

All eyes on the president and chief adviser

And time's running out

A redeeming feature in the midst of the political uncertainty is the 4-member committee set up by the CA to parley with the parties to devise a way out of the present gridlock. We hope that a solution has been found that would be acceptable to all the parties. The committee is ready to report to the CA. He should immediately receive them and move on to resolve the present political impasse.

His is the responsibility to help the Election Commission (EC) conduct a free and fair election. But the person who is supposed to ensure that it is organised flawlessly, the CEC, is everything but an acceptable man for the job now. He is not only a very unpopular man, his being in that post has denuded also the Commission of all credibility.

The CEC is a statutory post, and we have tread the path many times before in highlighting the general public distrust of Justice Aziz, a distrust that has been reinforced by the High Court and Appellate Division verdicts on the voter list prepared by the CEC. The unambiguous conclusion of the meeting between the 4-member adviser group and the parties on the very point at issue, that of Justice MAAziz, is the 4-party position against the rest who want to see him gone.

For President Iajuddin the acid test is how to retain the spirit of the constitution and yet see that the polls are acceptable to all. The biggest challenge for him is how to maintain the dignity of the constitution, something that is his bounden duty also as the president to uphold, yet to ensure that the genuine demand of the people is not disregarded. Here is a situation where the president and CA has to decide whether the demand of a party that had secured over forty-one percent vote in the 2001 general election, supported by many other parties who had sizeable number of MPs in the last parliament, constitutes enough value to determine once and for all whether the continued presence of the present incumbent as the CEC is in the larger interest of the country.

For one thing, a gentle presidential persuasion on Justice Aziz to go will certainly not be remiss. This will, we hope, help to retain the integrity of the constitution yet help overcome the impasse.

In the meanwhile, it may be worth the public time and money, as well as the CA's, to have the EC stop the printing of the voter list, which is patently flawed.

All eyes are on the President and CA, Mr. Iajuddin, and time is running out.

Antiquities recovered by RAB

Devise ways to stop smuggling

THE Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) the other day recovered a huge cache of antiques worth over Taka 50 crore. Bangladesh has a rich heritage of antiques consisting of plaques and tablets of burnt clay, terracotta and silver coins. Illegal cross border trading of various kinds of stones and terracotta statues including statues of brass had been going on for over two decades.

It is interesting to note that the artifacts are often recovered from houses and hideouts of people of somewhat lesser consequences in the society. Some of them are not literate enough to fathom, appreciate the value or significance of the artifacts acquired by them. The people hauled by RAB are in fact employed as field level collectors by some knowledgeable. These persons apart from collecting for themselves also act as middlemen on behalf of other agencies and individuals, who in turn assist them in smuggling the artifacts out of the country. Interestingly enough, quite some time back investigation by our customs and other intelligence agencies revealed the involvement of some expatriates living in the country during that time.

We are deeply concerned. These artifacts and their kind bear evidences of our rich culture, history and heritage and treasures that are irreplaceable. People who indulge in this kind of trading must be stopped and brought to justice. For years now the scourge is continuing and we are yet to hear of a single case of punishment meted out to the ones apprehended.

It is time that the administration took a hard look at the matter. Nothing short of a concerted effort by a combined group of quality and committed professionals consisting of individuals from concerned intelligence agencies and the department of archeology with vested authority will be able to either contain or put a stop to this. The administration could also engage the media in building awareness amongst the public against illegal trading in such relics. It should also be understood that such acts also have a negative impact on the very image of our country. Protecting and preserving our archeological heritage is a sacred duty of the citizens.

Vox populi



ZAFAR SOBHAN

HERE we are again. One step forward and two steps back. The 14-party alliance has called off its blockade program for another few days, but has vowed to enforce it again if its demands are not met, specifically the demand for the CEC to step down. The 4-party alliance remains adamant that he remain.

Once again, we are at an impasse between the two political forces that rule this country.

The 4-party alliance position is untenable and the only reason the BNP-led alliance is sticking to its guns is that it does not want to give its opponents a moral victory. The CEC has clearly demonstrated his unfitness for the office he holds, and, indeed, it was not long ago that the BNP itself was agreeable to his removal.

By any definition of the term, the CEC has disgraced his position. He has acted in violation of High Court and Appellate Division judgments, he has produced a bogus voter roll that was compiled using partisan political activists as enumerators and that is filled with well over one million fake voters and excludes a corresponding number of genuine voters.

If this does not constitute "gross misconduct," justifying

removal of the CEC by a Supreme Judicial Council, as per the constitution, then the words have no meaning.

In fact, you would be hard pressed to find a single person other than the 4-party leadership and die-hard supporters who believe that he is an acceptable head of the Election Commission. The fact that the 4-party alliance remains firmly behind him bespeaks its contempt both for the will of the public and for simple honesty and integrity.

