

For credible CCC polls

EC must take a firm hold

OVER the last several days the eyes of the nation have been focused on today's Chittagong city corporation election. The day the campaign closed there was, however, a startling revelation in the Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* that a CBA leader, a peon and an ayah, have been appointed as polling officials. This betrays in whatever degree a lackadaisical attitude to the conduct of elections and is totally against the professional approach that such an exercise calls for. We wonder how such 'unprecedented' appointment could be effected without the knowledge of the Election Commission? The action lends itself to speculation of ill motives on the part of those that have resorted to it. The EC did take some last minute corrective measures. How effective they will be only time will tell.

The CCC poll has been very eagerly awaited by the dwellers of the port city, and, not surprisingly, this has been regarded as a test case for good election in Bangladesh. The keen interest that has been evinced in the election is demonstrated by the very large number of contestants in the mayoral race as well as for ward commissioners' posts, a challenging prospect indeed for those conducting the polls.

It would not be wrong to suggest that the major political parties, through their pre-poll activities have demonstrated their stakes in the outcome of the elections. Also, the tone and tenor of the campaign and the level of hype that it was carried to, have lent it an aura of a national election.

The spending spree that has been reportedly associated with this election is mind boggling. We strongly feel that something must be done in the future to restrict election expenses or the electoral process will become totally dominated by black money.

It is our hope that the CCC election will be entirely free and fair and to this end we would like to suggest that the EC must have a firm grip on its conduct and remove all loopholes that have the potentials of derailing the elections.

We urge all sides to do their best to keep the election violence free.

Why the hamhanded treatment?

The FFs had a right to submit their demands

WE were horrified at the high-handed behaviour of the police on a group of war-maimed freedom fighters and family members of martyrs, who simply wanted to submit a memorandum with some demands to the prime minister's office (PMO). First of all, the freedom fighters did not create any nuisance, at least according to the reports, on the street when they began their march towards the PMO. Every citizen of the country, more so the crippled freedom fighters, has a natural right to ventilate their grievances and bring it to the notice of the highest authority of the government. Why should the police have swooped on the procession of about 1000 members of the Welfare Association for War-Injured Freedom Fighters?

Secondly, looking at the demands of the freedom fighters, we wonder what was so dangerous about these that the police had to prevent them progressing as soon as they came out with a procession. Among other things, they only wanted setting up of a plastic plant for a sister concern of Muktijoddha Kalyan Trust, which, in their words, was incurring loss for lack of a plastic plant. And lastly, since after all the representatives of the freedom fighters were allowed by the police themselves to hand over the memorandum to the PMO in the end, one simply cannot help wonder why such an appalling highhanded treatment was meted out?

Why there was such an inexplicable detour before allowing the submission of the charter of demands to the PMO? How would they explain the indiscriminate baton charging and clubbing of people, who were on wheel-chairs wounding at least 20 of them. We want to know who was responsible for such inconsiderate and reckless police action on the freedom fighters. An inquiry on how such an atrocious thing could happen should definitely be on the cards.

Blair's third term: What is it due to?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

FEW doubted that UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of the contemporary world's most accomplished and successful leaders, would go a long way. Over the past eight years he has become as much of a fixture in British life as London's Big Ben, Westminster, or even red double-decker buses. But his popularity has lately worn thin, and he sought a third term in office with his once-famous charm offensive looking increasingly pale. Indeed, many Britons had started thinking that it was time to change the occupant of 10 Downing Street.

Blair is amazingly eloquent, always on the top of his stuff and at his compassionate best. He has the

knack of always sounding and looking like he really believes in what he is saying. That makes him astonishingly convincing. But this time around, Blair's once overwhelmingly popularity has taken an apparent beating. Blair's special magic, with its particular appeal to female voters, is no longer working. As Blair's popularity has crashed, so

made Blair appear either a fool or an arch schemer in an aggressive war to grab oil and boost the fortune of Israel. Americans are always more charitable in attitude and more forgiving of their government's lies and distortions than Britons. Most American apparently couldn't care less that they were deceived into a war by their president, who actually

US cousins -- remain disgusted by Blair's untruths. His sanctimonious piety has come back to haunt him.

Perhaps, being a country of higher moral standards, Britain's political turf is somewhat different, and its politicians are more vulnerable to being called to account for their moral failings. Therefore, unlike George Bush, Blair's reputa-

Howard continued the tradition of weak, stunted leadership that appears to be Mrs. Thatcher's legacy to her party which dissipates much of its energies on internal civil war over whether or not to truly join the European Union.

Howard failed miserably to capitalise on Blair's rush to war and failed to capture the outrage of the

without its losses. This time, the Labour Party's majority of one hundred plus was cut in half and it is this that Blair will likely be remembered for more than his legacy of three election wins.

