

EC's electoral roll initiative

ID card needed for each voter

THE Election Commission, in what looks like a spurt of dynamism under the leadership of Justice MA Aziz, the newly-inducted CEC, has made public its decision to sit with political parties in a bid to elicit their opinion on whether the existing voter list should be updated for the next general election or replaced by a new one.

Gross inaccuracies have been detected by many voters in their names and addresses on the old list. One could only refer to Dhaka-10 by-election where discrepancies, even at the micro-level, were detected by independent observers. The last electoral roll is said to have been preserved in the EC's central database system, and some might take the view that a mere revision of the list could do. But just an update wouldn't meet the requirement, because the existing electoral roll is highly flawed. Besides, given the five-year plus interregnum between the preparation of the electoral roll prior to the 2001 election and the upcoming one a new generation of eligible voters have emerged to be franchised.

In all, therefore, the EC faces the massive task of preparing a new voters' list.

It is well and good that the EC is thinking of engaging the political parties in a dialogue, but preparation of a voter list is the mandated responsibility and primary duty of the EC. The political parties, however, in their own interest need cooperating with EC in the preparation of a fully credible electoral roll.

The exercise of putting all eligible voters on the list, vital as it is, can't by itself guarantee elections free of manipulations, what is furthermore needed would be the leveraging of the genuine vote by insisting that all voters have identity cards and that they produce them at the polling booths as evidence of their identity.

ID cards are not only easy to prepare in the context of present-day technology but they also provide an instant database. This in turn offers multifaceted benefits in terms of balanced resource allocation, development planning, service delivery, women's empowerment, poverty eradication and, above all, maintenance of security and enforcement of law and order.

Swoop on belching vehicles

Not a one-off, we hope!

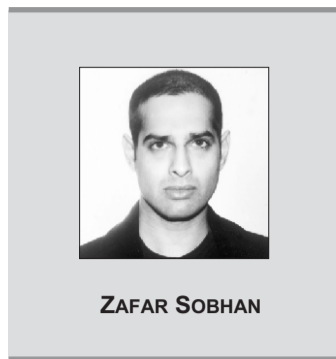
IT only shows the magnitude of pollution in the city air we are breathing, day in and day out. A court, consisting of officials from Department of Environment, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and Dhaka Metropolitan Police, and equipped with computers and infrared sensors fined 30 vehicles out of 38 they had stopped and checked for emitting lethal black smokes in a single day. The sheer proportion of violating transports is horrifying.

We simply hope that this effort doesn't end on the oars of a single success; instead, it is sustained for as long as the polluters have not learned their lessons. For, unless it is continued, the vehicles, no matter how bigger the fines or punishments are, would return to the streets when the dusts will have settled down as we have seen in the past. First of all, the authorities must identify the whole lot of polluting transports, be they private or public to launch any effective campaign against them. But many government and public sector vehicles, not excluding several belonging to the police force as well, are guilty of emitting noxious fumes themselves. To strengthen the hands of law enforcers in their effort to chase polluting vehicles in the private sector, such a same side folly will have to be overcome first.

Secondly, it is revealed that the magistrate of the mobile court himself was puzzled to see plenty of false documents furnished by the drivers. This is a problem that must be nipped in the bud. The concerned authorities must do away with issuing all kinds of fictitious fitness documents and punish the rackets who thrive on such business.

The bottom line is that no road-unworthy vehicles should be allowed to ply the streets. There were drives in the past to remove them from the streets, but those efforts ended up being short-lived. Even the government directive not to allow vehicles older than 20 years turned out to be a failure, only because the owners were influential and the actions had to be discontinued after the initial roar. Ad-hoc measures cannot do; in fact, they prove counter-productive. Each time that they are left with a fragmentary notion of success, the recalcitrant elements are only resurrected.

Cards on the table



ZAFAR SOBHAN

GAME on. The slate of electoral and caretaker government reforms proposed by the fourteen party opposition line-up led by the AL on July 15 has brought the differences between the government and the main opposition into sharp focus, and started the ball rolling with respect to the upcoming national elections.

Debate on the need for reform can now begin in earnest as the opposition has put its opening cards at least on the table. The public is now in a position to decide for itself whether it considers the opposition demands to be reasonable and where it stands on the issues.

There are still many questions left open of course. The first is how many of the reforms tabled are in practice non-negotiable and how many can be bargained away in the interests of consensus. The second question is whether the government will be inclined to fulfill even the most defensible of the demands, or whether it will refuse to countenance any talk of reform on principle.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us start at the start.