On the other hand, the 14-party alliance has also shown that it is perfectly happy to put partisan interest above the national interest, and feels no compunction in essentially holding the country hostage to this demand. What it hopes to gain out of this approach is unclear.

It is the common people who are the ones bearing the brunt of the 14-party blockade. Right now, most of the public still faults the CEC for not stepping down, but there is no logical inconsistency to thinking both that he should step down and that the 14-party agitation aimed at ensuring this is unacceptable.

In a situation like this, what is an ordinary citizen to do? The average citizen wants free and

fair elections, and as a first step to this end, thinks that the CEC should go. But the same average citizen also has a living to earn and is really being hurt by the kinds of programs that the 14-party alliance is enforcing. No one is asking the public what it wants, or if asking, no one is listening.

The feeling of relief that swept the nation when it was announced that the blockade program would be suspended was palpable. As is the desire to see the back of the CEC.

Perhaps Asif Saleh said it best in the DS earlier this week (Nov 13). It is time to take a stand for a change. One of the problems we have in Bangladesh is that we often choose not to take a stand for fear of being perceived as partisan. But there are some concerns that should transcend partisan politics.

One thing that all well-meaning people in Bangladesh should be happy to stand behind is a free and fair election. It is elemental. It is the sine qua non for things getting better. A free and fair election is not a sufficient condition for improvement, but it is a necessary and indispensable one.

Until and unless we have free and fair elections, all other con-

siderations such as clean candidates and parliamentary reform are moot. What good are clean candidates when the elections are bent?

All people ask is the freedom to cast their vote according to their conscience, without fear and intimidation. To request more for the Bangladeshi public is, frankly, presumptuous. Let us not presume that the public does not know the difference between a good candidate and a bad or one or a candidate who will be good for them from one who will not be.

We might be unhappy with the calibre of people the political parties nominate and the people elect, but the first thing that needs to be done to improve this state of affairs is to secure free and fair elections.

So, what is an honest citizen to do? He or she may not be thrilled with the choices available, but he or she does want the right to make that choice.

So, what can we do to secure that choice?

What I would like to propose is that all of us get behind a movement for free and fair elections. This is our fundamental right and it has nothing to do with the machinations or demands of our political masters.

So, what are the ingredients for

STRAIGHT TALK

Even the NDI delegation, when it came to survey the situation in September, was scathing in its assessment of the CEC. Let me quote from the NDI report: "In the absence of a strong, corrective, and urgent response, confidence in the Chief Election Commissioner will continue to deteriorate to the point that he should not continue his duties." Has there been anything even approaching such a response on the part of the CEC? No. Case closed.

CROSS TALK

This caretaker government has lost its chance to become neutral, not because it has taken sides with anyone, but because it has taken sides with everyone. Forgive me for saying it, but this caretaker government is looking for a compromise and it has transformed into a matchmaker of political interests instead of being the enforcer of popular will. I don't question the integrity or the intentions of this government. But it's hunting with the hunter and running with the rabbit. It's not a go-getter, but a go-between.

seven brothers, so far the president has been the singing voice in the family, while the advisers hung in there like wilted flowers.

Of course, some of the advisors have talked to the media. They expressed their anger, frustration, doubts and misgivings, which gave the perception that the makeshift government was either coming apart or it was badly stitched. Two advisers went to see the leader of the opposition. Another adviser called on the chief election commissioner in his residence, still struggling to sort out who lied about what. It's not clear whether either time the chief advisor was taken into confidence.

On his side, the president-chief adviser also made his blunders. He met with the secretaries of various ministries, and the advisors were missing from the scene. Then the president's office announced deployment of army throughout the country

and directives went out hastily to the DCs in the districts. The advisors and the ISPR responded to the news like Rip Van Winkle woken up from sleep. The directive was repealed as mysteriously as it was issued.

A government needs to run on one of the two steams: vision or mission, lucky is the nation where the government has both. In all practicality, the caretaker government should run on a mission, its short life committed to ensure that a free and fair election can be held in the country. But this government has lost sight of the wood for the trees. Of course, the politicians and the media have done their bit. They hounded it like children chasing their neighborhood lunatic.

Of course, there could be more than one reason to it, because this government has more than one center of gravity, even the advisers have been

chosen on the basis of their political platforms, not because of neutrality. Too many loyalties and too many inclinations have pulled it in many directions. May be too many demands, too many opinions and too much prodding have taken their tolls. Age old saying couldn't go wrong. The broth is never safe with too many cooks.

But then words can't explain everything. In science, the observer effect states that a phenomenon can be changed simply by observing it. An electron will change its path when observed because the observing light or radiation contains enough energy to disturb it. It is possible that the glare of too much attention may have affected the caretaker government and its personality. A 20th century sociologist named Robert M Kagan called it the "self-fulfilling prophecy." It means that a false prophetic statement may affect humans

a free and fair election?

