

## A question-ridden voter list

*Nation keen on authentic electoral roll*

THE instant reaction to the draft electoral roll, just released by the Election Commission, is one of incredulity and disbelief. No one can shake off the crowding doubts as to the level of sincerity and honesty brought to bear on the whole preparatory effort; of how crucial a nature the future will only unfold. It shows an abnormal rise in the number of voters. For, it represents an increase in new entries in the order of 1.65crore, a neat 22 percent higher than the total number 7.48crore listed in 2000. This draft list has more than 9.13crore voters.

The Chief Election Commissioner argued at the AmCham for a new voter list on the ground that the 2000 list was flawed with an 'epidemic' of fake voters. He cited reports of Washington-based National Democratic Institute, and US State Department as well as a letter of the European Union to make his point. He specifically quoted from the EU letter addressed to former CEC as 'noting' that the voter list of 2000 included 'a staggering 1.3crore ghost voters'. In other words, the operative 'base line' for the new draft was even lower than 7.46crore as on 2000 list, i.e. 6.36crore 'genuine' voters. The addition of 1.65cr in the new draft or the 22 percent higher intake over the last voter list clearly raises suspicion about its veracity, something the CEC so boastfully wanted to ensure for the new voter list.

Demographically, the above 15 population in Bangladesh is 50 percent but the present draft makes 18 year and above population look like more than 63 percent. How is it possible?

Through newspaper reports, informal discussions at public places and social interactions, we come to learn of personal experiences adding up to an overall impression that a huge number of voters have been left out.

So, the omissions and commissions like a staggering number of new entries and the exclusion of huge number of voters raise serious questions about the credibility of the EC. The biggest challenge before the EC is to now set things right immediately and ensure availability of an authentic voter list in good time.

The deadline set for filling objections and requesting corrections is 21 May, that for disposing of the same is 6 June and of incorporation and deletion is 24 June very tight time schedules given the enormity of the task and complicated procedures.

Our suggestions are threefold: first, let the enumerators go to the voter's doorsteps rather than asking him/her to approach any EC office which may discourage him/her to take any initiative. Second, all the political parties through their local units must ensure that none in their constituencies is left out or there is any interpolation. Third, and most importantly, it should be possible to conduct household by household physical verification of the draft list by independent monitoring groups. Or even sampling could reveal the truth. Finally, we would like the whole list to be put on the website.

The draft list has called into question the core element for free and fair voting which is a foolproof electoral roll. Thereby the whole election process and that of democracy are being thrown into a state of jeopardy. Instead of giving the nation confidence in the electoral process, the EC has given a damper.

## Vegetables export in disarray

*Settle discord through dialogue*

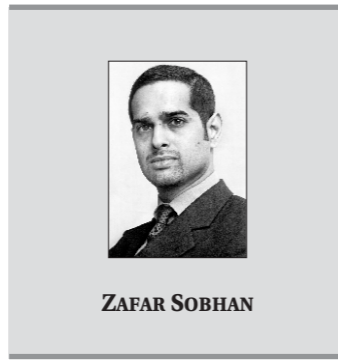
IT is disconcerting news that because of some form of stand-off between the exporters of fresh vegetables and the authorities of the Bangladesh Biman Airlines, the country is losing much-needed foreign currency. According to the aggrieved leaders of the exporters' association, they have lost business worth half a million dollars in three days. By any estimate the figure appears to be quite substantial for a developing country like Bangladesh.

The untoward situation is learnt to have arisen after Biman authorities recently increased the freight rate by 25 per cent in one go. Though the authorities argue in favour of increasing the freight charges to make its operations 'cost-effective', the exporters are of the opinion that with the enhanced rate they would not be able to find any buyer. The stalemate has resulted in the suspension of export of vegetables, fruits and betel leaf to the markets in the Middle-East and Europe since 1 May.

Among the few produces of the country that fetch valuable foreign currency perishable vegetables and fruits feature quite prominently. According to one study, in the last fiscal the total volume of export was worth 45 million dollars. There is also a healthy growth rate as far as demand for these produces is concerned in various markets of the world. And Bangladesh Biman Airlines is the sole carrier of these perishable goods, as other airlines do not agree to carry such items.

We feel it would not be too difficult to reach an amicable solution to end the impasse if the two parties can prepare the mindset and sit across the table to review the ground realities in a collective prospective. The looming threat of losing the markets to other countries should be the common concern to work out a solution.

