

Voter list odyssey

When will it end?

THE latest to join the chorus for going door to door for preparing the voter list is the newly appointed secretary to the election commission (EC). Even before taking over charges, he gave his comment on the subject that only echoes what the people have been saying all along. And the minister for law, justice and parliamentary affairs has also reiterated the importance of visiting every house to register voters. It now remains for the EC to take the cue from there and proceed on with the solemn responsibility.

We have written volumes by now on the sequels of wrong moves made by the Election Commission (EC) in preparing a tenable voter list. The reason for devoting so much of our time and energy to the subject is that preparation of an authentic voter list is the first and foremost requirement for holding a free and fair election. Therefore, the entire exercise is of paramount importance for upholding our pledge for consolidating democracy at all levels of nation building.

But, strangely enough, EC under the leadership of the much-controversial chief election commissioner (CEC) has not only failed to accomplish the first task of preparing a voter list, it has in the process done a great deal of damage to the credibility of the office by undertaking a series of obstinate moves, including providing simplistic interpretation of their own of the Supreme Court directive. Next, they took the unilateral decision that the fresh list would be prepared without sending enumerators door to door. Obviously this latest decision drew heavy fire from all directions. On our part, we have been crying hoarse trying to drive the point home that people would ultimately reject an office-centered voter list. That our apprehension has proved to be true is amply reflected in the recent media reports of negligible response of the people to the call for registration. Even after relaxing some regulations there is insignificant turn out at the registration offices.

We would like to say once again that through our columns we are only voicing the apprehension in the minds of the people about the credibility of the election. We feel that time is running out, and that further delay would only increase the possibility of producing a flawed voter list. Therefore, the sooner the list is prepared following the rules of the book, the better for the nation.

Mounting corruption

As counteraction missing

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh (TIB) has prepared the corruption database 2005 drawing upon published newspaper reports on graft for the same year. Although the analytical study, focused on reported corruption incidents, keeps out of major graft scams, the damage done to the economy nonetheless appears considerable. Taka 526.27 crore were lost through 2128 instances of bribery and graft in 2005. Still, it is the tip of the iceberg if it were possible to quantify all the under-hand dealings that went unreported, undetected.

Whatever magnitude of corruption, based on newspaper reports, the TIB has telescoped has been corroborated by further investigation and cross checking with the stakeholders by them. So the authenticity of most newspaper reports is a proven fact.

Whenever corruption is highlighted by the newspapers they are blamed for spoiling the image of the country. Similar castigation is lotted to the TIB studies, reports, analyses and perception rankings on incidence of corruption. Without being so critical of and sensitive to the negative corruption-ridden reputation of the country and squandering money and energy on so-called image-lifting lobbies, if the government had minded the business of stamping out corruption from within much better dividends could accrue to the country.

Basically, what has the government done to prevent corruption? As for the abuse of power, the biggest vehicle for the promotion of graft, has the government tried to clip the powers of those who are close to power? Those who are to set examples of honesty have themselves become iconic figures in corruption.

The anti-corruption commission (ACC) created with high hopes has turned out a farcical body. Although like the anti-corruption bureau ACC is not an appendage to the PM's office, it remains financially, logistically and even operationally dependent on ministries of finance and establishment. It has been allowed to roll without the needed structural and procedural preparations. So it is now an object of ridicule.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

AFTER the end of the cold war, the west, including the US, has been suffering from Islamophobia. The term Islamophobia refers to a prejudice—opposition and hostility to Islam.

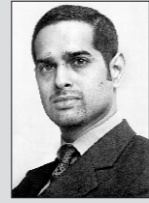
According to the Runnymede Trust (1997) it also refers to the practical consequences of such hostility, like the unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. In fact, the incident of 9/11 in the US played a tremendous role in the spreading of Islamophobia among the societies in Europe and America.

Especially, the Bush administra-

tion could successfully capitalise on this to promote its so-called "war against terrorism" campaign. In fact, the lack of understanding of Islamic theology and political Islam in the media has contributed much toward creating a negative impression in the very psychology of the secular world towards Islam. Consequently most of the average people from Non-Muslim communities view Islam as a religious form of terrorism.

This Islamophobia has coined some new terms, distorting their actual meanings. "Islamic fundamentalism" is one such term widely used to label the deeds of Islamist extremist groups. But historically the term fundamentalism is used in Christian theology with a somewhat

Policy please



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ELECTION season, or pre-election season at the very least, whichever you choose to define it as, is upon us. Both the government and the opposition are fully in pre-election mode. However, given the vagaries of Bangladesh politics, this does not consist so much of setting forth policies for the future and initiating debate on the choices that are available to the public (character assassination and casting aspersions on one's opponents' honesty and competence do not constitute debate).

