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Overzealous bureaucracy

CCC polls-- test case for our democratic process

AMPAIGNING for the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) polls has reached its peak. The two main political parties have thrown their full weight behind the candidates (of their choice) and the stage is set for a real fight.

The CCC polls have generated a tremendous amount of enthusiasm in the port city. That is no doubt a positive development, but what we have noted with concern is that even the bureaucracy is showing signs of getting overzealous. And the Election Commission (EC) has already acted twice to rein two government officials in. A police commissioner had to be withdrawn for his role in the campaigning and after that the divisional commissioner has been castigated for crossing the limits of his jurisdiction. All these point to the executive branch's tendency to get involved in the elections in a way that would spoil its neutral character. The EC, however, has acted with fortitude that deserves appreciation. That is something wholesome for our political culture.

There is a lot to be said on the possible repercussions of the bureaucracy overstepping its limits. The government must not be oblivious of the fact that the whole nation is watching the polls and expecting that it will be held in the best traditions of democracy. The ruling coalition should not erase from its memory the Magura debacle. It has to learn from its past experience.

The purely strategic and tactical points must not be overlooked either. True, the CCC polls could be a pointer to the public opinion, but the results will by no means loosen the coalition's hold on the parliament. The opposition, for its part, should not make it a "do or die issue".

The polls are being held at a time when people are frustrated with the recent happenings that indicate that decent politics is being replaced by violence and vendetta. So successful holding of the polls will go some way to restoring people's faith in the existing political system. The parties in the fray should attach due importance to this aspect of the issue.

PM's directives go unheeded

Failure to recover public land will suggest connivance

HERE can we put our confidence in, knowing that even the Prime Minister's directives go unheeded? In spite of the fact that the issue of illegal acquisition of public land had been identified by the PM as a problem deserving of the highest consideration of the administration, actions have not matched up to the words and intentions since the phenomenon continues unabated. It boggles our minds to know that the administration does not even have the record of how much public land has been gobbled up by various people and organisations.

While there is the inherent element of inefficiency of the administration in implementing government directives, which we cannot discount, there is the palpable element of collusion between the government and the vested interests in the whole affair that compels us to bring to question the sincerity of the government in resolving the matter.

It would not be out of place to suggest that flouting of the orders of the Prime Minister has put the prestige of her office at stake, and it is thus imperative that she takes it upon herself to initiate action to recover the land that rightfully belongs to the state. The Deputy Commissioners are perhaps in the most difficult position, having to contend mostly with political party stalwarts that are the biggest expropriators. The list of illegal land grabbers suggests that many of these belong to the ruling coalition or to influential business houses with political connection, and the government, by its inaction, only reinforces the perception of it acquiescing in the matter.

The India question

been very successful in bringing to a halt a policy with charges that the policy in question unduly benefits India at the expense of the national interest

In 1999, when negotiations over transshipment had reached a serious stage, the then opposition BNP used it as a wedge issue against the then government AL, calling three days of hartals, and successfully (if unfairly) using the issue to paint the AL as the handmaidens of New Delhi.

For India, transshipment facilities would ensure cost-beneficial trans-India has back-fired spectacularly is

(at worst) The reasons put forth by opponents of transshipment remain unconvincing, and there is little doubt that permitting transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh would be beneficial to both

countries, albeit of greater benefit to India than to us. At the very least, there should be a reasoned public debate as to the pros and cons, which given the current climate is not possible

Another example of where our confrontational posture towards

refused to countenance using Ostrogram as the entry point. The reason was that Bangladesh was reluctant to take steps that would be of such obvious benefit to India.

Interestingly enough, after the change of government in Bangladesh in 1996, the new government convened a series of seminars on the route, which finally recommended that Ostrogram would be the best entry point. But by this time India has already built 500 km of roads to connect its North-East states to Tamabil and refused to

return to the plan it had originally

sharing, to demarcation of the problematic relationship we now border, we have any number of

legitimate points of issue with India But looking at things from a strategic point of view, our focus should not be on nursing grievances, but on what is good for us, and how to finesse the bilateral relationship for maximum benefit.