# A tale of two administrations



ZAFAR SOBHAN

AMERICANS visiting Bangladesh, especially journalists, often comment on the similarity between the current four-party alliance government in Bangladesh and the Bush administration in the US.

I have to confess that this thought occurred to me too when I arrived in the country in mid-2003 after spending most of the past fifteen years in the US, and that the more familiar I become with the polity here in Bangladesh, the more strikingly apt seems the comparison.

Perhaps (to stand Tolstoy on his head) all unhappy governments are alike.

Perhaps there is something about the arrogance of power combined with the sycophancy of those close to the seat of power that results in all

## STRAIGHT TALK

**As it happens, 2006 is shaping up to be an interesting year in both US and Bangladeshi politics. The Republicans are already concerned about the Congressional elections due in November that they fear could return both houses of Congress to the Democrats and further isolate the president. Meanwhile, here in Bangladesh, we have elections scheduled for the end of the year, and the voters are looking restless.**

beleaguered administrations seeming to be so clueless and out of touch with the concerns of the public.

Perhaps all government mismanagement and incompetence can be reduced to the administration placing personal or party interest above the national interest.

Or perhaps we are reversing cause and effect, and it is their similarities which have led to the two governments' under-performance and unpopularity. But, whatever it is, the two administrations have very similar instincts and very similar problems.

The first point of similarity is between what some in the US media have dubbed the "imperial presidency" of George Bush and what I would call the "imperial prime ministership" of Khaleda Zia.

In the US, this amounts to unprecedented and virtually unlimited exercise of executive authority and privi-

lege, and the idea that the Bush administration is unaccountable, either to the other branches of government or to the public. Sound familiar?

The consequences are virtually identical in each country. The same out-of-touch leadership with dictatorial and anti-democratic inclinations. The same contempt for the media. The same obsession with image and "spin" and elevation of appearance over reality. The same insistence that things are going well when it is obvious to the voters that the opposite is true. The same inability to admit mistakes let alone to correct them. The same smearing of political opponents as unpatriotic and treacherous and giving aid and comfort to the nation's enemies.

In fact, when it comes to politics, the similarities do not end with the likeness that the BNP bears to the Republicans. It is perhaps unsurpris-

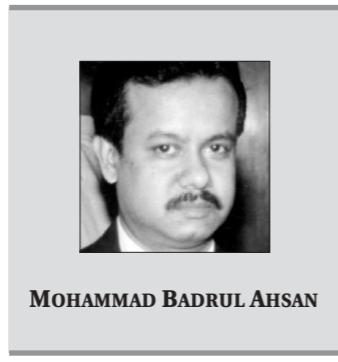
ing that there also seem to be parallels between the clueless Democrats in the US and the hapless AL here in Bangladesh.

The first similarity is in their media and public relations. Just as the Republicans run rings around the Democrats when it comes to propagandizing and framing the various political debates to their advantage, so too does the BNP public relations savvy and political acumen dwarf that of the opposition.

Like the Democrats, the AL always seems to get itself boxed into a corner. It is forever failing to take advantage of the political opportunities that the government provides, and it always seems to be on the back foot when it comes to public relations and communication.

There are similarities in terms of ideology and outlook as well. Both the AL and the Democrats are slightly left-of-centre while the BNP and the

# Short shrift to the people



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT is a pity that Jamaat-e-Islam was not banned and banished in the early days. History might have been different for us and we would not be worrying today. But I guess it is too late to fix it now, since the molehill has become a mountain. The party, which opposed the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, looms large in the national context. The government refuses to negotiate without Jamaat and the opposition wants to ditch it. The chance of a political reconciliation looks increasingly remote.

So, it was a mistake to let Jamaat live and return to politics. Jamaat has been a pretty bad actor, and played an atrocious role in the liberation war. It helped a ruthless army kill and rape our own people. But the fact of the

## CROSS TALK

**In 1971, Jamaat opposed our political freedom. In 2006, it is being opposed by us. Our bodies have been liberated, but our minds may not have changed that much. Do you know why? The politicians do not agree on the caretaker government. They do not agree on the dialogue. They do not agree on the voter list. But they damn well agree on one thing and that is to give short shrift to the people. Be it Awami League, BNP, or Jamaat. If you ask, they all look the same to me. It is time people should learn not to negotiate with any of them.**

matter is that we did not do anything to hold it accountable. Yes, there have been political movements, mock trials, lots of hullabaloo against it. At the same time, we have also done contradictory things. We have wooed its support in streets and ballots. The presidential candidate of a leading political party made clandestine visit to its head honcho. For all these years, we have condoned and condemned Jamaat-e-Islam in a single breath.