The first thing to note is that not the entire opposition has united behind the reform agenda. Much has been made of the absence of the CPB, but more significant to me (though hardly unexpected) was the absence of both the Jatiya Party (JP) and Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB).

The absence of the JP makes perfect sense. It has not been long since the entire nation witnessed considerable apparent evidence of the pressure that JP head HM

difference. The effectiveness of an AL-led boycott of the election would be undercut if the JP were to appear on the ballot.

Then comes the question of the BDB. The temptation for a new party hoping to make inroads into the vote-banks of the more established parties must be great.

It is true that the best case scenario the BDB can realistically hope for is that the AL comes to power, which might then precipitate an exodus from the BNP to the BDB

ance, JSD, and NAP.

Much depends on how the government behaves between now and election day, and how fairly the elections are perceived to be administered. If the election bears the appearance of being above-board and if one or more legitimate opposition parties can be rustled up, then the absent parties will have little that they can credibly complain about.

The opposition is in a bit of a Catch-22 situation. They have an

they do not manage to accomplish this. Then what?

Do the AL and its allies have the support to render elections held in their absence illegitimate, and do they have the power to render a government so elected ineffective? I am not so sure.

Much of course depends on how the government conducts itself in the run-up to elections and how the elections are themselves administered. The smart move for the government to make would be to

country and out, will swing decisively towards the AL and its allies, and that the government will have no option but to enact the proposed reform agenda in its entirety. But this seems to me to be something of a long-shot and I would be interested to hear the contingency plans in case things pan out differently.

Once again success in politics in Bangladesh seems to depend on which of the main parties can conduct itself with the greater restraint. Whichever party shows the greater accommodation and the greater reasonableness in relation to the proposed reform agenda will emerge strengthened. But I am willing to bet good money that both the government and the opposition will compete with each other only in terms of how intransigent and unreasonable they can be in negotiation. Score this one a likely draw.

Then will come the street agitation. As ever, the government can win this show-down by exercising restraint. But if the past is anything to go by, it will spare no effort in trying to crush any kind of street agitation that it will face. Ironically, this is just about the only thing that could translate into victory for the opposition by turning public opinion decisively against the government.

It will be interesting to see whether either side has learned much from mistakes made in the past. I am not counting on it, and it is the apparent inclination of our political leaders to do precisely the opposite of what they ought to that makes the likely outcome of the upcoming show-down so hard to predict.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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Ershad is under from the government, which has 15 cases pending against him. There has been much speculation as to whether the JP would enter into an alliance with the government or the opposition. Now it seems as though the party is slated for a third role.

If the main opposition parties boycott the coming elections, there will need to be a credible opposition for the elections to be considered legitimate, both within the country and internationally. The absence of any credible opposition was one key factor in the illegitimacy of the February 1996 polls in the eyes both of the nation and the international community.

However, if the JP, which garnered some four million votes in the 2001 election and has received as many as sixteen million (1991 elections) does run, then it makes a

and put them in a good position for elections in 2012. Under normal circumstances, it is hard to see how they would not be picked up by the re-election of the BNP-led alliance.

However, if the BDB were to contest the upcoming elections in the absence of the AL, then it could reasonably hope to pick up a fair number of seats and set itself up as a legitimate opposition party.

So far the BDB is keeping its cards close to its chest, and there is no doubt that a final decision on whether to contest the elections will depend largely on which of the AL or the BNP conducts itself with the most credibility in the coming months and the way things look on the day that the government is dissolved.

The next question is what would be the aftermath of an election held without the AL, the 11-party alli-

entirely well-founded fear that upcoming elections will be rigged in favour of the BNP and its allies. However, if they choose to not contest the polls, then the government will have no real need to rig them in order to win.

It was the fact that the then government rigged the February 1996 polls that were boycotted by the opposition that was the final nail in its coffin that year. It was the rigging of the election that permitted the opposition to successfully call for the ouster of the 6th parliament. I am not sure if the opposition can count on the BNP and its allies to make the same mistake twice.

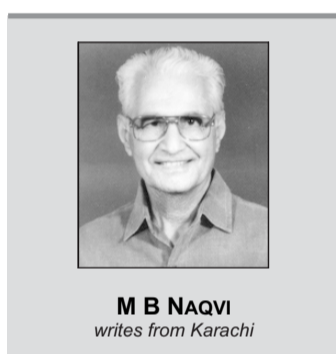
Indeed, the opposition game-plan is a little unclear. The best case scenario is that they force through the bulk of their reform agenda, contest the elections, and win a majority. But let us say that

accede to a number of the reform demands (many of which are eminently reasonable). This will give them the high moral ground and permit them to make the argument that they have done what they could in order to bring the opposition into the elections.

