

Unilateralism at EC

Not the way to win public confidence

CONTROVERSY and irregularity continue to run rampant at the Election Commission. The latest development is the unilateral decision taken by the CEC to revise the electoral roll, over the objections of the other two election commissioners. Not only has the decision been taken, but all preparations have been made, and the EC secretariat under his directive declared a timetable for preparing the list without consulting them.

We have editorialised before against what appears to us to be the CEC running the EC in contravention of standard practices. That the CEC continues to take decisions unilaterally without consulting the other ECs remains a serious point of issue, and one that calls into question all the actions taken by the Election Commission so far.

Compounding the problem, is the CEC's apparent reticence when it comes to explaining his position to the people, in which the media could naturally play a helpful role. It is to the people that he must feel accountable, and in that sense, a media-friendly approach is expected of him.

It is quite possible that the CEC can continue to hide behind what we regard as legal sophistry in defense of his position (when he deigns to speak on the subject at all), and he may well be able to bulldoze his way past the other ECs and ensure that his wishes are complied with.

However, he should bear in mind that when it comes to elections, public confidence is of paramount importance. Especially when it comes to the preparation of the voter roll (which is the current issue of contention) that is of such centrality when it comes to a fair election, it is absolutely critical that the public at least have confidence in the system and be fully accepting of the voter roll that is ultimately used.

We are not passing judgement on the question of whether a fresh roll is preferable to a revised roll. However, we do believe that dissenting views need to be listened to, and that decisions should be made by the Election Commission as a whole. The dysfunction into which the commission has fallen is the last thing that the country needs.

At the very least, we urge the CEC to take the time to persuade the public that he is not acting in an arbitrary or capricious manner. The most important thing is that the voter roll is prepared without a hint of controversy and that it be acceptable to the public.

Coalition in crisis?

The coalition with Jamaat is not only destroying the credibility of the BNP to the electorate, but it is also dragging the nation towards isolation internationally.

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

ALTHOUGH the incumbent is regarded as a four-party alliance government, in practice, the BNP and Jamaat are in the seat of power over the last four years. In the cabinet, Jamaat has only two members but it has been offered two very important portfolios. Without doubt, due to its vote banks and a strong network of workers, Jamaat has been rewarded generously by the BNP after the 2001 election.

Given the present crisis of suicide bombings and almost universal claim of Jamaat's alleged ties to the extremists, an influential quarter in the BNP has demanded severing all ties with the fundamentalist party for the greater interest of the nation.

In democracy, liberal or otherwise, coalition of like-minded parties is not new. In this regard, the world's largest democracy, India, immediately comes to mind. One sees a parallel in Bangladesh since 2001. The immediate past coalition government of Atal Behar Vajpayee had Hindu fundamentalists in the cabinet.

Perhaps the BNP formed a coalition with Muslim fundamentalist Jamaat to win the election in 2001 after eyeing the temporary rise of the BJP. The present crisis created by the JMB, however, raises a question. Like BJP, is the BNP-Jamaat coalition destined to collapse after one term? Before addressing this question, we need to revisit Jamaat gaining legitimacy in the politics of Bangladesh.

It is needless to say, Jamaat appeared prominent on the political radar of Bangladesh during the movement against the regime of General HM Ershad in late 1980s. One does not forget that both the BNP (to greater extent) and the AL (to lesser extent) gave Jamaat recognition

as one of the partners in the people power. However, it is the BNP which came close to Jamaat politics after the 1991 general election when with the support of this party, Begum Zia first tasted the seat of power in 1991. The BNP-Jamaat affinity over 1991-96 did not last long since Jamaat sided with the opposition movement against Begum Zia's then government in boycotting the voterless election in February 1996.

What does this mean? Through direct participation in the two popular movements (1990 and 1996) over ten years, Jamaat apparently cultivated and won the hearts and minds of our leaders. Eventually, Begum Zia honoured Jamaat by inviting them as a major coalition partner in 2001. The readers, however, know the rest of the drama well, which has been unfolding in Bangladesh over the last four years.

Having said that, under the present crisis, is the BNP-Jamaat partnership destined to oblivion? Certainly, the partnership has so far worked well for Jamaat, but the BNP has lost whatever credibility it had with the electorate since 1991.

As a part of the government, with the support of some BNP lawmakers in the northern region, Jamaat raised its status as the alleged undeclared political wing of the so-called Islamists such as JMB, Harkatul Jihad, and so on.

The Chief of Jamaat, Nizami, however, has denied such a role for the party. But is he credible? Has he been truthful in the past? For argument's sake, say we believe him this time. Then one may ask, what role Nizami played so far to capture even a single militant? Moreover, it is in the record that he has categorically said:

"There is no Bangla Bhai. He is the making of the media."