But things have happened in the meantime. The party has been reinstated in national politics. We have restored the citizenship of its leader and lifted the ban on its political activities. We allowed it to contest in national elections. It has won seats in the parliament and now sits in the government, running two ministries. Who is going to explain how so much

water has flowed under the bridge?

Somehow the politicians believe that politics is like a conversation. It can be picked up where it is left off, as and when they wish. But the Jamaat we find in 2006 is not the same Jamaat we left in 1971. The party has built its constituency in all these years, winning votes to sit in the parliament. A portion of the population, rightly or wrongly, likes it. If people are the source of all power, then some of that power has been vested in it.

Well, the popularity of Jamaat is not of any concern to me. Some people will always like some people -- different strokes for different folks. It is the fundamental tenet of democracy. It does not matter what I think of Jamaat. It does not matter that I do not like it doing politics with my religious belief. For so long as people vote for it, I have to take it seri-

ously.

That means it is silly to plead the excuse of not negotiating with it for what it did thirty five years ago. It was a mistake not to settle that score then and there. Then we have mingled with it, sharing the streets for political movements, sharing the parliament for debates, and sharing the government for decisions. We are already guilty by association if that is what we wish to avoid by refusing to sit with it.

In democracy, politics must be met with politics and Jamaat can be ousted only if it is rejected by people. It does not matter how it has happened. It does not matter how Jamaat has exploited religion. It does not matter if BNP has sheltered and nurtured it under its wings. If anything, Awami League has not done any better. They never tried to ban Jamaat or stop it

from participating in the national elections, at least not when they had the power to change a few things.

Perhaps that is the underlying reality of politics as said by a former US vice-president: To err is human, but to blame it on someone else is politics. It is the same blame game that persists, the same ineptitude that percolates through all the ploys to crush the opponent. It is a puerile defence many of us used as children when we did not know that passing the guilt was not innocence.

That underpins the fundamental problem in our politics. We are a bunch of adults behaving like kids, our minds trapped in the endless cycle of trick and treat. BNP has dragged us in the mud; its mindless abuses are showing through chaos in its last days. Power shortage, fuel crisis, rampant corruption, spiralling prices, misuse of power, growing violence, and unbridled greed -- all the reasons why it should not return to power again. Awami League has got enough ammunition to finish the enemy.

Yet, how the exclusion of Jamaat from the negotiation table is going to help anything? Will it eliminate Jamaat from politics if some of us keep a distance from it? Can we simply make it vanish six months before the elections, if we could not touch it in more than thirty-five years?

office and the AL and the Democrats seem to perennially be the party of opposition.

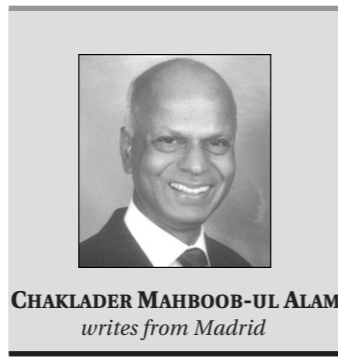
It is an interesting co-incidence that the AL came to power in 1996, the same year that Bill Clinton was re-elected president (the first Democrat since FDR in 1944), and that the BNP returned to power in 2001, barely nine months into George Bush's first term.

There does seem to be a natural affinity in terms of ideology and outlook between the BNP and Republicans on one side and the AL and Democrats on the other, and this might help explain the continuing indulgence the Bush administration appears to retain towards the four-party alliance and the otherwise inexplicable soft spot that so many US government officials seem to have for our current regime.

As it happens, 2006 is shaping up to be an interesting year in both US and Bangladeshi politics. The Republicans are already concerned about the Congressional elections due in November that they fear could return both houses of Congress to the Democrats and further isolate the president. Meanwhile, here in Bangladesh, we have elections scheduled for the end of the year, and the voters are looking restless.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

# Is the Doha round dead?



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM  
*writes from Madrid*

DESPITE months of discussion, the international trade negotiations remained completely deadlocked. As a result, a few days ago, Mr. Pascal Lamy, the director general of the 149 member World Trade Organisation formally announced the abandonment of yet another deadline (April 30, 2006) "to agree on precise formulas for cutting tariffs and subsidies on farm and industrial trade."