In Bangladesh, pre-election season continues to mean endless debate (though it must be said, little resolution) on the modalities of the elections and minutiae of constitutional interpretation. There is no doubt that this is in its own way a necessary

and critical discussion, but it says something about the political dysfunction of the times that such argument eclipses and any meaningful debate on policy differences between the two sides.

I suspect that the vast majority of voters, while resigned to the constitutional bickering and political maneuvering and the more or less tribal and personality-based politicking that have come to mark elections in Bangladesh, would welcome a frank statement of where each party stands with regard to a wide range of issues so that each voter can make up his or her mind about the path the country is to take.

It is true that one of the regrettable features of our political culture is that in terms of policy there is often little to choose from between the government and the opposition, and that more than the

STRAIGHT TALK

The political parties need to get their manifestoes ready from now so that the voters can make an informed choice if and when they are able to cast their votes. Nor should the manifestoes be enormous tomes of ponderous prose like in the past, but should be a concise statement of principles, and more importantly, concrete policies that they will pledge to enact within five years if elected. And we should hold them accountable to their words.

stated policies, it is voters' assessment of the integrity and competence (as well as party loyalty) on which they base their vote.

There is a great deal of assessment at the local level of which vote will be more advantageous to a community, but regrettably, that too has less to do with who will enact what policy than it has to do with careful calculation as to who holds the balance of power in a certain locality, the efficacy of being represented by someone from the party of government, and consequent analysis of which candidate that is likely to be.

It has little to do with policy and this is in fact one of the problems which we need to fix. From a philosophical point of view, the idea behind universal suffrage is twofold. One is that it is the manifest right of every adult citizen to

have some voice in his political trajectory of his country, and that government without the consent of the governed is illegitimate.

But there is also the practical reason, and that is that a functioning democracy is the best check against poor governance and that the combined wisdom of the masses as represented by the popular vote is the best guarantor of a system that offers the best shake to the most people.

To the extent that our elections are marred by money or muscle or intimidation, it is fair to say that the will and wisdom of the people is being thwarted and that it is no surprise to learn that we have been enjoying only partially the supposed fruits of democracy.

There is constant grumbling about democracy not having delivered for Bangladesh or how it is functioning poorly. It is worth

More than a medium of exchange



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF money is a medium of exchange, it changed hands last week in exchange for nothing. There was no business deal cut. There was no back payment settled. The second richest man gave away a vast endowment to the first richest man in the world over a simple reason. Both agreed that what they earned should go back to society.

So Warren Buffett pledged \$31 billion at a ceremony at the New York Public Library. He will give this money to Bill Gates on one condition. Bill has to disburse \$4 million a day, 7 days a week, on philanthropic causes in addition to what he is already spending through the Gates Foundation. The money will come in installments, a lump-sum of \$1.5 billion annually. Buffett said in his speech that Bill Gates and his wife would do a better job dispensing this money. It was "a simple decision" for him.

Fair game for a man who started 50 years ago with \$105,000 and turned it into \$44 billion. Buffett considered he was just a man who was lucky enough to be born in the right place at the right time, with the "right kind of wiring" to be successful in the American system. He has finally resolved his inner conflict. Buffett, who spent his life amassing unimaginable wealth, felt "all the way along" that what he earned

belonged to the society. Earlier he had announced that he was not going to bequeath his fortune to his three children for their personal use. Each of them will get roughly \$1 billion to run a charitable foundation. That is it.

Bill Gates, who is worth \$46.5 billion had sorted out his wealth long before Buffett. He will only leave a small fraction for his children and then donate the rest to health research, libraries, and education. Bill now operates small

CROSS TALK

It is obvious that Nature does not have any intention to give to children what it gives to their parents. Then why should parents give their wealth to children? Inheritance is the shifting gear on a runaway train. It can be used to escalate or slow down the mad rush for money that is knocking down the pillars of consideration and restraint. Money is more than a medium of exchange. Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have proved it. Is there anybody who wants to follow them?

high schools in the US, supports worldwide health initiatives against HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, and sponsors rural development in sub-Saharan Africa. With the donation from Buffett, he is going to expand the scope of his foundation, and surrender some of his duties at Microsoft in order to spend more time on philanthropic activities.

That brings a new twist to the game of money. Why make money mostly by uncharitable means if

one must give away in charity? May be, money-making is an addiction, which, once acquired, is hard to quit. It is possible that people under the excessive influence of affluence often feel guilty. That is when they give up their money to seek rehabilitation and recovery.