Lately the idea that we can turn away from India and instead link up with China and the Asean nations has gained currency. This is a pipe dream. China and the Asean nations are interested in us mostly because they see us as the gateway

They have started to

negotiate workable arrangements

with India, and we need to do so as

well if we do not wish to be left out in

tripartite road being built from Thai-

land through Myanmar and into

India. This road could easily have

encompassed Bangladesh, but due

to our disinclination to permit India

transit access, we have been left out

In fact, India is currently building

an extensive road network to con-

nect itself to the Asean countries. It

would like to do so through Bangla-

desh as that would be the cheapest

and quickest route, but in the face of

continued Bangladeshi hesitation is

fully prepared to leap-frog right over

We need to sort out our relations

with India before it is too late. Any

vision for the future needs to

squarely address and resolve the

us as if we were not there.

For instance, right now there is a

to India.

the cold

of the planning

have with India Regardless of how one might fee about India or Indians, or how hard

done by we think we have been by their policies, it is simply not in our long-term self-interest to continue to adopt a confrontational posture. Once hostility to India was merely

a question of souring the bilateral relationship. That was bad enough in terms of the opportunity costs foregone But now such hostility threatens our relations with China and the Asean nations, too.

We need to go back to the drawing board and re-envision a working relationship with India that maximises the benefit of the unique position we hold at the cross-roads of South Asia, South-East Asia, and China.

It is no use waiting for India to come around to our way of thinking We have no power to make it happen, and will be waiting a long time. We have to deal with the neighbour we have, not the neighbour we would like to have. Unfortunately, we need India far more than India needs us, and we need to recognise this simple if unpalatable truth if we are to fashion an India policy that works to our best advantage.

The chest-thumping approach might give us some psychic satisfaction, but the question I have for those who advocate a continuing bellicose and confrontational posture with respect to India is a simple one. Look around you and answer honestly. How is that working out for you?

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily

India lobbied strongly to attempt to persuade Bangladesh that entry on the North-East side should be through Ostrogram rather than through Tamabil. The difference to Bangladesh would have been small -- indeed Myanmar. there is a strong argument to be made that Ostrogram would have been more advantageous from the

Bangladeshi perspective -- but due to the existing infrastructure and terrain of the North-Eastern Indian states thus linked to, it would have been much more advantageous to India

Bangladesh dug in its heels and

in relation to negotiations for the requested route for the Trans Asian Highway. There we have it. Bangladesh The Bangladeshi gateway to the passed on the opportunity for an highway network is through Tamabil entry point of the Trans Asian Highin the North-East and way that would have been of greater benefit to the country than the entry Banglabandha in the North-West. point finally agreed upon because it In 1995, when negotiations over what route the final highway netwould have been of even more work would take began in earnest, benefit to India. It is no wonder that India is cur-

STRAIGHT TALK

The chest-thumping approach might give us some psychic satisfaction, but the question I have

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rently cool to the idea of a road through Tripura to Chittagong to allow port access for its North-East states, and is building a road through Mizoram to Akia port in

The point I am trying to make is that again and again we act against our own self-interest due to our hostility to India India is far from blameless when

it comes to the sorry state of bilateral relations. Time and again, it too has acted in a confrontational and unfriendly manner towards us. From trade relations, to water

manners, nobody wants to know what the hell he is doing on the job. Only thing bright about this man is the colour of the ties he wears.

The biggest challenge of public life anywhere is not intellectual but moral. Intelligent people enter politics, some of them too clever for the public interest, and then somewhere down the road their minds take an elusive turn and go to hell. That is when things fall apart, and politics begins to give away honour

for money. People don't easily quit public life, at least not in our neck of the wood. All three men, who exited the public scene in one week, didn't have a choice. One died, another didn't get an extension, and the third one was forced to resign. No more interviews, appointments, photographs and comments, at least not To speak in general terms, three people vanished in one week. Specifically, we can call it anything we as aggressively as when they were want, but the fact remains that one man is dead and two men are duds. If this is any consolation for these in power. The glitz and glamour of ublic life will recede like sunshine at dusk. To speak in general terms, three people vanished in one week Specifically, we can call it anything we want, but the fact remains that brought knowledge, experience and one man is dead and two men are recognition to his job. But then he is duds. If this is any consolation for gone, probably because he wasn't these quitters, public life in our "brave" enough to suck up to the country is a contradiction in terms. The public have been sent home Subordination is a great virtue in any with its tail between the legs. Politiprofession, but public office must cians are just having a good life in have enough ventilation so that their name good people, who come to it, do not Words of wisdom from Simone

in politics, people who are profes-

are often required techniques to withstand the heat. Often, it is habitual and instinctive like a foulmouthed drill sergeant in the army, who is tough and mean as a way to raise good soldiers.