The first is fair and accurate voter roll. The current one being peddled by the CEC is a disgrace, and the idea that he would attempt to cram this trash down the voters' throats and thus take us to the polls and is reprehensible. The argument that there is no time left to fix the list is worse than specious.

The second point is that there is no way that we can have free and fair election under the current CEC and his hand-picked commissioners. They need to go. This is not a partisan demand, but a national one.

Even the NDI delegation, when it came to survey the situation in September, was scathing in its assessment of the CEC. Let me quote from the NDI report:

"In the absence of a strong, corrective, and urgent response, confidence in the Chief Election Commissioner will continue to deteriorate to the point that he should not continue his duties."

Has there been anything even approaching such a response on the part of the CEC? No. Case closed.

Indeed, the removal of the election commissioners is only a first step. The entire Election Commission needs to be reconstituted from the ground up to ensure its neutrality. This is eminently doable, but the first step is the removal of the CEC.

The next step would be to demand an end to any kind of political program that restricts the rights and movements of the general public. Such programs are non-consensual and fundamentally anti-democratic. They have no place in a movement ostensibly aimed at furthering democracy.

There is actually a lot we can

(through fear or logical confusion) to take actions that will ultimately result in fulfillment of the prophecy.

Thus, there is the good news for those prophets who wanted to hear the bad news. This caretaker government has lost its chance to become neutral, not because it has taken sides with anyone, but because it has taken sides with everyone. Neutrality is a state of mind where one must start with a clean slate and has the independence to act on the basis of one's own moral judgment. It doesn't work if one is eclectic, when doing it right becomes more important than doing the right thing.

Forgive me for saying it, but this caretaker government is looking for a compromise and it has transformed into a matchmaker of political interests instead of being the enforcer of popular will. I don't question the integrity or the intentions of this government. But it's hunting with the hunter and running with the rabbit. It's not a go-getter, but a go-between.

That brings us to the famous Hollywood movie made in 1997. *Wag the Dog*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro, showed how politics was all about manipulation. A Washington spin-doctor hired a Hollywood producer to create a fake war, so that he could distract the electorate from a presidential sex scandal. Much of our

do as citizens to protect our right to a free and fair election. If enough people are motivated to go to the polling stations and monitor the situation as citizens, they can help ensure that the elections are not stolen.

A motivated and mobilized citizenry can help ensure that the police and the returning officers play a neutral role and do their jobs. If the people stand four-square behind free and fair elections, it becomes very hard for musclemen and corrupt officials to stand in their way.

So let's get the message out. This is where we stand. The people. We want our right to vote in a free and fair election. We want our voices to be heard.

So far, the agitation for a free and fair election has not brought in the common people to a great extent. This has been the mistake that the 14-party alliance has made. It has not reached out to the people even as it voices their demands.

So let's make the message clear. No more blockade programs. But let it be known that we are willing to march in the streets or wear black armbands or do whatever it takes to secure our right to a free and fair election.

We need to be heard. We need to convince the 4-party alliance that the CEC must go, and we need to convince the 14-party alliance that the way to accomplish this is by appealing to the people and bringing them into the movement, not by shutting down the country.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

political disaster has been the work of spin-doctors, professionals who teach politicians how to bluff the people, fabricate scandals, and then blow them out of proportion.

It is crucial in politics to know who wags the dog because the balance of power is a delicate thing. Often the dog forgets it's the dog and the tail forgets it's the tail. The caretaker government has already failed to make that distinction. Perhaps only the tails are left in the government while the dogs are barking on the streets.

If you know how a lens-shutter camera works, then you also know that the view through a camera viewer and the view through the lens are two different things. Parallax is the difference between these two views. Some people argue that the difference between two views, itself is not a view. In that sense the parallax view is a view that doesn't exist.

Take this allegory and apply it to this caretaker government. Whether you look through the viewer, or you look through the lens, it's a government that reminds us that there is no government. Like the man in the joke, it wanted to accommodate too many fancies in one haircut. Every time I look at it, it looks ridiculous to me.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

The 11-point demand and our foreign friends

The major aim of the national movement presently in place is to get rid of the CEC. It is not anymore a demand of the AL-led 14 party opposition. It is a national demand, thus, people had no other alternative than to take control of the street in order to realise this demand. When the whole nation can see that the CEC is a non-neutral person why this cannot be recognised by the CA? It is time now for all of our foreign friends in Dhaka, including Ambassador Butenis, to call a spade is a spade.

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

MR Boucher, the assistant secretary of state of the US for South and Central Asia, concluded his visit to Dhaka on November 12. The US ambassador to Bangladesh, P A Butenis, accompanied Mr Boucher to all the meetings with our national leaders on November 11. The observers at home and abroad have been watching the political events in Dhaka closely as these meetings have been taking place.

