

## EC powerless before partisan recruitment

With what neutrality does it begin?

It seems that the government is hell-bent on creating all sorts of suspicion and misgiving in the public mind about the ability of the Election Commission (EC) to conduct free and fair elections in the country. The caderisation of the EC at the election officers' level demonstrated by the recent induction, albeit through the PSC, of a large number of Upazila Election Officers (UEO), with umbilical links to the ruling alliance, has only helped to reinforce the suspicion. Our apprehensions and distress are further intensified by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC)'s express inability to do anything about it.

One has noticed with dismay the gradual politicisation of the administration, of the police and the bureaucracy, the subtleties, in acts that cannot escape even the less than scrutinising eyes, of enhancing the service limits of the high court judges, the motives behind which may be considered less than pious.

Institutions like the Caretaker Government, perhaps the only of its kind in a parliamentary democracy came about due to the relentless struggle and demand of the people to be provided with the opportunity to elect their representatives to the parliament in a free and fair manner. Many amendments to the Constitution and existing laws were made to ensure that the pretenders of democracy did not trample the sanctity of the hallowed principle of free and fair elections. The EC is one such institution that has the sacred duty to uphold this principle. We feel that the credibility of the EC will be severely dented if those that are appointed as its officials, with the specific task of ensuring free and fair polls are themselves suspect of lacking neutrality and the CEC being unable to do anything about it.

Nobody under the sun is apolitical. But there is a sea of difference between a politically conscious officer and one who has been an active cadre of a political party, whose appointment is designed to tinker with the very process of free election. The EC may seek shelter under technicalities and bask in the assumed detachment of his constitutional post and tout technical trivia to justify an ill-motivated action of the government, but that will not help prevent loss of public confidence in the system.

This reinforces our call for urgent electoral reforms to make the EC really independent with an independent secretariat, budget of its own and without the need to be beholden to any institution of the government or the administration.

It will be well for the CEC to remember that election is not a technical but a political process whose edifice is built on public credibility, transparency and acceptance of the system. Loss of public confidence will cause the edifice to crumble.

## Revolting scenes

Undemocratic to the core

We are simply shocked to have witnessed once again police highhandedness against opposition activists, especially their women members during the general strike on Wednesday. The outrageous ways of blocking women activists from practising their democratic rights -- beating them, tugging at their clothes, using batons on them, forcibly pulling them on to the nearby van -- all these only go to show a disregard for minimum decency and modesty.

Whilst we condemn the police atrocity we also feel that policemen on duty should not come under attack; but this is occurring due to a disappointment over roadblocks to the opposition's legitimate rights to demonstrate peacefully.

Sadly such a disturbing trend of using highhanded measures against opposition women activists during strike hours is nothing new. We have in the past condemned it and expressed our disgust at the lack of decency on the street. The public deserve to know whether this is the only method the authorities know to break up demonstrations and silence dissent. As far as we know, the government has not imposed any ban on strikes, demonstrations or processions.

In a democratic environment, the opposition parties have a right to demonstrate and agitate in public so long as they do not go violent or disrupt public peace. It was a clear example of denying the opposition space on Wednesday. Why just them, even the journalists were not spared police brutality while discharging their duties.

## Inching towards isolation



ZAFAR SOBHAN

He did not raise the issue of political violence in Bangladesh at the summit, and has apparently chosen to ignore the letter, or at least decided that any issues the US would like to raise with Bangladesh can be discussed on a bilateral basis and need not be raised in public. Secretary of State Rice met with the PM while she was in New York to attend the summit.

But it is a point worth noting that this is not the first indication of

dent of the Bank to push the policy imperatives supported by his former boss, President Bush.

There is no question that, in the next three years at least, we are likely to see a more coordinated approach from the US government and the World Bank when it comes to Bangladesh, which accord the remarks made by Dr. Wallich and Dr. Wolfowitz an increased significance.

So when the new head of the Bank goes on record to suggest that "what

tion."

Also interesting to note in the letter is the lawmakers' stated concern for "serious consequences for regional peace and security." This is a more or less unmistakable reference to the long-standing Indian complaint that the Bangladesh government is permitting North-Eastern insurgents to operate from Bangladesh territory and to New Delhi's fears that the instability in Bangladesh could spill over into the

The question now is what does all this mean, if anything. It certainly seems as though the events of August 17 have been seen as a serious strike against the administration in the eyes of the international community.