Some of the losses are unpardonable and can be laid squarely at Blair's feet. For example, Ms. Oona King, MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, which includes Tower Hamlets, who has long championed Bengali causes in this Bengali populated constituency that has been a Labour borough for the last several decades, was defeated by rebel ex-Labour MP George Galloway due solely to her support for Blair's Iraq war.

The final numbers showed less than a three point gap between the two parties. Had the Tories a stronger leader, Blair would surely be out of his job. Moreover, his Labour Party rival Chancellor Gordon Brown is waiting in the wings, looking over Blair's shoulder and waiting for the chance to stab him in the back at the first opportunity.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

The final numbers showed less than a three point gap between the two parties. Had the Tories a stronger leader, Blair would surely be out of his job. Moreover, his Labour Party rival Chancellor Gordon Brown is waiting in the wings, looking over Blair's shoulder and waiting for the chance to stab him in the back at the first opportunity.

have the fortunes of his own dispirited Labour Party. Now, for the first time in recent memory, Britain's politicians and voters are pondering life after Blair.

Obviously Iraq is the principal cause of Blair's fall from the grace he once enjoyed, his infamous justifications for invading Iraq being exposed as a pack of white lies. His indecorous claim that Iraq could attack Britain within 45 minutes with weapon of mass destruction

suggested that Iraqi drones of death massed on lurking steamers in the North Atlantic might be able to spray germs across the sleeping United States.

Americans just wanted revenge for the emasculating and humiliating 9/11 attacks. Nothing more, nothing less. They were not particular about whom they attacked or why. But two years after the invasion of Iraq, Britons -- better educated and more conscientious than their

tion has been more seriously damaged among his countrymen and women.

In the end, good sense seems to have dawned on Blair and he was able to more or less wriggle out of the situation, even though there was, of course, much residual damage. But what really came to Blair's rescue was the notoriously squabbling Michael Howard who put on a pitifully inept performance as leader of the opposition Tories.

some 65 percent of Britons strongly opposed to the conflict. Instead, like John Kerry in the US, Howard jumped on the pro-war bandwagon. The fact that Howard is an ardent supporter of Israel's expansionist right perhaps played a key role in his decision to support Blair in the war. But by doing good for Israel, he did bad for his own Conservative Party and paved the way for a Labour victory.

Nevertheless, Blair's victory is not

What's free isn't always fair

FARID BAKHT

IF we do not ask people what they think, why should we expect them to take a stake in policies? After fourteen years of democratic rule, the political leaders are as far away from the people as they could be. Try though they may to "meet the people," they are kept apart from their "constituents" by a phalanx of sycophants. They hardly ever hear the truth. If they do, it is indirectly via local party activists who relay the frustration of the electorate. Sixty million voters have little or no stake in this democratic system. Combined with a faltering, under-performing economy and precarious security situation, and one understands that the legitimacy of the democratic experiment is in question.

Infrastructure politics

How do people vote? Do they "think local" and "act local" too? And why shouldn't they? They now mistrust all politicians. The electorate may be functionally illiterate but they are nevertheless tactically astute and

also judge their local candidate by how much they can deliver. The voter wants to see tangible signs of "development." That means a bridge, culvert, school, clinic, canal, road, or electricity. They correctly judge that most existing candidates come from dubious backgrounds. They can see that the election is

other considerations come into play. For example, the background of the candidate is important. How much time has he spent in the area over the last few years? If he is an absentee politician, that counts against him since he is more likely to forget to secure funds for that road or bridge than one who is based in

Our local candidate gets elected, and that is the end of that. Promises are forgotten, people are betrayed and the new MP gets comfortable in Dhaka, "doing politics." We have had our one-day of power. We have sent our "representative" to parliament. Job done.

We need to see a return to legiti-

tions. Now even this is embroiled in controversy. It is a pity that this was not immediately conceded, an inquiry launched, the appropriate changes enacted and made into a non-issue. Instead, it is the latest lightning rod. Whole rafts of proposals are about to come out. The opposition party machines are ready to

So, can I make a little request? As you engage in the battle over the electoral mechanism, bear this in mind. Do not spend all your political capital telling us how you would like to get to power. Save some to tell us what you are going to do when you get into power. As one senior politician remarked, it is not enough to build a movement against something.

being bought as candidates spend Tk. 10 million for rural seats and Tk. 50 million for urban ones. Cigarettes (bills) and Tk.100 bills are literally given away. On top there are feasts to attract poor voters. Election rules are flouted. Manifestos are ignored. Ideology is dead. It seems to boil down to a question of which candidate can provide the most infrastructure.

Once these criteria are satisfied, the constituency. Voters still vote for the big two parties since they are likely to be in government. Independents rarely do well. "New party" success at the polls is almost unheard of.

