Turncoat Paul O'Neill, his former Secretary of the Treasury, published a scathing, best-selling expose of the inner workings of his administration.

Meanwhile, weapons inspector David Kay said bluntly that there are no weapons in Iraq. Many questions, moreover, have been raised about Bush's National Guard Service records of three decades ago, and his aides haven't been able to put them to rest.

And as the President struggles to neutralize these negative developments, he has had to suffer through the release of a series of public opinion polls that showed his popularity fading. Mark Shulman, a prominent independent pollster, told the AP that the credibility issue was Bush's number one problem. "A lot of poll numbers from a lot of different organizations are finding that people are questioning (his) credibility," Shulman explained.

These developments have been troubling enough, but Bush has also had to listen to the clamour of the Democrats for an investigation of why his administration's pre-war claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were dead wrong.

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2004 political election campaign. The Commission's findings won't be released until March 2005.

Those of us Americans who want a truly independent investigation of the WMD issue have every right to be outraged. As House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi explained: "We had an opportunity to have a truly independent commission that could have brought fresh eyes to the subject. Instead, we have a commission wholly owned by the executive branch investigating the executive branch."

Pelosi was referring to the composition of Bush's commis-

sion. Indeed, how can a commission be independent if Bush gets to select all the members? It's a classic example of the fox guarding the hen-house.

Bush should be doing everything possible to ensure that the commission is independent, given the questions that have been raised about his credibility on the WMD issue. Instead, not only has he selected all the commission members, he is also refusing to make public their financial disclosures. In short, the American people will have no way of knowing if conflicts of interest are clouding the commission's work.

Bush has given a lame justification for the non-disclosure. The commission's nine members, he said are not being paid for their work. But some of the commissioners also are believed to have



ties, either to the Bush administration or to the US defense industry and other groups that could be involved in the inquiry. Co-chair Judge Laurence Silberman for one is known to have a chummy relationship with Bush and the neo conservative cabal that has gotten us into the Iraq mess. Consequently, concerns have been raised in the US press about Silberman's fitness to serve as co-chair of the commission. For instance, a press release from the People for the American Way noted that "those who know him -- including one-time Nixon

loads of time reviewing intelligence on weapons programs in North Korea, as well as Iran, and will follow Bush's mandate to "examine intelligence on the threats posed by Libya and Afghanistan before recent changes in those countries."

John W. Dean, in an article posted on the Findlaw.com web site, put the irrelevance of those inquiries into perspective: "What does any of this have to do with whether or not the Bush administration misused, falsely reported, or concocted intelligence to take the nation to war? Nothing."

That is exactly right, and given the commission's mandate, it will avoid finding answers to the most important questions about the Iraq War. Did political pressure from leading figures in the Bush administration contribute to the intelligence failures? Did those officials exaggerate the intelligence analysis assessments as part of a misleading campaign to get the American public behind the war effort? What hard evidence was there that al-Qaeda had ties to Saddam Hussein?

Fortunately, the Bush administration's effort to insulate itself from Iraq War intelligence issues may not succeed. Last February 17, the Senate Intelligence Committee announced its plans to investigate whether the White House officials exaggerated the Iraq threat or pressured intelligence analysts into making assessments that supported their case for war.

No date for release of a report has been set yet, but it's likely the committee's finding will be released well before next November. If this happens, there is a good chance that all of 2004 will be a really bad year for George Bush, Jr.

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aided and respected author Kevin Phillips, former independent council and Eisenhower deputy attorney general Lawrence Walsh and reformed right-wing hitman David Brock -- raise serious questions and concerns about Silberman's past activities, his temperament, his judgement and his unyielding commitment to rightwing orthodoxy. After reviewing this criticism, along with Silberman's own statements, it becomes clear that Silberman is ill-suited for a role on the intelligence commission."

Furthermore, instead of focusing on Iraq, the commission will spend much of its time on matters having nothing to do with reasons why the public and Congress want the commission. For instance, it will also spend

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