The administration no longer appears to have any friends of note outside the country who will stand up for it, and the general consensus in the international community seems to be that, at best, the govern-

think that we need to worry about any foreign power directly influencing events here. But, by the same token, it would be naive to assert that public opinion beyond our borders is wholly irrelevant to domestic political considerations.

Politics here, among other things, is a confidence game. People like to go with winners -- that way they can best garner the spoils of the patronage system that dictates so much in this country. If people get the idea that one party or other has lost favour with the big powers, then that will likely have an effect on how they vote or how far out on a limb they are prepared to go in the run-up to a vote.

Not only that, but the flow of foreign investment that this government has been courting so assiduously is likely to be impacted by the poor image of the administration overseas. No one doubts that self-reliance and national pride are a good thing, but at the same time we live in an inter-connected world, and the state of our relations with other countries is a very legitimate focus of concern. No one can take pride or comfort in the fact that Bangladesh's relations with friendly nations have taken a hit.

It might matter a great deal less if the government were more popular within its borders. But the corruption and violence of the past four years together with steady rise in prices and fall in the standard of living have combined to bring the ruling alliance into severe disrepute with the general public.

With its support both inside and outside the country rapidly crumbling, the government needs to give serious thought to how to turn things around. The increasing isolation of the country does none of us any good, and it isn't doing the government any good either.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

**It might matter a great deal less if the government were more popular within its borders. But the corruption and violence of the past four years together with steady rise in prices and fall in the standard of living have combined to bring the ruling alliance into severe disrepute with the general public. With its support both inside and outside the country rapidly crumbling, the government needs to give serious thought to how to turn things around. The increasing isolation of the country does none of us any good, and it isn't doing the government any good either.**

impatience with the government's failings among influential members of the international community.

Last month, the hitherto diplomatic World Bank Country Director for Bangladesh Christine Wallich gave a much talked about speech at an international workshop on infrastructure financing, in which she chastised the government for the corruption in infrastructure development and public procurement. What was noteworthy about her speech was that for the first time Dr. Wallich went significantly beyond her more muted and delicate criticisms of governance failure of the past.

It is perhaps no coincidence that her speech came hard on the heels of the visit to Bangladesh made by the new head of the World Bank. Paul Wolfowitz is better known for his recently completed tenure as US Deputy Secretary of Defence, during which he achieved notoriety as one of the principal architects of the Iraq war, and there can be little doubt that he will use his new role as presi-

dent of the Bank to push the policy imperatives supported by his former boss, President Bush.

The recent reassignment of US Ambassador Harry K. Thomas after a scant two years in Bangladesh could also indicate changes in the relationship between the government and the Bush administration. Indeed, sources tell me that there had long been a difference of opinion between Ambassador Thomas and officials such as Assistant US Secretary of State for South Asia Christine Rocca on the approach to be taken with respect to the Bangladesh government's inaction in the face of terrorism and political violence.

It is possible that the return of Ambassador Thomas to Washington heralds the beginning of a new get tough policy on the government, and that the Bush administration will henceforth demand a more active role in ensuring that Bangladesh not become (to quote the letter) "a base of operations for international terrorist organiza-

bordering Indian states. They weren't talking about Myanmar.

India has long been on record expressing its alarm at the proliferation of religious extremism in Bangladesh and the government's apparent inability or unwillingness to confront it. The most complete statement of Indian displeasure with the current government was delivered by Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran on the heels of India's decision not to attend the 13th Saarc summit that was scheduled to be held in Dhaka in February.

Since then, the bilateral relationship has improved considerably, with Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh's recent official visit to Bangladesh the high point of the renewed thaw. However, the serial bomb blasts of August 17 have rekindled concern that the situation is not under control and the statements made by senior cabinet members implicating India in the attacks have infuriated New Delhi (the successful recently concluded water talks notwithstanding).

ment is utterly unable to maintain law and order within the country in the face of terrorist atrocity, and at worst, that the government, or elements within the government, are tied to the extremists, which is why they have been able to act with virtual impunity.

Either way, it seems as though the patience of the international community may finally be running very thin indeed.

The next question is whether it matters. Does it make a difference if the US or the EU or anyone else for that matter is running out of patience with the current government?

Let us not lose sight of the fact that, for all its shortcomings, the alliance government has been democratically elected, and that whether its performance in office merits re-election should be a matter solely for the people of this country to determine, and no one else.