the whole thing. The end doesn't quite feel like the ending. But the second man who served his term and then left, remains a mystery. Nobody could question his

examples to make a point. Public life has its own survival skills, the wheeling and dealing, huffing and puffing, lying and cheating. These

But it is also equally important that we make public life appealing to good people. For that we have to make room for those who are inept

people in bad politics

allowance for the bad Anyway, we can start by thinking that good folks are special people, handicapped by their terrible contradiction: high on intelligence to lead

the country but low on emotional capacity to put up with politics. It is an irony that politics attracts the wrong people for the right reasons and keeps away the right people for the wrong reasons. But we need good people in good politics as much as we should get rid of bad

One of the rude awakenings for

these two extremes come to a head, when rebellious heroes seize power and then want their followers to follow orders. That is not a problem for the opportunistic bad guys, who come into politics for a cut or margin. But what is in it for the good guys,

to serve their country and their people? The world belongs to the brave, and bravery now belongs to the knave. At least one of the three guys who quit last week was a good guy and I know it for sure. This man

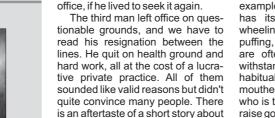
party bosses and toe the party line.

feel dishonoured and suffocated.

For politicians, it comes as natu-

rally as mother's milk. One politician

whose aim in politics is nothing but



Three exits in one week



ZAFAR SOBHAN

NDIA is the third rail of

Bangladeshi politics. You touch

the issue at your peril. It is not

for nothing that successive

Banaladeshi governments have

been unable to come to sensible

win-win arrangements with India

that would be beneficial to both

Anti-Indianism has long been a

focus of Bangladeshi politics. This

anti-Indian focus took centre-stage

when the BNP made it a key compo-

nent of its political platform in the

1970s in response to the perceived

obeisance of the AL towards India

and growing discontent with India's

policies towards Bangladesh.

and to identify the AL with India.

been a significant contributory

factor in the BNP-led four-party

alliance's current commanding

majority in parliament. The only

down-side is that it threatens to tie

the hands even of the BNP when it

comes to negotiating with India, as it

is finding out now that it is back in

The issue of transshipment of

Indian goods through Bangladesh is

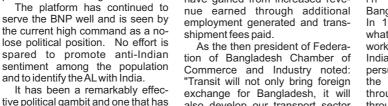
a good example of how the BNP has

sides.

power

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

O speak in the general sense, three people quit public life within the same week. But specifically, one of them died, another left after his first term, and a third man stepped down for personal reasons. Public life has the illusion of magic. Poof! Now you see it; now you don't.



portation and faster delivery of

goods to the otherwise almost

naccessible areas of its North-

Eastern states. Bangladesh would

have gained from increased reve-

exchange for Bangladesh, it will also develop our transport sector and benefit our economy." The Bangladesh government in 1999 estimated the benefit to Bangladesh in the range of \$400 million annually and an additional 200,000 jobs.

I use our disinclination to grant transshipment as an example of a Bangladesh government policy where concrete gains to the country have apparently been sacrificed on the altar of domestic political considerations (at best) or hostility to India

The government must act promptly if it is to demonstrate its sincerity in resolving the issue and before we are forced finally to conclude that it is itself a party to the shoddy affair of grabbing public lands.

Action must commence by the government making those in the ruling coalition to give up the lands that they are in wrongful possession, before it loses control of entire public lands, of which it has already lost control of about 88 percent, according to available statistics.

We don't need to feel sorry for them. That is the name of the game. You buy into the game, you buy into the rules. Private men go public when they want to do something for a greater cause and become recognised in the public eye for what they accomplish. At times it backfires, and people disappear in ignominy or shame, often asked to quit much to the horror of someone who has to give up the plate before the meal is inished. There are others who walk away from the table because they don't like what they see

The first man did neither, because he died. There you don't have any choice, because, all said and done, we can't bargain with death. He lived a reasonably long life; the first public office he held was also his last. He was an astute politician and could hold the same

quitters, public life in our country is a contradiction in terms. The public have been sent home with its tail between the legs. Politicians are just having a good life in their name.

