

## Campaigning on official tour

*The violation of norms must be avoided*

In case there was any doubt in anyone's mind, the actions of the ruling alliance since the start of the year make it clear that its re-election campaign is in full swing. The ruling alliance is now using every advantage and privilege of incumbency to advance its own electoral cause and to show-case its favoured candidates for the nominations in the public eye.

This is not new in Bangladeshi politics, but neither is it in any way acceptable, and, as in some other realms, the present government has surpassed previous records when it comes to this kind of abuse of official power and position to extract electoral advantages. The launching of what can only be called an incipient re-election campaign under the pretext or on the sideline of official work is obvious, blatant, and in violation of the law.

The Privileges and Remuneration Act contemplates this kind of abuse, and clearly implies that other than for carrying out official functions, use of money from the state exchequer is strictly forbidden. Under the act, there can be no mixing up of partisan elements in official government functions or events.

Thus when the prime minister or ministers or state ministers or deputy ministers visit development projects or the openings of schools, colleges, hospitals, bridges, culverts, etc at government expense and make a political speech in favour of the ruling alliance and requesting the audience's vote, it should be deemed unlawful as in other democratic countries. The sensitivity of helicopter being used for such a purpose is well known.

In addition to the afore-mentioned, taking this kind of personal or political advantage also runs counter to the Bangladesh General Financial Rules, and, we would imagine, might well even implicate aspects of the election financing law.

The government and opposition are set to debate the rules to level the playing field for the next election; however, unless this abuse of government power and position is curbed, the opposition will have new cause for complaint.

Besides, it must be noted that at a time when the finance ministry has announced a 10% austerity cut, these lavish events to promote party interest are neither fiscally nor politically prudent, and will do nothing to improve the tense political atmosphere.

## Our nationals in detention camps

*Reach legal help to them*

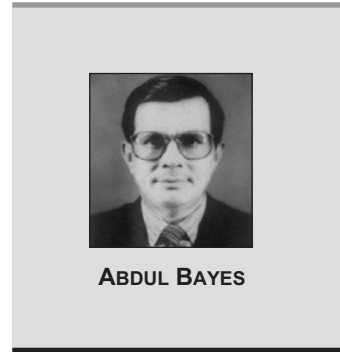
It is disconcerting news indeed that as many as 150 Bangladeshi nationals have been passing days in uncertainty under harsh conditions in a detention camp at some remote area in Spain for the last ten months. These Bangladeshis were intercepted by the Spanish police when they were making attempts to enter the country without any valid travel documents. According to a media report, while most of them had travelled from Bangladesh, others from various Middle-Eastern countries joined them in a journey that included crossing the Sahara Desert. The report says that three unfortunate Bangladeshis died of sickness while crossing the desert. These Bangladeshis, allured by high salaries, had embarked on the perilous journey with false travel documents given by some so-called travel agents in exchange of exorbitant sums. And like many of their predecessors the journey of these young men also ended in tragedy.

Another media report says that hundreds of Bangladeshi female workers are dodging the eyes of the police in Dubai where they are working as illegal workers. Among the seven to eight thousand Bangladeshi female workers in Dubai most have no valid work permit or residence visa and they would be arrested and sent to jail once the Dubai police will be able to trace their whereabouts.

The trend for travelling to foreign countries in search of jobs by desperate young men and women is increasing in the country and there is nothing wrong in that. But trouble begins when some of them fall into the traps of unscrupulous travel agents and end up in such pitiable conditions in unfriendly environments. These young people in their desperation fail to distinguish between legal and illegal documents before beginning the journey and when they get caught the Bangladesh embassies or consulate offices cannot act promptly to extend legal and other help since they fail to submit legal papers.

It is only natural that people from Bangladesh will travel to various overseas destinations in search of work, therefore, the relevant authorities should undertake programmes to create mass awareness in society so that young men and women do not walk into the traps of the crooked travel agents. The authorities concerned will have to take strict measures against the dishonest agencies and extend legal aid to the victims.

# PM's appeal and anguished public



ABDUL BAYES

**A**MIDST the fourteen party alliance's ongoing demand and agitation programs for the fulfillment of the reforms for Caretaker Government and Election Commission, Prime Minister (PM) Begum Khaleda Zia had been holding hectic public meetings throughout the country. Besides bashing her opponents in the said meetings, the BNP chief is also found to be seriously campaigning for support for another term in the office. It may be mentioned here that, within few months, the present government will have to hand over power to a neutral caretaker government to hold general election in 2007. Thus it is quite obvious that a PM (and also the party chief) would move around the country with success stories of her government, along with the offences of her opponents, to win the hearts of the voters. But what surprisingly struck my mind is an appeal by her made to the public. I noticed that her son Mr. Tareq Rahman, the senior-most joint secretary general of the BNP, had also been making the same point in his recent meetings.