Has he underestimated the JMB militants? We do not think so. Perhaps by acting like this, he has instigated the JMB to attain their common goal, the creation of a Taliban-style state.

The names of Jamaat, Nizami, and Saydee we happened to know since 1971, and we can be forgiven for concluding that their word is not worthy of trust. That a political party of the stature of the BNP does not know this well is beyond imagination. Of course, the BNP and its constituency of freedom fighters know the role Jamaat played in the liberation war and the atrocities they have committed on this soil.

The BNP, however, was convinced that without forming coalition with Jamaat, the party had no chance in 2001 election. Whoever made this proposition to the BNP high command, we know now that they had ulterior motives. The outcome of this coalition is now crystal clear. After four years of sharing the bed, it is the BNP which has lost its credibility to the nation, but the so-called partner has been shining.

Shining not only in political terms, but also in terms of patriotism. An idea has recently been floated that Jamaat is the custodian of clean and corruption-free cabinet members of the present Khaled-Nizami government. It is now widely known in Dhaka that Nizami does not live on his own income, but is dependent on his earnings of the school teaching wife of the minister. If true, in the present context of corruption-ridden Bangladesh, of course the credit goes to the family.

That the Jamaat and its politicians have been corruption-free and ultra-efficient sounds a bit



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odd. The reality is Nizami's initial appointment as Minister for Agriculture was a major crisis for the incumbent. Subsequently, Nizami left agriculture after creating a mess in a previously healthy department steered by former minister, Motia Chowdhury until 2001.

Timely removal of Nizami out of agriculture saved the nation from a near catastrophe in food production. Yet, Nizami was rewarded with a promotion to another important portfolio, industries. In view of the above, a legitimate concern has surfaced in the Khaled-Nizami administration that the BNP-Jamaat coalition is dragging the nation back to the days of 1971, both politically and economically.

Having said that, from a distance, one sees yet light at the end of the tunnel. The recent visit by Bill Gates and his wife is a ray of hope in the era of suicide bombing. Such a visit without doubt creates a good

image for the nation at a time when image is a rare commodity in Bangladesh.

Dr Khan and Dr Faruk were nominated by the government to welcome the Microsoft boss and his wife. On this occasion, the leadership of the technology and education portfolios were obvious choice due to the nature of the work Microsoft does. It is widely known that the IT industry is also Microsoft's major interest (Bill Gates has just announced \$1.7 billion investment in the IT industry of India). However there was no sign of Nizami as incumbent minister for industry during the visit by Mr. Gates.

Perhaps the BNP high command ultimately realised that Nizami was not an appropriate representative of the government on such an occasion, and decided to keep Nizami off the roster.

What does all this suggest? The coalition with Jamaat is not

only destroying the credibility of the BNP to the electorate, but it is also dragging the nation towards isolation internationally.

Unfortunately, the reality is that however Begam Zia wants to paint a good image for her government at home and abroad, what is more important is the reality.

She knows well that the fundamentalists put the nation on the world's radar the day that they declared in public: "Amra Hobo Taleban, Bangla Hobe Afghan."

The PM needs to reverse the course of the ship of state before this boast becomes a reality.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Netrokona agenda

They are out to destroy all we stand for

THE number of casualties in the bombing near the Udichi office in Netrokona has risen to eight, with another cultural activist succumbing to her injuries in hospital. The ghastly attack has left deep scars on the psyche of not only the people of Netrokona but also the nation as a whole.

We cannot, however, regard the fact of the bomb blast near the Udichi office as a mere coincidence. The attack on Udichi meeting years ago in Jessore is a harsh reminder of our cultural values having been the target of obscurantist forces. A cultural organisation promoting patriotic songs and championing secular ethos as against rabid fundamentalism is an eye-sore to reactionary elements. Now if these things come under attack, society will be at risk of being cut off from its age-old moorings. And that is precisely what they want.

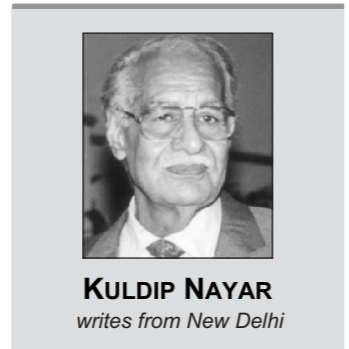
The nation has to respond to the immediate need for protecting men and women who are threatened by the religious fanatics. The law enforcers are arresting the suspects here and there, but it seems the attackers are still organised enough to kill and maim people.

The law enforcers have to intensify the drive against the bombers who are planning to tear apart our socio-cultural fabric. The threat must be neutralised with some determined efforts on the part of the government and the society at large which regards violence as an irreligious act.