The opposition would then face pressure both inside the country and from the international community to contest the elections. Fortunately for the opposition, nothing in the record of the alliance government suggests that it is capable of anything remotely as statesmanlike and sophisticated as this.

But this does not answer the question of what the opposition's game-plan actually is in practice. It is possible that the government will respond in the coming months in such a heavy-handed manner that public opinion, both inside the

Hasba Bill and what it portends

M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

HASBA Bill illustrates two causally-related problems of this country. There is a wide sway of a certain interpretation of Islam that involves political activism. The second concerns the power of religious leaders and their parties unexpectedly made a good showing in 2002 polls. One will not comment on whether or not, or how far, did military's intelligence agencies helped the MMA. All one can say is that virtually no one outside the charmed circle of power thinks that Mullahs suddenly became so popular in 2002 that they all but captured two provinces and got hold of a third of National Assembly all by their popularity. Their political sights not unexpectedly have been rising ever since. What is certain is that MMA's current rise is a political victory of a rather new interpretation of Islam.

While one does not know why Army has been pushing MMA so much, as most say, the latter is certainly playing an astute game. It has been in an unwavering alliance with Musharraf and probably also the Army but it projects itself as an opposition party to gain credibility. What it bodes for future is to be assessed because the Military-Mullah alliance is in working order.

In the record of MMA's achievements what stands out is its astute move of having the Hasba Bill passed through the Provincial Assembly. It poses a dilemma for the Musharraf regime: it is damned if it takes no strong action against the MMA Ministry. In that case, the MMA will go round claiming that it is a victim of non-Islamic forces that are in power. Its leaders call for popular support. The expectation is they will get a lot of votes in the local government

partial. True, Pakistan does what America tells it to do without reservations. But, on its own part, it does not move strongly against Taliban. Taliban have regrouped in Pakistan and seem to have a whole network of support. (ii) Indians are threatening to delay the peace process because infiltration of terrorists in the Indian-controlled Kashmir has not stopped completely; they claim the infrastructure of training and despatch of Jihadis are intact. (iii)

of promoting terror.

Drawing of conclusions from these facts is not difficult. It is true Pakistan is teeming with Islamicists who sympathise with the likes of Taliban, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda or others of the kind. There is a definite advance in these ideas' acceptability in recent years as a result of what the US and the UK are doing in the Middle East. There are also genuine Jihadist-producing organisations, most grounded in Deoband

political ambitions of ruling their country alone. They have floated various front organisations. Most have their own militias. They find no difficulty in sympathising with the beliefs that Taliban had displayed in action in Afghanistan. Indeed actions of Taliban in Afghanistan were fully approved by most religious leaders of Pakistan belonging to Deobandi school as well as Jamaate Islami.

The point is that bulk of opinion in Pakistan seems to favour this

ble with Islam. Ideas of democracy had not been heard of in Muslim countries; even today democracy is a foreign import that many Muslim leaders do not permit.

It is obvious that, as the Hasba Bill displays its true nature, this uniquely Islamic state would establish on a grand scale an autocracy that would take away all the fundamental human rights enunciated in the Pakistan Constitution and the UN Human Rights Charters. They would do as Medieval Caliphs did: pass whimsical orders as their political expediency dictated. That has been happening throughout Islamic history. The Muslim leaders, wherever they were ruling, were ruling as absolutist monarchs and in practice were secular without being democratic. This shows that the idea of re-establishing the Taliban-like Caliphate is retrograde and the people will not accept a Pakistani Mullah Umar.

Fact of the matter is that in the Twentyfirst Century Pakistanis want all the human rights that have been promulgated in the UN Human Rights Charters or in the Constitution of Pakistan today. Aware Pakistanis will go on opposing pseudo religiosity of scheming politicians. The aware citizenry may be a minority today. But they include all manner of social elites and the intellectual community, also known as opinion makers. It is the business of this community to ensure that the dark night of medievalism does not descend on Pakistan.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

The point is that bulk of opinion in Pakistan seems to favour this particular interpretation of Islam. For the first time in history a large body of Ulema has demanded a uniquely Islamic state that would enforce what the Hasba Bill seeks to achieve. The model is that of the Medieval Caliphate, the leader who by definition would be the top religious leader, autocratic ruler, top economic decision maker. His would also be the ultimate voice over matters of culture.

elections next month as well as position themselves for a better showing in 2007 general election. The regime would also be damned if it does not take any strong action against MMA government. Musharraf's supporters abroad will blame it and may withhold some of the cooperation or make his acceptability partial for not having taken any firm action. Meantime, the MMA will claim victory and can be expected to go from strength to strength. That too will not please the friends of regime at home and abroad. Who can doubt that the MMA will project itself as a doughty fighter for Islam and many people are likely to believe it.