In addition, I am not one for conspiracy theories, and I do not

## The smile



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

friend. God works in mysterious ways, he thought, and took a deep breath.

He looked again and she smiled again, putting her lips in a luscious manner that could send a thousand men to their deaths. In his long years if he had learned one thing about women, it was that the mystery of the universe was hidden in them. Their eyes held the depth of oceans, their glances dwarfed many mountains. Their lips carried

swayed her head from side to side to the rhythm of music playing inside the room. He didn't know what to do or say. For a while he thought he should walk up to her and start a conversation.

Just then a second thought crossed his mind. The heart of a woman has the strength of a dense forest. One could never claim to see it through from end to end. Who was she and why she should take interest in him? He tried to remem-

ber if he had met her before. Could she be one of his distant relatives, whom he hadn't seen since she was a kid? It happened to one of his friends who made a pass at a steaming beauty in a shopping mall, and came home to find that the girl was his niece from a distant cousin.

Relationship defies the law of mathematics when multiplications diminish familiarity and create strangers amongst kith and kin. He grew up in the solitude of an immense house, which swarmed with people, relatives, visitors, and servants until they all vanished, one by one, in the stretch of life, to get married, to find jobs, to raise families. She was now looking bored, her lower lip curved over the

upper lip, blowing air into the bangs of hair hanging over her forehead. When he looked again, she smirked her lips as if to announce that she wasn't getting enough attention from him.

But he wished to think a little longer, wondering how a crowd could become the loneliest place on earth, remembering how he grew up unnoticed and ignored, craving for attention in a house full of loved ones. Loneliness arouses a

face now, her head lowered in a gaze fixed on the table. Glory of creation! He thought again. If men were wax, women were fire. If men were steel, women were magnet. If men were flies, women were flames. Flesh to flesh, yet the mystery of the universe transpired between them. It was his turn now, to meet his woman, raise a family, and perpetuate that mystery in the cycle of life and death.

For a long time the woman didn't wombs of women who came as mothers, who came as wives. It was destiny that made things happen, whereas love, sex, and marriage were mere excuses to bring two bodies into predetermined union.

His heart was about to explode when she finally raised her head and looked towards him. But this time she wasn't making any eye contact with him, her face heavy as the laden sky before monsoon rain. He smiled at her, but she looked away, and it amused him to think that the wrath of a woman could make her silly. He smiled again, she looked away again, her eyes going over his head as if she was looking for someone, who was sitting behind him.

The blood was beginning to boil inside him. Why did he have to meet this woman inside this restaurant where he had come for no other business but to eat one meal? Why did she have to smile at him, and why did he have to believe that she was smiling at him on this day which was not different from any other day?

The ribs in his chest started to ache as if they felt cheated by one of them. Before he knew what happened, she sprang up on her feet and ran towards the door. By the time he turned around to look where she was going, she had disappeared into the belly of a car which sped away in the blink of an eye and vanished into the traffic on the road.

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## CROSS TALK

**The woman was pulling a long face now, her head lowered in a gaze fixed on the table. Glory of creation! He thought again. If men were wax, women were fire. If men were steel, women were magnet. If men were flies, women were flames. Flesh to flesh, yet the mystery of the universe transpired between them. It was his turn now, to meet his woman, raise a family, and perpetuate that mystery in the cycle of life and death.**

nectar of fruits, breath reeking with fragrance of rose. Their voice lilted the music of flutes, laughter resounded shattering glasses. Their smile shone like a beaming sun, their tears flowed like surging tides. Dark clouds floated in their hairs, a thousand galaxies roamed their minds. When they speak, look, sing, smile, weep, love and hate, nature sets in motion to destroy and create.

She waived at the waiter and said something to him, and then looked straight in the direction of where he was sitting. For a moment he thought a sharp knife had just gone through his heart, realizing how he was unprepared to look a woman in the eye. She smiled again, and

terrible hunger, seething in the veins with a raging void, hurting like a napalm bomb that sucks out the air before burning everything within its pocket.

A man is aroused when he is either full or empty. It comes to him after a good meal, when he is wine and dined, when he is content and life feels like a breeze in the spring. But it also comes to him in the midst of worries, when he is afraid and anxious, when he feels desolate, abandoned and challenged. Players feel it before a game, soldiers feel it before they go to war, and vagabonds feel it every time they realise that they have nothing left to lose.