How many more Uma Bharatis and Raj Thackerays?

BETWEEN THE LINES

What the revolt by Raj Thackeray and Uma Bharati signifies is not so much disobedience as discontent vis-a-vis the Shiv Sena and BJP high commands, respectively.



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

UMA Bharati, once of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and Raj Thackeray of the Shiv Sena may not be chips off the same block. But their resentment underlines the same point: personal ambitions dent the armour of parochialism as easily as that of pluralism. Bharati is a product of a political party which oozes religion. Raj Thackeray comes from a set-up which exudes regionalism. Both have been tempered by mixing

ideology with obedience.

Still both take no time in denouncing their leaderships when denied positions they coveted. They prove to be as undisciplined as wayward liberals. Ideologies based on religion or regionalism are supposed to steel their followers. But their commitment seems to be in proportion to the importance they get in the party. The examples of Bharati and Thackeray show that when challenged, personal considerations get the better of their supposed entrenched beliefs.

In fact, the question their conduct throws up is whether religious or regional frenzy is the means to an end. If they want to grab a particular position, they too would adopt any method to get it -- histrionics, tears, and even denouncing what they stated all their life. If ambition can drive individuals to extremes, what about the parties they represent? Isn't power or

position their ideology? Every slogan, every argument of theirs is only a performance. It seems that leaders invoke patriotism or principle only to impress upon the people that they are fighting for a cause. Actually, their ulterior motive is to advance themselves.

Bharati may have habitually violated discipline. But her posers are relevant. She has rightly asked, how can the BJP high command name Shivraj Singh Chauhan as the leader before the party's MLAs have met to elect him? No doubt, it was blind fanaticism which made her applaud the destruction of the Babri Masjid 13 years ago. She proved her loyalty to the party and its anti-Muslim bias. But it was sheer cussedness on the part of BJP high priests to deny her the chief ministership of Madhya Pradesh when she claimed a majority in the legislature party. Thackeray's case is similar. He

has said that he can no longer tolerate the "injustices and wrongs" meted out to him in the Shiv Sena. He too thinks that he was denied his "rightful place" when Bal Thackeray anointed his son, Uddhav, as appointed heir to take over the reins of the party. Bal Thackeray was partial because Raj was more popular than his cousin, Uddhav.

What the revolt by Raj Thackeray and Uma Bharati signifies is not so much disobedience as discontent vis-a-vis the Shiv Sena and BJP high commands, respectively.

This holds good for practically all parties. They too ride roughshod over conscientious objectors. They too have their blue-eyed boys. One of them is Natwar Singh, of the Congress. That he is mentioned in the Volcker report on oil purchases has been known for weeks. He was not asked to quit the government because word had not yet come from the top. It was only when he was ousted from the Congress that he began to be criticised by party leaders. The Congress' image was not important, Natwar's connections were. Still the truth is not known.

If transparency is needed -- and there should be no two opinions about it -- parties have to be

democratic in their functioning. Somehow, it has come to be recognised that a party requires a strong leader who can sustain discipline. This is how authoritarianism was born in India. In fact, the concept of a "strong leader" developed in Europe in the last century for rapid economic development. It was thought there would be no interference if there was one person at the top to guide the pace of progress. In our country, its origin goes back to the time when one group in a party came to power. It saw to it that there was no space for critics.

Naturally, strong leaderships have killed whatever democracy political parties may have had. They have put fear in the minds of political workers. Anyone challenging the party line is ruthlessly crushed, lest his or her example incite dissidence.

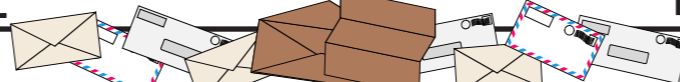
From the past, I can recall two examples in the Congress party. After the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress president K. Kamaraj tried to develop a collective leadership to fill the vacuum. But Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri pushed him into the background. Kamaraj met the same fate at the hands of Indira Gandhi when she became prime minister through his efforts. In the BJP, it is a bit different because the RSS

decides on the leadership, both in the party and in the government. L.K. Advani is quitting at the end of this month not because he has lost support within the BJP but because the RSS has decided to end his tenure.