Both of them are now appealing to the people to put them to power again so that they could "uproot corruption" from the country. In other words -- as they want to say and I want to interpret -- their fight against corruption would start only after BNP is sent to the citadel of

**BENEATH THE SURFACE**

The question is: why their "jihad" against corruption had been shelved for the last four years since voted to power in 2001? All the more important is the fact that, during the 2001 election campaign, as readers could recall, one of the important pledges that BNP made to the public was to uproot corruption from the country. People honoured their words and voted them to power -- notwithstanding the alleged modalities of the election held in 2001 -- to see a corruption-free society. But as ill luck would have it, people were allegedly betrayed to witness just the opposite syndrome: corruption continued to creep in and cripple the economy, claiming roughly 2 per cent of our GDP every year.

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Shortage of space would not allow me to tell the telling stories of corruption. Nor shall I resort to the TIB reports, widely publicized, with a view to ventilating the rampant corruptions, rank and file. But allow me to cite two reports headlined by The Daily Star on March 30 that possibly would speak of the level of corruption in the country during the time they are making the appeal to the public. One report says that the Power Development Board (PDB) is to incur colossal loss, about Tk.10

million annually, on buying costly plants: "After pushing the country into a perennial power crisis through inaction and wrong actions in the last four years, the government is making the Power Development Board (PDB) swallow a loss of thousands of crores of taka in the next 15 years by imposing very costly skid-mount projects on it. Price of power from such a plant ranges between Tk.3.10 per kilowatt hour (one unit) at the lowest and an unbelievable Tk.12 per unit. In contrast, the country's existing three power plants of 11 MW production capacity each (now being expanded to over 30MW) offer power at Tk.2.03 per unit." According to the same report, the government is pushing for two dozen skid-mount plants which would generate a total of 450-500 MW power. This process is alleged to be a gross violation of the country's private power policy.

Generally, power plants have a gestation period. From procurement to generation of electricity, it takes few years -- sometimes the total tenure of a government. We came to learn that the demand for transparency by the donors in the procurement processes of power projects stood on the way towards materialization of the projects in due time. The party in power wanted to gift party lobbyists in a non-transparent fashion. As a result of the stalemate

so impinged, the country was thrown into its most acute power crisis ever. Farmers in the northern districts are suffering from want of water caused by power crisis; industries suffer heavily; load shedding jeopardizes human lives in urban areas; and there are other problems created by the crisis. The Hon'ble PM and her followers, of course, dub it as a consequence of the "flood of development" that the country is faced with. Economic development, no doubt, demands more power but a shortage of power in no way means economic development. In fact, one of the important indicators of development is per capita consumption of power. Even if for brevity's sake, PM's perception is taken to be true, then hunger could also turn out to be a blessing; it means some people are eating more (flood of eating!) to keep a large number starving!

The other report of the same daily and on the same day, relates to land grabbing. Land grabbers are reported to feast on 1.88 lakh acres of forest land in different parts of the country. The main grabbers are, as reported, politicians, local elite, and businessmen. The Parliamentary Standing Committee is reported to have blasted the concerned ministry for their alleged failure in getting the lands off the forceful occupation. Few years back, we read a newspaper report that the then minister in

charge of the Ministry of Environment spent Tk. 10 million in the wedding of his daughter!

The Daily Jonokantha reported that the one MP from Bakergonj district built a house costing Tk.10 million in his village. He has another residential flat in Dhaka worth Tk. 10 million and business properties worth few more millions. It is now almost a universal perception that most of the ministers and ruling party MPs, allegedly, amassed huge wealth during the last four years and, as critics would say, there are more to come in the remaining part of the tenure of the government. Our crude calculation shows that roughly 2-3 per cent of our GDP each year have been "hijacked" by the corrupt ministers, MPs, businessmen, and officials. Needless to mention, perhaps, that "Haowa Bhaban" rose to headlines as a source of corruption in the country.