CROSS TALK

honesty and erudition. He was ready to serve his country after a comfortable retirement from an international service. For a while we heard rumours that the government wanted to keep him. What we know now is that it was tabled at the Cabinet meeting, which declined to extend the age limit for the job. We don't know if the man was at all willing to hang around for a second term. May be, he also had his reasons to quit-- health, peace of mind, simple disgust for what he didn't like. May be the government also has its reasons to let go of him.

I am not interested in these men. any more than someone using

OPINION

sional, well-meaning, honest, and dedicated, who are committed to bring social justice and harmony equitable distribution of wealth infrastructural development, rule of law and much more, but shudder at the thought of politics.

Now the country belongs to them as much as it belongs to anybody else, and that is the irony of political tolerance, which brings us to the age-old dilemma of good and bad. The bad doesn't complain because good is always beneficial. But the good has to suffer the bad and all its harmful effects. Tolerance is sadly a one-sided affair. It means only the good has an obligation to make

those who enter public life is that everything is tied to the party line, the great mantra of partisan ululation whereby truth, justice, fairness and freedom are handled with raw emotions. I am not a great fan of the third guitter, but his subordinates and colleagues are claiming that his resignation was good riddance. Why? He was an embarrassment for the government, the ruling party and its alliance.

Ellen Goodman writes in The puts lot of gel in his hair, and the joke Washington Post that history is full s that he carries the provision on his of heroes who rebelliously followed head for what he does best to keep their consciences as much as it's the job. And he does it well, because also full of people who shamefully despite his shady past, bad looks followed orders. Politics is where lousy speeches and questionable

de Beauvoir, who writes in her celebrated book The Second Sex that a woman is an intermediate between a man and a eunuch. Be either a politician or the public. In between you know what!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

Seeing through other's eyes: A perpetual malady

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

RE-EMPTIVE words or actions at times can provoke immediate repulsion. They can come back as boomerang on the individual(s) used to such trick purported to beat down the upcoming truth. We had such a corroboration of this contention very recently.

We recall that our Finance and Planning Minister Mr. Saifur Rahman had recently participated in a round table on Reproductive Health etc. in a European country. The meet was reported to have covered various aspects of reproductive health, the problems, their variations between advanced countries and LDCs, the common grounds as would address those and other complications etc. Without raising eye-brows on the relevance of a finance minister's participation in such an international (some one directly responsible to the health sector could perhaps be a better choice) we can take a look at the versatile Minister's statements to the press on the report about the concern expressed in the EEU parliament on the situation in

Bangladesh

Mr. Saifur Rahman emphatically refuted the report and claimed that nothing like that happened in the EEU parliament. On the contrary, he alluded to his participation in a dinner in company of 12 distinauished members of the EEU parliament. In his own words those gentlemen were all in praise about the radical improvement of law and order situation in Bangladesh, its

economy. harmony among the people belonging to different communities. He dismissed the report as a mere cock and bull story, a veritable concoction hatched up by the disaruntled members of the opposition who were out to damage the image of Bangladesh.

Coming on the heels of Mr. Saifur Rahman's statement to the press at ZIA, a front-page report in a few national dailies on April 16, 2005 gave to the whole nation a clear and unambiguous corroboration of the 'story' Mr. Rahman tried to pre-empt and belie. This report categorically referred to the great concern expressed by the European Parliament on the recent and atest situation in Bangladesh. More specifically, the EEU parlia-

ment vis-a-vis its distinguished members took official cognizance of the numerous bomb assaults on the leaders and workers of the opposition political parties, minority communities, journalists, workers of NGOs. They made particular reference to grenade charges on the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina and former Finance Minister SAMS Kibria.