The Musharraf regime is anyhow skating on thin ice. Look at some of recent developments: (i) the US already views Islamabad's cooperation over Taliban to be

School's orthodoxy, enumerated in the particular article from the magazine. Too many now preach Jihad against a sinful west. That is the real problem: implications need to be seen of the fact that Pakistan is one of the leading places where ideas of a vague international Islamic revolution were first floated.

Originally, the authentic Sunni Hanafi orthodoxy, represented by Deoband school, produced an organisation in pre-independence India that believed that its goal was liberation from Imperialism; Islam was compatible with secular Indian nationalism; and the more noted Ulema of Deoband openly stood for the victory of secular Indian nationalism that was expected to be realised in a democratic India. Today the Ulema of the same School in Pakistan have new

particular interpretation of Islam. For the first time in history a large body of Ulema has demanded a uniquely Islamic state that would enforce what the Hasba Bill seeks to achieve. The model is that of the Medieval Caliphate, the leader who by definition would be the top religious leader, autocratic ruler, top economic decision maker. His would also be the ultimate voice over matters of culture.

One makes the point that this interpretation of Islam is new. Before 20th Century Islam was seen as being complete everywhere including historical India. No one needed any uniquely Islamic kind of statecraft, supposedly implicit in the Quran and Sunnah. All kinds of Kingdoms have existed in the Muslim world and they were good, bad and indifferent. But they were all accepted as being fully compati-

Why Advani puts his neck on the line?

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

L K Advani, former home minister under the last BJP government, considered as a staunch Hindu nationalist hawkish member of the Sangh-parivar, and the brain behind BJP's thrust for power, is under pressure to resign. He has created history, by playing a very well-orchestrated drama during his recent sojourn in Karachi, his birth place, when he visited the mausoleum of M A Jinnah, the father of the Pakistani nation. Mr Advani, the current president of the BJP, was not on official visit to Pakistan, therefore, there was no official or protocol obligation on his part to visit the mausoleum. And he went to the extent of praising the most hated man in India (Mr Advani was reported to have discussed his whole programme with colleagues before his departure for Pakistan). But all this to the dissatisfaction of party members and detriment of his position in the party. It is an irony of circumstances that Mr Jinnah who was once given the title of 'Ambassador of peace' between Hindus and Muslims by the Congress leaders, later became the father of

the two-nation theory that led to the partition of India. But the circle moved in a reverse way, when Advani visited his mausoleum to pay tributes calling the man as "secular."

Creates history

In fact, the most anti-Pakistan politician and renowned upholder of the saffron flag of *Hindutva*, Advani made a history undoubtedly, making himself larger than his size on the Indian political scenario, with his unprecedented remarks on Jinnah in Karachi, to the astonishment not only of his own home-audience but also the spectators around this region.

Sincerely speaking, many of his 'Sangh-parivar' members, in agony, must be asking each other: 'Can a preacher of undivided India, enforced with the cult of *Hindutva*, call Jinnah 'secular'? But in diplomacy also perhaps every thing is fair, just as in love and war. And his own home constituency must have been shaken to the foundation when Mr Advani said, "Many persons find a place in history, but there are actually very few who make history. Quaid-e-Azam M A Jinnah was such a rare personality." Mr Jinnah must have turned in his grave hearing the 'rich eulogy'

Will the Indians, specially his party followers, accept Mr Advani, rather a new Advani? If they do, then it would go down in India's history as a miracle of the 21st century. Let us wait and see till the next general elections, whether Mr Advani has really become a 'born-again' Indian leader to lead a secular India, or is just thrown out like a rotten tomato. No doubt, Advani has very hard days ahead. A sink or swim situation for him.

showered on him by Mr Advani.

A "super-human"?