What about the rich kids, those who are raised on the nutrition of their fathers' wealth? Why have Bill and Warren decided not to leave everything for their children? They



Bill Gates, Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

repeating the point that democracy in Bangladesh has only worked as well as we have allowed it to work. Any failures in the system can largely be put down to deficiencies in our democratic culture, and the solution to this is surely more democracy, not less.

But returning to my main point, that the more informed the public is about the choices available to it and the wider the policy debate, the better for the country. The need for free and fair elections are a given, the sine qua non for things to get better, but we also need to focus on what issues will be raised and what issues voters will be able to express an opinion on in free and fair elections.

What the country is most interested in is what each party has to offer. What would a new 4-party alliance government mean in real terms for their lives? What would a 14-party alliance government mean in practical terms.

Nor is it enough to make vague or generalized promises such as more security, better law and order, less corruption, etc. People want to know specifically which policies will be implemented. The IT sector want to know what will be done to facilitate this industry. The garments sector wants to know what support the government

can offer it in a time of expanded international competition. Farmers want to know what policies will be in place to ensure timely and affordable fertilizer and fuel. Rural voters want to know what infrastructure development schemes will be put in place.

How these are carried out and the integrity and competence of those who carry the policies out, of course remain important. But the policy itself is often the key. To cite just one example of an area in which it would be nice to have some answers: how would each party address the issue of the continued insolvency of state owned enterprises?

The political parties need to get their manifestoes ready from now so that the voters can make an informed choice if and when they are able to cast their votes. Nor should the manifestoes be enormous tomes of ponderous prose like in the past, but should be a concise statement of principles, and more importantly, concrete policies that they will pledge to enact within five years if elected. And we should hold them accountable to their words.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

are going to give enough so that the children can live comfortably. But they are giving back most of it to where it came from. They believe that they heavily owe it to society, not their children.

It upsets the traditional sense of getting rich, which is an acquisitive habit to amass fortune and hand it over to the next generation. Most rich people use their money to satisfy their carnal needs, and pass it to their children so that they can enjoy their lives without hardship. One of the most intriguing thoughts of all time is how birth becomes destiny. Inheritance is no more accidental than earthquake or tsunami.

The reason why Warren Buffett or Bill Gates has drawn our attention is not that they have their phenomenal wealth. It is the quirky reflex with which they have denied the gravity of being wealthy men. They have agreed to give back what they have taken. Right or wrong is not the important question. Nobody would have blamed them if they had clung to their wealth for many more years and to their titles as the top two richest men.

Instead, they have turned our attention to something more important. Is it right to keep the fortune that is gained at social expense? This is not to say that the fortunes of Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are ill-gotten. But most property is theft, as the French philosopher named Prodhoun once said. In one way or another, one man's gain is another man's loss. Accumulation of wealth is a function of ripping others off!

It reminds us of the Roman empire where affluent people used to eat and then throw up in the vomitorium so that they could eat again. It is a kind of sickness, a compulsive habit to acquire more

than what is required. What Warren and Bill have done is show how much money they could live without. That gives a redundant margin which is left behind as inheritance. In some societies, there are legal provisions to absorb that margin into the state if there is no surviving heir. Socialism and communism were disposed to abolish it altogether.

If looked at closely, inordinate inheritance is the most ruinous of all human customs, which sets man against man in an endless cycle of conflict and retribution. Inheritance is idle fortune that creates idle generations, who seldom engage in anything more fruitful than blowing away their ancestors' fortune. These idle generations are like the sequels of a blockbuster movie, which are rarely as good as the original.

Children do not always inherit the good looks of their parents. Children do not always inherit the talent of their parents. Children do not always inherit the knowledge, wisdom, intelligence, courage, and charisma of their parents. Children do not necessarily inherit the temperament, judgment, and acumen of their parents. It is obvious that Nature does not have any intention to give to children what it gives to their parents.

Then why should parents give their wealth to children? Inheritance is the shifting gear on a runaway train. It can be used to escalate or slow down the mad rush for money that is knocking down the pillars of consideration and restraint. Money is more than a medium of exchange. Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have proved it. Is there anybody who wants to follow them?

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Fundamentalism, extremism and Islam

The Sharia based Islamic groups fail to understand the dynamism of Islam. It may be noted that Islam is not a static religion. Rather, Allah declares Islam to be a religion for all people of all times. This dynamism of Islam in fact lies in the evolution of Sharias. Islamic scholars should pay special attention to this regard. If we fail to modernise the Islamic Sharias then possibly many orthodox leaders like Shaekh Rahman, Bangla Bhai will appear again and again to torment our society by distorting the real image of Islam.