This was going to be an important

## LETTER FROM EUROPE

**It is a pity that the rich nations have once again failed to realise that by developing the poor countries where two-thirds of world's population live, they would eventually create huge new markets for their manufactured products. Until they can overcome their reluctance or fear to expose their farmers to competition, trade negotiations will remain deadlocked and in the long run it will have negative effects on them as well.**

step towards the conclusion of the world body's Doha round of negotiations which started with much hope and fanfare in the capital of Qatar in 2001. The principal objective of the Doha round (also known as the Development round) was to help millions of people in poor countries to lift them out of poverty by eliminating the wrongs of unfair trade.

Unfortunately, now it is widely feared that the Doha round is dead. There are, of course, good reasons for this fear.

Although both the US and the EU have made vague proposals to cut agricultural subsidies and tariffs, in

reality they are more spin than substance. In fact, according to Oxfam, if implemented, these proposals could lead to increased spending in the EU on these items. Yet, in return they wanted market access to health, banking, telecom sectors in poor countries.

Five years after the launch of the Doha round and a series of missed deadlines, it is evident that the developed world has failed to appreciate the growing frustration of the poor nations about the sincerity of the rich nations' mantra that free international trade would help spread the benefits

of globalisation among the rich and the poor in an equitable manner.

Regrettably, the international political situation does not seem to be conducive to making concessions in trade negotiations. The current low approval rating of the Bush administration, mid-term elections in November, and a growing protectionist sentiment among American politicians are making the situation more difficult.

In July 2007 "fast track voting" in the Congress will run out. This procedure would have obliged the Congress to accept or reject any trade deal as a

package. After this date, the US Congress will get back the power to examine individual parts. It is highly unlikely that the Bush administration, whose focus is now directed elsewhere, would approach the Congress to extend this extraordinary Trade Promotion Authority.

The transfer of Robert Portman -- until recently America's high-powered trade negotiator and the person who concluded the landmark deal allowing China to enter the WTO -- to oversee America's federal budget does not bode well for the Doha round of negotiations.

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic is not very encouraging either. According to Ken Ash, the deputy director for food and agriculture of the OECD, the overall levels of protection given by Europe to its farmers is higher than that given by the United States. The French farmers, in particular, are the principal beneficiaries of the EU's very generous subsidies and the powerful French farmers' lobby is not willing to make any concessions in this respect.

The growing protectionist sentiment in France and the coming elections do not allow its politicians to make bold decisions. A new factor -- a sense of insecurity linked to energy -- has recently been added to this already complicated situation.

According to Christine Lagarde, the French trade minister, some European countries are now viewing agriculture not only as a food source but also as a "potential alternative energy source," i.e., bio-fuels; hence it deserves greater protection and not less.

It is a pity that the rich nations have once again failed to realise that by developing the poor countries where two-thirds of world's population live, they would eventually create huge new markets for their manufactured products. Until they can overcome their reluctance or fear to expose their farmers to competition, trade negotiations will remain deadlocked and in the long run it will have negative effects on them as well.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

# Pledge and ploy for next election

ABMS ZAHUR

THE nation is waiting for the general election to be held early next year. The present government seems busy in preparing 'controversial' voter list. The opposition parties are pressing hard for reform in election commission and appointment of caretaker government to ensure free and fair election. Correspondence was going on between the alliance government and the 14-party opposition led by the AL. Strangely enough the BNP chairperson was openly declaring her views on the proposed reform. Thus we were confused as to whom to believe the BNP secretary-general or the chairperson. BNP seems not serious about the discussion. And ultimately the AL has rejected it on grounds of the government's proposed committee.

Question arises as to how to ensure free and fair election in an atmosphere of high politicisation of

administration, dominance of muscle and money power and inadequate sense of security among minorities, particularly the Hindus. It appears that BNP is in a dilemma. Some of the BNP leaders may be in favour of running the election independently (free from Jamaat support). The other part is afraid of a disaster in election without support from JI. This part is fully conscious about the government's poor performance during the last four and a half years.