Now, we are asked every five years to stand in line and then vote for a local candidate. We get all very excited on election night to see who are our political masters will be and then get on with our normal lives.

macy. That means citizens need to see a benefit from democracy. In terms of jobs, economic upliftment, and social change. They judge the system by its output, not its input.

What's free isn't always fair We used to marvel at our "unique" caretaker system. Whereby the incumbent government steps aside for 90 days to allow a "neutral" administration to handle the elec-

enlighten us, and then take to the streets.

However good the ideas, I find it hard to believe that the quality of politician will suddenly improve. Only because so many of the proponents for political reform are alumni from the old "school of corrupt politics." They are not fresh faces. Their track record does not inspire. The barometer for change will be how many old "leaders" step aside

or are forced to retire. Dhaka city has had its cleanliness drive. We need to see one or two political parties cleaned up too. The impetus can only come from enlightened leadership, bold enough to try a new approach.

Until then, it appears to the layman, that a "free and fair electoral process" gives us a false choice between two almost identical groups. Political reform may eventually lead to a new generation entering politics, but that will take time. Time that this nation does not have.

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Farid Bakht is the founder of Futurebanga Network, an independent think-tank.

Indo-US relations gaining further ground

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

APPARENTLY India has scored points over Pakistan not in the cricket field, but diplomatically with regard to supply of F-16 fighter planes when India's External Affairs Minister Kumar Natwar Singh was received by no less a person than the President himself at the oval office of the White House on April 14. It was unprecedented gesture shown by America's President by receiving the Foreign Minister of India with whom America does not have very excellent relations.

The recent decision of America to supply F-16 aircraft to Pakistan has caused disappointment in India. Over and above, America's objection to India's proposed gas pipeline through Tehran was not received favourably in New Delhi either. The Bush administration has raised objection to a proposed \$4 billion gas pipeline running from Iran through Pakistan to meet the growing energy needs of India. India sees the pipeline project as a boost in its rising competition with China for energy resources while America is concerned about Iran's ongoing pursuit of nuclear programmes. America, which is at odds with Iran warned that India would face Iran-Libya Sanctions Act if it goes ahead with the project. India signed a 25

year contract with Iran last year for the supply of 7.5 million tons of liquefied natural gas.

Instead of ten minutes President Bush had more than thirty minutes tete-a-tete with India's External Affairs Minister in an effort to soothe "ruffled Indian sentiments" over the sale of F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan, and to reiterate America's position in the sub-continent which

note that Natwar Singh's visit to Washington immediately after the visit of Chinese prime minister to India could be interpreted as to apprise a friend, America, of the outcome of the visit and its implication. During the course of the meeting President Bush has expressed his desire to pay a visit to India sometime this year.

It was agreed by both the coun-

India's exports to America stood at \$14328 million. Last year America exported to India to the tune of \$5532 million. Therefore, balance of trade is in favor of India. (Source: US Department of Commerce)

Meanwhile, India's Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Mani Singh Aiyar had meeting with America's Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman to seek America's support to explore

India and America signed a landmark Open Skies air transport agreement on January 15 this year. This agreement allows airlines to make commercial decisions with minimal government intervention and provides for open routes, marketing arrangements, including code sharing. The two countries are discussing the possibility of India joining the Proliferation Security

massive scale. BJP government had expressed its willingness to encourage further economic development in India by reducing trade barriers and encouraging foreign participation in economic development, but Clinton administration did not take advantage of the opportunity. On the other hand, American administration was insisting on "unrealistic labour and environmental standards and by relying solely on WTO mechanisms to reduce India's barriers to trade." The present Congress government, however, assured America of moving ahead with regard to trade liberalisation, elimination of subsidies, and tax reforms.

The formation of new Senate Caucus on India in April, 2004 with Senator John Cornyn and Senator Hillary Clinton as co-chair will push forward the bilateral relations between India and America to a higher level to the mutual benefit of the people of the two countries. Both President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed their desire to strengthen the existing relations which they described "had never been as close as they are at present" at the end of their meeting on September 21, 2004 at the United Nations.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat, now resides in Virginia, USA

Apart from collaborating in New Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) and India-US High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG), India and America signed a landmark Open Skies air transport agreement on January 15 this year. This agreement allows airlines to make commercial decisions with minimal government intervention and provides for open routes, marketing arrangements, including code sharing. Military to military cooperation remains one of the most proactive aspects of the transformation in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

in no way signals a shift in the policy towards world's largest democracy.

As reported by news media, President Bush said America held "India as a global power" and wanted to work together for mutual economic benefit and cooperate in the civilian nuclear and other energy sectors. Natwar Singh's meeting with President took place before the meeting with Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in violation of normal diplomatic practice which signals America's interest to have best of relations with the growing power in Asia. It is also interesting to

tries to accelerate the process of the next step in strategic partnership envisaging cooperation in civilian space and nuclear technology, high-tech trade and missile defence. The two countries are determined to take the partnership to wider scale. This initiative was undertaken last year. On the Indo-American cooperation on space, Indian Foreign Minister said that it highlights the technology bond that is a special characteristic of bilateral ties between the two countries.