Salat (Prayer to God) iii. Seaam (Fasting for purification) iv. Zakat (Charity) v. Haj (pilgrimage to Mecca). These five cardinal tenets of Islam, in fact, cause no harm to any non-Muslim community in the world. Further, these fundamental beliefs in Islamic theology have no links with terrorism. So there is nothing wrong if any group from Islamic communities advocates for Islamic fundamentalism.

Another Islamic term, "jihad," commonly interpreted as "holy war," creates a negative attitude towards Islamic theology among non-Muslim as well as secular Muslim communities. Like the crusades in Christian dogma, jihad does not mean to initiate war against non-believers. In fact, jihad is exerting oneself for the cause of religion.

The preaching of the Quran: "No compulsion is there in religion (Surah al-Bakarah, verse 256)" has strongly opposed the idea of initiating a "holy war" against non-Muslims. There is nothing in Islam that says that a Muslim should fight in order that religion should live. Islam forbids offensive fighting. Islam says: "Fight in the cause of Allah against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah

loveth not transgressors." (Surah al-Bakarah verse 190-193) So, Islam only allows Muslims to fight a defensive war.

Again, true Islam is more tolerant than any other existing religion and it preaches peaceful co-existence with other religions or beliefs. The Quran explicitly instructs: "Say, O ye that reject faith! I worship not that which ye worship... To you be your way, and to me mine (Surah 109:1, 2, 6)." So, an Islamic fundamentalist cannot be an extremist as his/her principal source of divine instructions is the Quran and it explicitly vocalises against any sort of religious extremism.

Then the obvious question that arises is why the media, academics, politicians or state-men continue to portray Islamic fundamentalism as a sort of religious terrorism. The answer to this question, in fact, lies in their failure to differentiate between Islamic theology and political Islam. Islam is a theology whose main objective is to set up a bridge between mankind and the Creator. By following the guidelines given in the Quran, Muslims believe they would achieve greater success in the hereafter.

However, deviating from teach-

ing of Islam, some vested quarters in Muslim societies in different countries overemphasise the political aspects of Islam rather than theology. These sections of the Muslim community may be termed as Islamist groups. By analysing their characteristics and objectives, these groups may broadly be classified into two. The first group tries to capture state power in different Muslim countries by capitalising on the name of Islam and the sentiment of the Muslim community.

Many secular parties in Muslim majority countries use Islam and Islamic values as their political agenda just to get sympathy from Muslim communities. Their objective is not to establish an Islamic state and they are not orthodox like the second group. The prime objective of this group may be compared with any other democratic political party elsewhere. During the partition of India, Mr. Jinnah's Muslim League was an example of such a group. The then Muslim League of India advocated to uphold the interests of the Muslim community rather than promising to establish an Islamic state in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence or Sharia. The political agenda of the sec-

ond Islamist group is to establish a Sharia or Islamic jurisprudence based Muslim country. So to understand the very perspective of this group, we need to probe into Sharia in general. Sharias were developed by some Islamic scholars to control the medieval Muslim societies in the light of instructions given in the Quran, Hadith (saying of the prophet), and sunnah (the deeds approved by the prophet) considering the social context, social structure, economic relationships etc, during that period.

Obviously the primary source of Sharia is the Quran. The methodologies adopted for producing Sharia are: i. Ijma (Consensus) ii. Qiyas (Analogy), and iii. Ijtihad (Progressive reasoning by analogy). There are many schools of Sharia: namely, Hanafi, Maleqi, etc, and on many issues verdicts given by two Sharias contradict each other. This contradiction, in fact, is due to time and context dependency of Sharias.

So, Sharias are not universal prescriptions for the Muslim community. Sharias should be modified to address our present problems, following the guidelines given in Quran, Hadith and Sunnah, after methodical analysis of the relevant

issues in our contemporary timeframe. Medieval Sharias are not enough to provide appropriate solutions of many problems in our present complex social structure and social relationships. In fact, many Islamic scholars have advocated for modernisation of Sharias. For instance, the great poet and philosopher of Pakistan, Dr. Allama Iqbal, in a letter to Md. Ali Jinnah also suggested the modernisation of Sharias.

The Sharia based Islamic groups fail to understand the dynamism of Islam. It may be noted that Islam is not a static religion. Rather, Allah declares Islam to be a religion for all people of all times. This dynamism of Islam in fact lies in the evolution of Sharias. Islamic scholars should pay special attention to this regard. If we fail to modernise the Islamic Sharias then possibly many orthodox leaders like Shaekh Rahman, Bangla Bhai will appear again and again to torment our society by distorting the real image of Islam.

The author is Assistant Professor and Research Coordinator of the Department of Computer Science of American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).