BNP has unofficially started the party's campaign for the next election with the pledge to root out corruption, introduction of free education for female students upto the degree level and wiping out the power crisis. It is really difficult to understand as to why the party is terribly afraid of admitting partly or fully its failure to fulfil the election pledges it made in the election of 2001 like (a) appointment of the judiciary from the executive, (b) appointment of ombudsman, (c)

setting up of Human Rights Commission, (d) repealing the special powers act, (e) election to zila and upazila parishads, (f) autonomy of state media and (g) disclosure of wealth of public representatives.

BNP claims that the government has achieved great success in development activities. Quoting Khaleda Zia's statement in her 2001 election manifesto "no effort for development and people's welfare will succeed unless corruption is rooted out from the state and social life" we may point out the failure of the government to make the Anti-Corruption Commission a constitutional body. It may further be added that the ACC is yet to function effectively. Despite demand of many BNP lawmakers for probing allegation of corruption against some ministers and lawmakers nothing has been done. How can we expect any effective measure for controlling corruption from the ruling party, in fact it appears that the

corrupt and inefficient administration may further lose its credibility due to high politicisation. If no improvement can be shown about reducing corruption within a short time receipt of assistance from the donor agencies may further shrink substantially. By appointing foreign lobbyist, it is extremely doubtful, our image as the most corrupt country can be changed to any appreciable degree.

It appears that government is desperately trying to please bureaucracy without making adequate measure to improve the capacity of administration. Simply promoting huge number of employees and recruiting extraordinarily large number of personnel can hardly improve efficiency. Poor management and planning has resulted in cropping up of newer problems. Despite loud claim of no fertiliser crisis, people are not only dying while raising their legitimate demand for fertiliser (Kansat crisis), we do not see

government's sincere effort to solve the crisis. It sounds rather interesting that Islamic militancy has been eliminated in Bangladesh. How can a government claim for a simple solution to such a widespread and deep rooted problem? Has the government found out (a) that there is no link of JMB with Al Qaeda, (b) whether the activities of JMB have not been financed by some foreign governments, (c) what measures have been taken or contemplated to improve the curriculum to improve the capacity for rational thinking of the madrasa students and (d) what steps have been taken against the ministers and lawmakers of the alliance government suspected to be assisting the Islamic militants directly or indirectly?

Power crisis has reached the worst point within last ten years and we do not see its solution within a near future. The minister concerned is repeatedly showing his helplessness. So far no sincere effort of the government to solve the crisis is seen.

We are not yet clear whether past reputation of a candidate's sincerity, honesty, a reasonable level of education (say bachelors degree) should be considered properly in the process of selection. Besides, it must be seen that he strongly believes in the independence of Bangladesh and is a strong believer in parliamentary democracy.

With apparently little interest in good governance or even not reforming administration how implementation of projects can be improved by BNP? With seemingly no clear idea as to the separation of judiciary from the executive how the party aims at establishing rule of law? No appreciable step to appoint an ombudsman has so far been taken. As common men do not bother about it; the government, it appears, is not too keen about it.

Our foreign office is, as it appears, is concentrating too much on saving the country from further tarnishing of its image. However, sudden appear-

ance of Bangla Bhai is embarrassing, on the other hand by showing too much tilt toward China we are not able to improve our relation with India. As a small country we must strive hard for maintenance of balance in our relationship with these Asian giants.

What is needed at this stage of our political drama is mutual respect and appreciation of each other's views. Confrontational politics are a critical factor for our lagging behind some of our neighbours despite our comparatively adequate resources to move forward much more rapidly. Let the major parties, particularly BNP and AL, agree that by defaming Sheikh Mujibur Rahman or Ziaur Rahman they will not be able to win respect.

As the matter stands to day BNP-led alliance made too many commitments during 2001 election without assessing their capability or the capability of the administration. AL failed to show enough of capability to

administer either during 1972-75 or between 1991-96. Though the position of JP meanwhile seems not bad, but Ershad's uncertainty may prove to be detrimental to party's performance. Though JI has been able to improve much of its organisational capability JMB's militancy may have adverse effect on its performance.

Despite open exchanges of blames and counter blames between the AL-led 14-party and BNP-led 4-party both the sides appreciate the necessity for freer and fairer election for smoother progress of democracy in Bangladesh. Both sides feel the need for better candidates. In theology election means selection by God of certain people for salvation and eternal life. Actually in politics we need good people for salvation of the country from the present serious crisis.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.