It must, however, be admitted that the government for the first time set up the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) since last year or so. Whether done by the pressure of the donors or whether driven by government's own judicious judgment of containing corruption could, of course, be a matter of debate. But as things went, there seems to be little doubt that ACC came into being to obtain a particular loan from donors and once the loan landed, ACC ceased to operate as

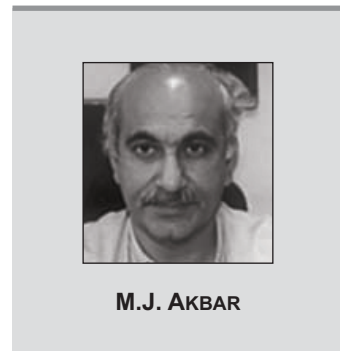
expected. Therefore, it was never an ardent wish of the government to create an independent institution to investigate into corruptions. The ACC is being made almost a non-functioning body due to the lack of logistics and other supports.

Therefore, we think, the appeal for another term in the office of the government by the present PM and her son, to uproot corruption from the country, may not attract the people already anguished and angered by rampant corruption in the country. The cost of corruption is mostly borne by the poor segment in the society. And it is the poor who mostly suffered during the last four years of creeping corruption in the country. The power crisis, allegedly caused by corruption, put farmers in perilous position. Prices of sugar, onions, baby food and other essential items soared partly due to corrupt practices of business syndicates. The under ground economy, accounting for roughly one third of the GDP, originates from corruption. By and large, corruption crippled the socio-economic fabric of the society. Corruption now has entered into the hearts of rural areas also.

In this backdrop, faith in the capacity of the present government in wiping out corruption had been fading fast and people might not stake their vote this time in their favour on this issue particularly. It is, however, not to argue that a change of government would do all that is the needful in wiping out corruption but, at least there would loom large hopes for a better future. People live on hopes and like to see changes. That appears to be the lesson of history. The anguished people, given a choice to select candidates freely and fairly, may not respond to the appeal of the PM this time.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

# Walking through raindrops



M.J. AKBAR

**T**HERE is a curious, perhaps inadvertent but certainly revealing, flaw in the Congress formulation of Mrs Sonia Gandhi as the Leader Under Siege. It is possible that the paradox escaped her think tank, since it is so very easy to miss the obvious. But her strategists made a mistake when they constructed a line that does not stand up to scrutiny; namely, that just as "everyone" had ganged up against Mrs Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, "everyone" was also ganging up against Sonia Gandhi.

All the heavy hitters during the struggle phase of Indira Gandhi -- Morarji Desai, Kamaraj Nadar, S.K. Patil, D.P. Mishra, Ram Subhag Singh -- are dead. But those who drove Rajiv Gandhi from power are still amidst us. Not all of them are in the best of health, but all of them are part of the national discourse.

If I had to prioritise the foes of Rajiv Gandhi, I would place them in this order (the ratings are based not on their place in politics, but on their effectiveness in media and opinion-creation). At the very top would be the name of Ram Jethmalani. It was his series of questions on Bofors, heavily promoted in Ramnath Goenka's Indian Express, which established the tone of the acrimony.

**BYLINE**

The dilemma before the Congress is not the vote-pulling power of its foes but the vote banks of its friends. The Congress is in power because of an alliance. Can it return to power without an alliance, or with a reduced number of allies? It will seek the second option. It would be foolhardy to plunge into the first. But an alliance is a house of cards, and has to be carefully protected from any passing breeze. Will the structure hold if you remove a few cards from the north or the west? It did not when the BJP muscled into friendly space in Jharkhand and Haryana and Assam.

Second would be Vishwanath Pratap Singh, who was effectively if artificially built up as the symbol of anti-Bofors probity and went on to reap such extensive rewards, far greater than landed in Jethmalani's lap. Third would come the BJP, led then as now by Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, who of course were delighted to see the secularists get together to shred the Congress. Fourth, on par with the BJP in volume and invective, were the Communists, led then as now by Jyoti Basu and Somnath Chatterjee. Fifth, higher in both volume and invective than the previous two, were the Socialists led by George Fernandes and Madhu Limaye at the senior level and Lalu Prasad Yadav on the second rung. It might be noted that on ground zero Lalu was more effective than Fernandes or Limaye.