The woman was pulling a long

raise her eyes and quietly ate the food served to her. Meanwhile, the waiter had also laid out his lunch when he waited for her to lift her face and look at him again. Suddenly he felt annoyed lest she thought he would like to become a plaything to her! Then he knew that women were unpredictable. What they showed wasn't always what they meant. Perhaps it was her revenge for the time he spent thinking and not paying attention to her.

It occurred to him that this was part of that same mystery, which was chasing its logical conclusion in the fatal attraction between man and woman. Life was nothing but a relay race, passing from father to son conceived in the

## OPINION

## An apology

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I do not know whether any one within the government or from civil society has yet regretted or apologised to Mrs. Sarbjit Chakrabarty, wife of the Deputy High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh, for the incident that took place at the city's Bashundhara complex.

I for one would like to do so on behalf of myself. Surely I would even go to the extent of apologising on behalf of the entire nation, but I am hesitating since this may irk the relevant authorities in our government. Such incidents are indeed far from desirable. It is twice unfortunate when it happens involving a lady, whether belonging to the diplomatic community or from civil society. It is not a question as to who

triggered off what, the very first action of the relevant governmental authority should have been to tender an apology right away. An apology on behalf of the complex owners would also be a highly welcome gesture, and would go a long way in resolving this most undesirable debacle causing tensions between our neighbour and us.

I do not hold any kind of brief for the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh, but certainly as a conscious citizen of this country I believe that the incident has only added to the list of failures in providing adequate security to diplomats and their families. The people of the diplomatic community are yet to overcome the horror of the bomb blast in Sylhet in which the British High Commissioner narrowly escaped death.

**Although a case has been registered in this regard and the law will "take its own course," it is common knowledge that this course is often too long. Our administration has been known to have followed this path in many such similar cases of high sensitivity only to create a visibility factor and buy time so that public memory, which is often notoriously short, forgets the issue altogether and the whole thing becomes a mere matter of the past.**

While the security of the entire country is threatened by terrorist acts and acute law and order situation, surely an incident of this nature further complicates matters. The administration is continually harping on how our nation's image is being tarnished at home and abroad by a vested quarter, but with incidents like this no vested quarter will be required to damage our image here or overseas.

Following the reports in local dailies, something else has confirmed my suspicion that, unlike

developed countries of the world, the neo-rich of our country do suffer from acute arrogance. I am convinced that extraordinary wealth and arrogance at least here in this country go hand in hand.

It baffles me as to how poorly our people behave in given situations. It is but too well known that the whole world today is on a downward swing, but we seem to be at the bottom of it all. Some stern action should be taken against individuals involved in the incident. It must not be pushed under the carpet and forgotten.

This incident has also revived our memory of the time when none other than the High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh, Mr. Samar Sen, was fired upon and narrowly escaped death sometime during 1974-75.

The administration may take shelter under the excuse that an incident of this kind is too isolated and relates to some erratic behaviour of some individual/s and hence may underplay the importance of the incident. But taking that stance would be a blunder. The matter should be most seri-

ously investigated and the culprits should be brought to justice. We have often experienced that whenever an individual of wealth and influence in the society is involved the matter is either hushed up or an individual of lesser consequence is made a scape-goat. It must not happen in this case.

It may appear far-fetched, but there is no denying of the fact that an incident like this is not helping in improving the already existing strained relationship between us and our neighbour, although it must be said that the incident was

purely accidental caused by the thoughtless behaviour of a few.

We should also take a lesson from the incident. Of late there has been too many incidents in which security personnel have been alleged to be highly non-professional and even involved in thefts and robberies within the complex, the safety and security of which were entrusted to them. The administration and the owners of large enterprises and business houses should properly check out both their professional capabilities and integrity before they are employed. Looking back at the incident, I still wonder how come the guards and other individuals involved in the incident let matters go so far.

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mon knowledge that this course is often too long. Our administration has been known to have followed this path in many such similar cases of high sensitivity only to create a visibility factor and buy time so that public memory, which is often notoriously short, forgets the issue altogether and the whole thing becomes a mere matter of the past.

A total reliance on that line will however be absolutely unwise for the administration in this instance. In this case, swift and sincere diplomatic moves by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also called for. We seem to have totally forgotten that honesty of purpose and humility are all time virtues anywhere in any society through eternity.

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