India and America have developed good trade relations. In 2004,

avenues for gas and oil fields in India. Aiyar also held a conference in Houston where several major American oil companies attended. Bilateral contacts at civil, military and minister level between India and America have been continuing well. Latest exchange of visit of Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State of America and Natwar Singh, India's Minister for External Affairs is the glaring example.

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Initiative, which was announced by President Bush in Poland in 2003, to interdict passage of weapons of mass destruction to 'rogue states' and other groups.

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Coal not for export

FARUQUE HASAN

LET us have a quick look at our energy resources. In the year 2004, the National Energy Policy estimated the country's total coal deposits to be at 2527 million tonnes. This includes estimates of deposits at four fields - Barapukuria, Khalaspir, Phulbari and Jamalganj. Not all of these coals are recoverable. Of the total deposits, only 492 million tonnes, equivalent to 13.4 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas, are estimated to be recoverable. Extraction of the coal at Jamalganj is not yet economically viable at present energy prices as it lies at a depth of 1,000 meters under the ground. Deposits at Jamalganj are at least 1,000 million tonnes, and all are not recoverable. If recoverable deposits at Jamalganj are

excluded from consideration, economically recoverable coal reserves in Bangladesh are below 300 million tonnes, which is equivalent to 8.1 TCF of natural gas.

Besides coal, the estimates of remaining recoverable reserves of natural gas in Bangladesh are in the range of 11-16 TCF.

The hydropower potential of the country is negligible. Bangladesh can at best produce 755 megawatt of electricity using its hydropower. Country's present installed hydropower capacity is 444 megawatt.

The picture of our coal and natural gas reserves and our hydropower potentials shows that our energy resources are very limited.

Tata has proposed to invest to

Enormous pressure was put on Bangladesh to make it agree to export its natural gas. Somehow, we have been able to avert that pressure, it seems. We hope no quarter, this time, will put pressure to make us export our coal. We hope our policy makers will not opt for any quick bucks from exporting any of our limited energy resources.

the tune of US dollar 2.5 billion in steel, fertilizer and power projects in Bangladesh. (We should not go for any more fertilizer projects, which will use natural gas as the raw material.) According to Tata, Bangladesh can earn US \$1 billion a year from Tata's proposed projects. We hope that from those projects, Tata will also be able to make decent profit, decent enough to encourage them to invest in a foreign country.

The Tata representatives have told that Bangladesh could save

around 1.5 TCF of gas if Tata establishes a coal-based power station instead of a gas-based one. It is nice to know that, as we need to save our gas as much as possible.

Tata officials have expressed their interest to use coal from Barapukuria and the Phulbari coalmines for a power plant. Tata has also proposed the export of coal to India from Bangladesh, which will be carried by the wagons used for bringing raw materials for their steel plant in Chittagong. Under the backdrop of our scanty energy

resources, we have strong reservation to this proposal of exporting coal from Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, with its 138 million population, and being on the brink of an industrial revolution, cannot think of exporting coal from its scanty energy resources.

Four-fifth of the people of Bangladesh still do not have access to electricity. The country needs 17,500 megawatt of installed power to attain the goal of electricity for all; at present the country can produce at best 4,000 megawatt.

The current annual oil import of Bangladesh varies from 3.5 to 3.7 million tonnes to meet some of its energy needs.

Annual GDP growth rate of Bangladesh for the last one decade has been 4.55 percent on average, not an encouraging figure. Last year growth rate was around 5.5 percent. At present our economy is at a stage of taking off, and there is every possibility that the country will achieve, very soon, a higher annual GDP growth rate, which may even surpass a rate of seven

percent. Confrontational politics at home will not be able to hinder our country's economic progress for long.

We will be in need of our scanty natural resources to develop our own industrial sector, our own economy. We cannot indulge in the luxury of exporting our energy resources, when we ourselves are in dire need of every bit of that. No doubt, the domestic coal deposits will be playing an important role in meeting energy needs of the country. Coal will primarily be used in power generation.

If we had, in our country, the energy resources in abundance, we would not have any reservation in exporting them. What is the use of keeping natural resources buried under the ground?

Enormous pressure was put on Bangladesh to make it agree to export its natural gas. Somehow, we have been able to avert that pressure, it seems. We hope no quarter, this time, will put pressure to make us export our coal. We hope our policy makers will not opt for any quick bucks from exporting any of our limited energy resources.

It is nice to know that a US company has come up with the proposal of exploring coal mine and set up four power generation plants, 250 MW each, at different places of the country including Jamalganj; that means the company thinks using the coal of Jamalganj is economically viable.

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OPINION