Where are they today? Ram Jethmalani is publicly and forcefully on the side of Mrs Sonia Gandhi, as readers of the Op-Ed pages of this newspaper will confirm. V.P. Singh may be more muted, but he too is firmly on the side of Sonia, having nothing to say anymore about Bofors. (He once announced, during a public rally at Gandhi Maidan in Patna, that he had the full list of account numbers where the Bofors commissions

were stored and would shortly disclose them.) Jyoti Basu and Somnath Chatterjee are active allies of Sonia Gandhi and come readily to her defence if she is under attack. It would have been unthinkable fifteen years ago that they could be part of an alliance with the Congress. The Socialists, being socialists and therefore less than sociable, are split. But one of the most important leaders of the movement inspired by Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, Lalu Yadav, is with Sonia Gandhi. Looking across the political spectrum, if you see Sharad Pawar as a variation of the Congress(O) that opposed Indira Gandhi, then he too is within the alliance led by Sonia Gandhi. The "everyone" therefore is an exaggeration. Only the BJP and a section of the Lohialites remain against Sonia Gandhi.

The reason for the strategists' mistake is easy to discern. Subconsciously the Congress is still reluctant to accept that it is firmly committed to alliance politics, and struggles to return to its natural métier, as the dominant national party: "us versus all of them" creeps naturally into its dialectic.

It is equally natural that it should believe that Sonia Gandhi could restore the party to its Indira Gandhi-era status. If she can resurrect it once, she can be trusted to

rebuild it further. Desire, though, has to be married to opportunity for such political consummation. Opportunity, however, is not constantly available for wedlock. It can arrive without warning. Desire has to be ready for opportunity. Opportunity can be more flippant; it does not have to be as constant as desire. Opportunity can take its time, choose its moment, and arrive at the door through the most circuitous route. You cannot flirt with opportunity or keep it waiting at the door for too long. You must seize it.

Has opportunity arrived once again at the Congress door? The BJP provided one two years ago by first advancing the date of the general election and then announcing a landslide victory before the people ensured a slide in the reverse direction. Has a series of events beginning with the successful effort to unseat Jaya Bachchan from the Rajya Sabha created the conditions for Sonia Gandhi to seek the endorsement of the electorate at a national level? There are early signs of this possibility. The Congress has launched a campaign across the country with a simple theme: that Sonia Gandhi has an unparalleled sense of sacrifice and such a virtue is precisely the kind of nobility that the Indian voter wants to see in his,

and of course her, leader. The memory of Indira Gandhi, the iron woman who had a soft heart for the poor, is easily evoked. So much effort can hardly be for a mere by-election in Rae Bareilly, which Sonia Gandhi does not have to visit to win. Opposition parties who think that they should put up a candidate against her in Rae Bareilly will be wasting their money and time if they take their candidate seriously. It seems probable that pollsters are testing this proposition with market research and will have their suggestions ready by the end of April. Add a few percentage points for the fact that the anti-Congress Opposition is in about as unholly a mess as can be, and clueless to boot. If a trip on a chariot is all that is on offer, then the Congress has some right to optimism.

One might add in parenthesis that the results of the coming round of Assembly elections (in which the Congress will lose, probably everywhere) will have as little impact on the outcome of a general election towards the end of the year as the BJP's victories in the northern states had on the overall results two years ago. The goalposts shift, changing the game.

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of its friends. The Congress is in power because of an alliance. Can it return to power without an alliance, or with a reduced number of allies? It will seek the second option. It would be foolhardy to plunge into the first. But an alliance is a house of cards, and has to be carefully protected from any passing breeze. Will the structure hold if you remove a few cards from the north or the west? It did not when the BJP muscled into friendly space in Jharkhand and Haryana and Assam.

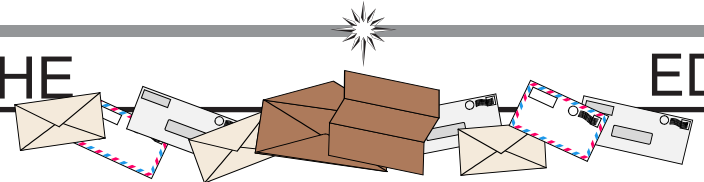
The BJP may or may not have learnt from this mistake; will the Congress learn from the BJP's mistakes? The irony is unmistakable. Both the Congress and the BJP have the same strategic interest, to become dominant national parties. Their basic frustration is not each other, but the regional parties that they have to carry in the tactical search for immediate office.

The Congress believes that it has a story to tell the people, of Mrs Sonia Gandhi's sacrifice. But does it have a story to tell its allies? The smaller parties in the ruling alliance can see no obvious merit in another general election, since the best result they can hope for is the status quo.

The Congress is walking through raindrops. As an exercise this has superb merits, not the least of them being that it keeps the party on its toes. If it can tiptoe its way through the drops, avoid that slip that turns into a splash, there could appear a rainbow on the horizon. It will be probably have to dump the Rainbow Coalition of 2004 to find the rainbow of 2007, but that is the fate of rainbows. They disappear as quickly as they come.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## 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.