Advani didn't stop there. He boldly admitted his 'guilt' in demolishing the Babri Masjid when he said: "The saddest day of my life was the demolition of the Babri mosque." It is really unbelievable. Was it impulsive or just confession? Whatever, it must have exonerated him from his past wrong-doings. As they say, "To err is human, but to admit it super-human." Has he really become a "super-human" after his visit to Karachi? He has won the hearts of the majority of the people of Pakistan, no doubt.

But what about his new image in India? The instant whirlwind was very dangerous. But Advani seemed to be least worried about the outcry raised by a section of BJP and Sangh-parivar members on his *volte-face*. He sent his resignation letter from Karachi. But

later BJP leadership seemed to have calmed down with the fall in the mercury and persuaded Mr Advani to withdraw his resignation letter, which Advani was much obliged to do. But now again it seems he is really under pressure.

Why putting neck on line?

Now the big question is: for whose benefit, or in whose interest, did Advani take this great risk of putting his neck on the line? Was it a political gamble that he had played to boost his party's future, throwing a big 'bait' before the Muslim voters, to capture their solid 'vote-bank' in the next general elections? Or was it a 'fixed-game', agreed upon at a much higher-level of the party and Sangh-parivar, to make Advani play the role of a new political Messiah to wash off the dirty hands of the BJP and Sangh leadership, before facing the

Muslim voters? Whatever might have motivated Advani he has played it very successfully, thereby winning the hearts of not only of the Pakistanis but also of a big chunk of his own home audience, and opened a new chapter in Indo-Pak relations with a huge investment of goodwill. He has just started the ball rolling. Where it stops and if it rebounds, only time will show.

A glimpse Advani's glitimpse adventures

Meanwhile, let us have a glimpse of the veritable political career of Advani, beginning from his early days in Karachi, prior to his migration to India following the partition.

Before Advani began his good-will visit to Pakistan, the Pakistan media had opened almost an unknown or forgotten chapter of Advani's life in Karachi. According to the Pakistan press, a criminal

case was still hanging against him since 1947 in a Karachi court, charging him of a conspiracy to assassinate Jinnah. It is not, however, known whether that criminal case file of Mr Advani, maintained so carefully ever the last six decades or so, has been closed now, after Advani's praise for Jinnah as well as his regret for the demolition of the Babri Mosque. Now, how the Indian Muslims will take the regret expressed by Advani whom they considered as the mastermind behind the tragic episode of Babri Masjid?

A hard-nut communalist Mr Advani had always advocated for establishing a 'Hindu-raj' by marginalising the minorities, particularly the Muslims who constitute some 14 pc of total Indian population of over a billion. *Hindutva* appeared to be the main plank of his political philosophy.

In order to advance their political

move, the hardliner Hindu leadership, like Mr Advani, took shelter under the protective umbrella of BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), indeed an innocent and secular name, using it as their cloak. And it is an open secret that Sangh-parivar members, like RSS, Vishva Hindu Parishad, serve as the flesh and blood, even as muscle and brain, of the BJP. The great fall of BJP in the last elections was due to the communal politics followed by leaders like Advani, which was disliked and abandoned by majority of Hindu voters too. So BJP has to take a new turn to pick up its lost threads. And Advani, like a well-seasoned magician, perhaps has done it in Karachi.

But the same Advani had also vowed to build (or re-build) 'Ram Mandir' at Ayodhya at the same site where Babri Masjid was built by the first Mughal Emperor Babar allegedly demolishing the Hindu temple. And the popular movement, led by the Sangh-parivar, for re-building the temple is gaining ground day by day. However, those who think that Advani's future, and that of his party he now heads, is almost gone with the whirlwind he had created during his Pakistan visit, perhaps will have to hold their breath for

some time more to come to a conclusion.

Advani seems to have turned a new leaf, by putting on a new role of a mixed colour of 'secular communalism' (?) or 'communal secularism' (?), and posing as a non-belligerent great peace-maker to further improve the existing 'friendly' relations between the two nuclear rivals of Asia. In fact, he has killed two birds with one stone during his visit to Karachi.

Conclusion

But the big question still remains: will the Indians, specially his party followers, accept Mr Advani, rather a new Advani? If they do, then it would go down in India's history as a miracle of the 21st century. Let us wait and see till the next general elections, whether Mr Advani has really become a 'born-again' Indian leader to lead a secular India, or is just thrown out like a rotten tomato. No doubt, Advani has very hard days ahead. A sink or swim situation for him. The people are now conscious enough to see through the gimmicks of to-day's political leaders. They can't fool all the people all the time.

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