The EEU parliament was also reported to have adopted a resolution in condemnation of the continuous bomb and grenade assaults on the opposition. Besides, they resolved that all these be properly investigated into by noted international agencies who would have to be allowed free access to all the witnesses and documentary evidences and also to work independently. The EEU parliament resolution was also reported to have dealt at length the issues of free and fair national election, an absolutely neutral election commission and a caretaker government after procedural reforms to the system. Among other issues incorporated in the resolution were: trial of the war criminals of 1971, withholding of RAB activities, ensuring rights

and privileges of religious minorities and stoppage of criminal activities of extremist Muslim militants. Before adoption of the resolutions the EEU parliament members went into formal voting. Out of 92 members only 2 voted against while 3 were absent. The resolutions were eventually adopted by 87-2 votes which could be considered to have been absolute and unanimous.

The Finance Minister neither retracted from his airport statement nor challenged the reported resolutions mentioned above. However, and as is usual, we have had a half-hearted reaction from the law minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed. In an interview with a television channel he thought very casually that the EEU parliament had identified some problems and expressed their concern. This they did as well-wishers of Bangladesh and that they wanted good governance to be more firmly established in Bangladesh. Barrister Moudud Ahmed didn't think that there would be any adverse reaction on the country. Notwithstanding the contentions of the two honourable minis-

ters on the resolution adopted by the EEU parliament, there is no way out to repair the damage already done to our national image by the self-same complacency born of utter lack of farsightedness on the part of our leadership

Dr Ziauddin Ahmed, a renowned lawyer in the International Criminal Court living in Brussels. Belgium had almost concurrently expressed his hurt feelings on the failure of the present aovernment in conducting the affairs of the state. It has been, in his opinion, all due to this ionominous inefficiency that the image of the country has been tarnished globally. Dr Ahmed had firmly claimed that, if the government itself didn't violate human rights, provide unfettered leverage to the so called religious fundamentalists and could curb corruption with strong hands then the country wouldn't have faced such a delicate situation in the international arena, wouldn't be so pitiably disgraced in the comity of nations. According to Mr Sitangshu Guha, an international coordinator for the HinduBouddha-Christian Oikva Parishad in Europe thought the EEU parliament resolution reconfirmed existence of extreme fundamentalists and violators of human rights in Bangladesh. On the other hand, a convener of BNP in USA observed that the EEU parliament was used to make

such resolutions against many countries every year. In his words those had been all mere paper works and would have no impact on the nationalistic spirit of his party. Coincidentally, his conviction has been in conformity with that of the central leadership.

Massive haul of illegal arms and random use of grenades have been yet another intriguing aspect that has invoked great concern both nationally and internationally. Inspite of claims of government leaders that there was no existence of extremists like Al-Qaida in Bangladesh the United States and the European countries have been expressing their reservations about such contention of the government. We may recall that the US Ambassador in Bangladesh Harry K Thomas had openly complained about the notorious

'Banglabhai' and his criminal activities. Subsequent to that the Prime Minister had ordered for arrest of the alleged 'bandit' creating havoc in the northern districts. 'Banglabhai' has been 'absconding' since then.

Meantime, the unusually big haul of arms in Chittagong, at Kuril of Dhaka and at other places of the country went on without any meaninaful intervention of the administration. Between the period the country witnessed a number of tradic incidents in Svlhet. Dhaka and Habiganj. The British High Commissioner had sustained wounds from grenade blast at Hazrat Shah Jalal's Shrine, grenade attack on August 21, 2004 on Awami League meeting at Bangabandhu Avenue killed 20 including Ivy Rahman and lastly on

27 January 2005 killed former Finance Minister SMS Kibria among others at Habijganj. Taking cue from all these unfortunate incidents Admiral William J

Felon of the United States firmly

claimed on April 17, 2005 in Dhaka

after his meeting with Foreign

Minister Morshed Khan, that some

international extremist militant

desh. He offered US assistance to contain these terrorists. The Admiral also observed that there were some people used to provide patronage to extremism, use religion for their personal gains. Admiral Felon had said that there was a big network of international terrorists. They were ever on the look for such places where there was political and economic unrest. These are the basic weaknesses where the terrorists would fruitfully exploit the poor to achieve their ulterior motive. In this context, he alluded to similar groups active is Indonesia, Iraq, the Philippines and Afghanistan.

groups having Al Qaida connection

was very much active in Bangla-

The government will have to make a very serious rethinking about its strategies to combat the terrorist groups.

Kazi Alauddin Ahmed is an industrial consultant.