### IT needs attention

The IT industry is evolving very fast and gradually spreading to every nook and cranny of Bangladesh. The process of spreading IT awareness and introducing our professionals to the advanced part of this wonderful technology might have taken a bit time, compared to the neighbouring countries, or the countries which claim to be far ahead in this regard, but the good news lies in the fact that the wonder of this technology has already been tested by our industries and, in this way, the enthusiasm about IT has increased dramatically in Bangladesh. In fact, even the mushrooming cottage industry in our country has become responsive when it comes to buying software for managing their offices more efficiently. Consequently, the demand of the professionals is shooting up.

The world has marched ahead from the beginning, whereas we are still trying to make the mark in this area. The yawning technological gap between Bangladesh and other countries has further widened.

In the past few years, I have noticed that we have an abundance of IT professionals but we are still lagging behind other countries; the reasons might be numerous, the foremost being the IT Infrastructure, of course. Thus, sensing the urgency of the subject the IDB-BISEW has taken the initiative in this regard and has created a pool of skilled manpower that this country was lacking. Here, I would like to draw your attention to the word 'skilled'.

The noble effort of IDB-BISEW is instrumental and has been hailed with lot of appreciation by the industry itself. But a single effort is not

enough; building a nation requires collective efforts. This industry has great potential but it needs basic infrastructure to excel further.

**Mithilesh Kumar Singh**  
On e-mail

### Good candidates for 2007 elections?

In a recent meeting of Nagorik Songlap held in Dhaka, political parties were urged to be careful in nominating their party candidates for the next general elections in 2007.

But if we go through the present system of selecting the party candidates, we find that very few honest and highly qualified candidates are nominated by the major parties. The beneficiaries of the existing system are the dishonest traders, black money holders and black marketers; every party gives nomi-

nation to those who can give a good donation to the party funds. Sometimes that donation or subscription may exceed Tk 1 crore.

So it is not easy to get good candidates nominated by the parties.

**Peerzada Syed Rofiqul Hussain Hiala Shaheb Bari, Habigonj**

### We, the youths

We, the youths, are now moving in different directions to reach the destination which is completely unknown to us. We think about our own lives. We have no time to think about the country. Everybody is ready to go abroad without thinking twice.

We just want to make money; it doesn't matter how it is earned. We all want to be rich in money, unfortunately not in mentality. The vicious cycle has to be broken

at any cost.

**Korak Sen**  
On e-mail

### Civil society and good governance

Observers on the socio-political dynamics of Bangladesh should be elated with the recently formed civil society body to elect "competent and honest people" in the next parliamentary election. This has arisen out of the continuing and frustrating failure of the elected governments since 1991 to deliver essential services to the people and at the same time ballooning corruption that simply put unearned wealth in the hands of a small number of people. This is again a great moment of victory for the common people, as the movement is likely to gain momentum and change the

course and quality of democracy in Bangladesh. Let us all unite with the movement so that the nation gets out of governance by the party in power and the one in opposition, rather two sides of the same coin. I would however like to mention that the movement should be a long term one and continue beyond the next election. I would suggest that the movement also demand holding of upazila and district level elections at the time of holding the general election as per our constitution.

This will go a long way in our efforts to bring power back to the people. Let more and more honest and competent people participate in the governance of the country and bring the fruits of real democracy to the doorsteps of the people. The people of Bangladesh deserve it and that is why the movement has originated from among the people at

large.

**M. Shamsul Haque**  
Prof. IBA, DU

### Police action on opposition activists

A couple of weeks ago we saw that the Awami League activists kept the roads of Dhanmondi blocked for many hours while holding a rally. The leading newspapers are writing about how the AL activists were beaten up by the police, but none of them published any picture of how people remained stranded on the roads due to the protest rally. When the protestors started to throw stones at the cars police had nothing else to do. There were kids who were going back to their homes after their class, many of them were students of playgroup who even did not know what was happening. I saw a lady crying with her daughter

in her lap and she was urging the so-called activists not to break the glass of her car.

But no one had any concern about that; her car got hit by a stone and her child started crying. We claim we love our country and our people. I think the newspapers can play a very important role in condemning this kind of acts! But unfortunately no one seems to have that courage to come up and protest against this kind of vandalism.

The government should take some tough measures to stop such activities. If they can talk about human rights when police beat up opposition activists, why can't we ask for protection from the government?

**Syed T. Haque**  
Lalmatia, Dhaka