Still it is important for political parties to nurture internal democracy. There should be real elections, not the kind of sham we witness where everything is left to the "leader." Maybe the Election Commission should supervise the organisational polls of recognised political parties. This may also address the problem of bogus membership. There is no perfect plan which will absolutely prevent conflicts where there are sharp differences of opinion. Yet a way can be found whereby all interests are represented in the committee or the bureau which the party constitutes. Free election within a party for several positions is sine qua non of discipline. This may introduce accountability. This is also a device to devalue coterie or the so-called advisors. Otherwise, there will be more Uma Bharatis and more Raj Thackerays.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Arrange a dialogue

We are greatly anxious over the present situation of Bangladesh. Rise of militancy is, of course, the prime concern for us. No doubt, sheer negligence of the two mainstream political parties of the country regarding the extremist political groups' activities is responsible for the present horrible situation. Nonetheless, these two parties seem to be reluctant to solve the problem through uniting themselves and working accordingly. In this emergency they are behaving like kids. We, the people of the country, want them to sit and have a talk over this alarming situation so that the terrorists get no chance of using their quarrels as a way of furthering their cause.
Shamim Sufi
Law, DU

Fundamentalism in Bangladesh

It is 30 years since I left Bangladesh, one of the reasons was that I witnessed fundamentalism in Bangladesh. When I talk with Muslims from Bangladesh or Pakistan, they talk about only religion, although I'm a Muslim too. Muslims from Indian sub-continent are the most backward people and that is why economic prosperity did not come to our motherland. To stop the aggression of Islamic fundamentalists, all madrassahs must be closed down, leaving one or two in the country for producing Imams of mosques. Madrassah does not produce any specialists. We need to heavily invest in our education system. Only through investing heavily in education Bangladesh can

achieve prosperity and progress in every sphere of life.

Baz, *On e-mail*

HIV/AIDS prevention

The internet edition of The Daily Star published three articles on World AIDS Day. It is disappointing that nobody in the journalist pool has taken the time to really analyse the situation pertaining to AIDS prevention in Bangladesh. It is really unfortunate that media spends a disproportionate amount of time and space in actually analysing why we are facing so much trouble to control AIDS and other infectious diseases in Bangladesh. Most of these features are reports on the existing situation and they have been disseminating the same information for the last five years. Have your editorial team spent any time to actually go for some analy-

sis of the situation? Since the mid-1990s, the National Policy explicitly endorsed the strategy of creating an enabling environment for vulnerable groups. All three features just repeated the same recommendations. We know what is needed but we don't know why it is not being implemented. Why are we afraid to ask the question? What has happened to the policies that were outlined 10 years ago, or the volumes of strategies that were endorsed over the years? Why did we fail to create an enabling environment for the risk groups? Ask the questions and believe me this is the best promise we should make on the World AIDS Day. Injecting Drug Users are vulnerable and this information is not new. But despite adopting evidence based strategies, drug use is still considered a criminal

offence not a public health issue. Under the Narcotic Controls Act of 1990, drug abuse is a punishable offence, and so they are the easiest target in our fight against drugs. They are persecuted like criminals. On the one hand, we have a policy that clearly identified the need of the drug users and a law that criminalises them. They are harassed, imprisoned regularly through Section 54. Just take your time and go through the survey of any NGO working in this field. Does any of the features bother to seek why this discrepancy between law and policy persists for over ten years? We need to ask these questions and judge our intentions about what we are actually doing. We all have the intelligence that if we are so keen to persecute the vulnerable groups they will be more hidden and more difficult to

reach for prevention works and consequently more vulnerable. Despite that, the situation has not yet improved. Don't you think you should seek some thoughts on the matter from all the authorities concerned? Since 1998, CARE Bangladesh has been involved in harm reduction programmes for IDUs like, needle exchange, drop in centres, peer education, distribution of condoms and basic primary health care. But the legal issues surrounding the effective harm reduction programme still remain dubious. There are several sections in the Narcotics Control Act that can be utilised to launch a legal battle against such programmes. We have to consider this. It is not only time for reporting, we need to find the gaps and evaluate what we are doing. The people of Bangladesh at least have the

right to know. There are other issues that can be discussed, why are we not utilising our own pool of skilled people within the government system? The public health culture is virtually absent in our country. For years, we are talking about STD treatment facilities, but why things have not changed? If you ever visit a STD treatment centre, you will find there is no privacy and they are not youth friendly. We all know that we don't need to hear it all over again, what we need to hear is why the situation has not changed. There is also lack of diagnostic facility. I had the opportunity to work in one of such departments, and I know what really the constraints are. Why we spend so much time on talking what should be done, why not spend some time why it has not been done. In Bangladesh, within

the government pool of resources there are infectious disease specialists, virologists and microbiologists and, of course, the public health practitioners (in every medical college there are community medicine departments), why the government is not leading the way like it should? We have already identified the barriers but why are we not changing the situation? We need to ask these questions. Yes no doubt hundreds of NGOs are fighting at the forefront of our battle against HIV/AIDS, but we need to ask why still there are so many gaps between the policies and the situation at the field level? What has really happened?
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