From the body language of relevant diplomats, it appears that Mr Boucher's visit to Dhaka

has failed in bringing peace and sanity to this land of ours. However, it came through the media that, Mr Boucher had kept arms-length distance from both the immediate past PM and the opposition leader to mediate the present crisis. He suggested that the CTG must be given more time for creating an environment for holding the next election without fear, favour, and intimidation.

One of the 11 points of the opposition (now a national demand) to the CA is to get rid of the incompetent and partisan CEC and three of his fellow commissioners. With the request of Her Excellency, the US ambassador, it appeared that the opposi-

tion extended the time of realising their demands by 10 days on the expiry of the first ultimatum on November 3.

The second extension expired on November 12 and nothing has happened on the issue of the CEC and the three members until this date. Now, the question is: has the CA given a serious thought on this issue over the extended period? How serious Ambassador Butenis was about her shuttle diplomacy towards defusing the crisis without a bloodbath? I am sorry to drag Her Excellency into this debate. It has been interesting to watch how successful she has been in bringing the major parties into a

dialogue, although many regard this as too little, too late.

If I may remind the readers at this stage what has been happening in Dhaka after the departure of Mr Boucher, is simply extraordinary. Unfortunately, his visit was coincided with the second extension to the ultimatum of the 14-party coalition in realising the 11-point demand. With this extension to the ultimatum, perhaps the opposition tried to show the nation that they would like to settle the dispute of reforming the EC peacefully. But this is not going to happen.

The BNP and its allies have something else in store. The readers are well aware by now that as soon as Mr Boucher left Dhaka, two incidents occurred which were unprecedented under a CTG. One, the futile exercise of the present home secretary and his cohorts about bringing military in the picture, and two, the police force (cadres of the BNP-Jamaat?) ploughed over opposition demonstrators with a police

van and killed one person and injured others on November 13.

Having said that, one may legitimately ask now, what difference it made to give extension to the CA in realising the 11-point demand? The CA had failed to keep his promise to the nation to become a neutral person. A similar incident occurred in Dhaka almost 22 years back. At that time a military dictator was in power. In those days the dictator refused to bring the culprit in the book. What the civilian CA is going to do this time? Is he going to bring the culprits in the book?

Ambassador Butenis has witnessed all these incidents since the time Mr Boucher departed Dhaka. She now suggests to stop "pressuring" and "influencing" the caretaker government through street violence or "from behind the scenes" (DS, Nov 15). I am sure all our readers will not disagree with this call. But, the question remains, the major aim of the national movement presently in place is to get rid of the CEC.

It is not anymore a demand of the AL-led 14 party opposition. It is a national demand, thus, people had no other alternative than to take control of the street in order to realise this demand. When the whole nation can see that the CEC is a non-neutral person why this cannot be recognised by the CA? It is time now for all of our foreign friends in Dhaka, including Ambassador Butenis, to call a spade is a spade.

It must also be realised that if the democratic west wants democracy to survive in this land, they must come forward with the democratic principles and values they enjoy in their own country. May I request to diplomats to go through the 11-points again and see whether they reflect the principles and values of a liberal democracy that exist in your own country?

Moreover, one may ask why every time during the immediate post-BNP regimes, the CTG has to become subject to all sorts controversy. What we are wit-

nessing today, similar behind the scene intervention through the post of the president has been witnessed in 1996 (a military card has been played). Our foreign friends must acknowledge this truth. It is sometimes regrettable to watch how some of our friends refrain from accepting the truth and reality in Bangladesh politics and they start behaving like one of ours.

I am afraid, my observations in the last few weeks made me more concerned about the role of our foreign friends. We must take lessons from our neighbour Nepal and see how a true friend can play a positive and constructive role to save a country from a brink of destruction (the role of Dr Manmohan Singh's envoy in Nepal crisis few months back immediately comes to mind).

In conclusion, I must say, a time has come to accept the reality and there is no time for rhetoric any more. The 11-point demand is now a national issue and nothing less is acceptable

after what we witnessed over the last two weeks. It is now no secret that a section of politicians (4-party alliance) want to use the CTG for engineering the outcome of the next election.

The AL-led 14 party alliance, if gives in to further pressure and makes more concessions like the one about the appointment of the CA, will not only be the end of the 14-party alliance, but also be the beginning of the end of Bangali nationhood, let alone liberal democracy.

Post script: After finalising the present commentary, I have just received the piece by Dr Kim Howells in this daily's November 6 circulation on "Expect us to stay neutral -- but not to stay on the fence" is certainly an encouraging move. Precisely, the subject matter of my commentary today is to engage and to engage further in saving our whatever democracy currently exists.

The author is freelance contributor to The Daily Star.