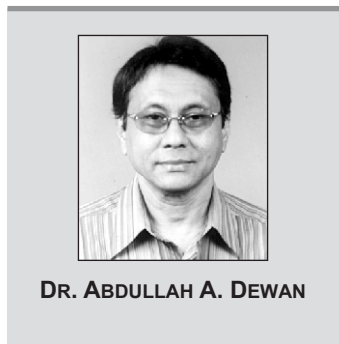


Polls, publishers and politicians



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE last few weeks' political gridlock and civil strife since the installation of President Iajuddin Ahmed as the chief of the CTG has underscored a few remarkable things: (a) The people's indomitable resolve for holding a free and fair election (FAFE); (b) That no winning party should replicate the machinations entrenched by the BNP-Jamaat alliance (BJA) ever again; (c) The CTG system is easily maneuverable, resulting in an imperial presidency which has rendered the 10 advisors almost irrelevant; and (d) The reformation of the CTG provisions with checks and balance is a must.

The BJA, with two-thirds majority in the parliament, could have developed a consensus-driven political milieu in the country and listened to people's whispers and wishes instead of engaging in notoriety with electoral rules and reforms.

The whispers and wishes I am referring to are reflected in a country wide survey of 2,252 respondents conducted over the period December 2004 - January 2005 by the Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka. The following are some of the notable findings (DS, Sep 28).

NO NONSENSE

The survey response that 69% never read newspapers and that only 7% do is a appalling. Do our politicians, in particular Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, fall among the 69% (non-reader group) or the 7% (reader group). Neither leader seems confident enough to offer regular press conferences. On campaign trails, one often offers scripted speeches and tired platitudes, while the other often speaks extempore and makes an assortment of incoherent statements.

- 80% of the respondents said they want a free and fair election.
- 80% percent said they did not take part in socio-political activities.
- 85% believe the participation of terrorists and hoodlums in politics has led to the deterioration of law and order.
- 54% thought that the previous elections held under the CTG were free and fair.
- 35% of the respondents do not have any idea about the CTG.
- 7% read the newspaper regularly, while 69% never read a newspaper.

If the politicians exploited these survey responses to their advantage, the intensity of the antagonistic climate would have begun to taper. For example, any attempt by BNP to redress AL's claim that the last election was not truly a FAFE (a claim also shared by nearly half of the respondents) could have promoted a congenial inter-party discourse.

The fact that 80% of the respondents want a FAFE bears important implications for the ensuing election. If the voters view the embroiled political impasse surrounding the chief advisor and the CEC that brought the social and

economic life to a torturous standstill as a necessary evil for holding a FAFE, then BNP will lose the election decisively.

Drawing out a non-negotiating posture with the AL until the last few days of BNP's tenure in power and then deceptively raising the specter of hope of conceding to a consensus CTG chief in place of Justice Hasan while scheming to install the partisan president as the CTG chief was a Machiavellian intrigue in its purest form. The people finally realized that the opposition struggle for electoral reforms was their own and in the process some protestors were crushed and flattened by police trucks.

The last act of BNP's election rigging machination was its leaders' brazen obsession with MA Aziz. Khaleda's unwavering support for this man was a scornful display of arrogance -- one that has exposed BNP's scheme to manipulate the election results. The positive outcome of the standoff, however, is that 35% of the survey respondents who were previously unfamiliar with the CTG now are in full cognizance of it.

The survey response that 69% never read newspapers and that

only 7% do is a appalling. Do our politicians, in particular Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, fall among the 69% (non-reader group) or the 7% (reader group). Neither leader seems confident enough to offer regular press conferences. On campaign trails, one often offers scripted speeches and tired platitudes, while the other often speaks extempore and makes an assortment of incoherent statements.

For leaders, press conferences and town hall meetings are two of the most effective ways to communicate with the people. Here, the politicians (exceptions apply) often appear averse to new ideas and rarely advances themselves with new knowledge. This is so because they see that it does not require much education or knowledge to become an MP, a minister, leader of a party, or even a prime minister. As long as one has the money and muscle power one can win an election and thus become an influential figure.

Politicians have little time to read newspapers, especially when they hold ministerial positions, including the prime minister. But they are the ones who need constant access to first-hand news and ideas.

Unfortunately, they are often insulated from news and ideas that appear inauspicious to the party and the leadership.

Although academic qualifications alone doesn't make an able politician, they often serve as an indication of one's demeanour and intelligence. Without proper education, many politicians are incapable of grasping how party politics, public policy, governance, and the country's laws inter-relate. One can, however, compensate for some of these deficiencies by assiduously reading books, newspaper editorials, and op-ed articles.

In his book, "The Tyranny of Printers," Jeff Pasley presented a fresh look at American politics and journalism in the early republic. Pasley argues that newspaper editors provided the crucial ideological and organizational tools that were needed to negotiate the chaotic political waters of the early republic. The editors were uniquely positioned to gauge public opinion because of the volume of other printed materials that passed through their desks.

By publishing accounts of party rallies, speeches and marches, newspapers propagated the party's message to many more people who could not have witnessed the events in person and thus created an "imagined community" of party followers spread far and wide over the entire political landscape. The printing of toasts and speeches also allowed politicians to simultaneously forge a national party ideology and to tone down the parts of that ideology that might not play well in certain states or

regions.

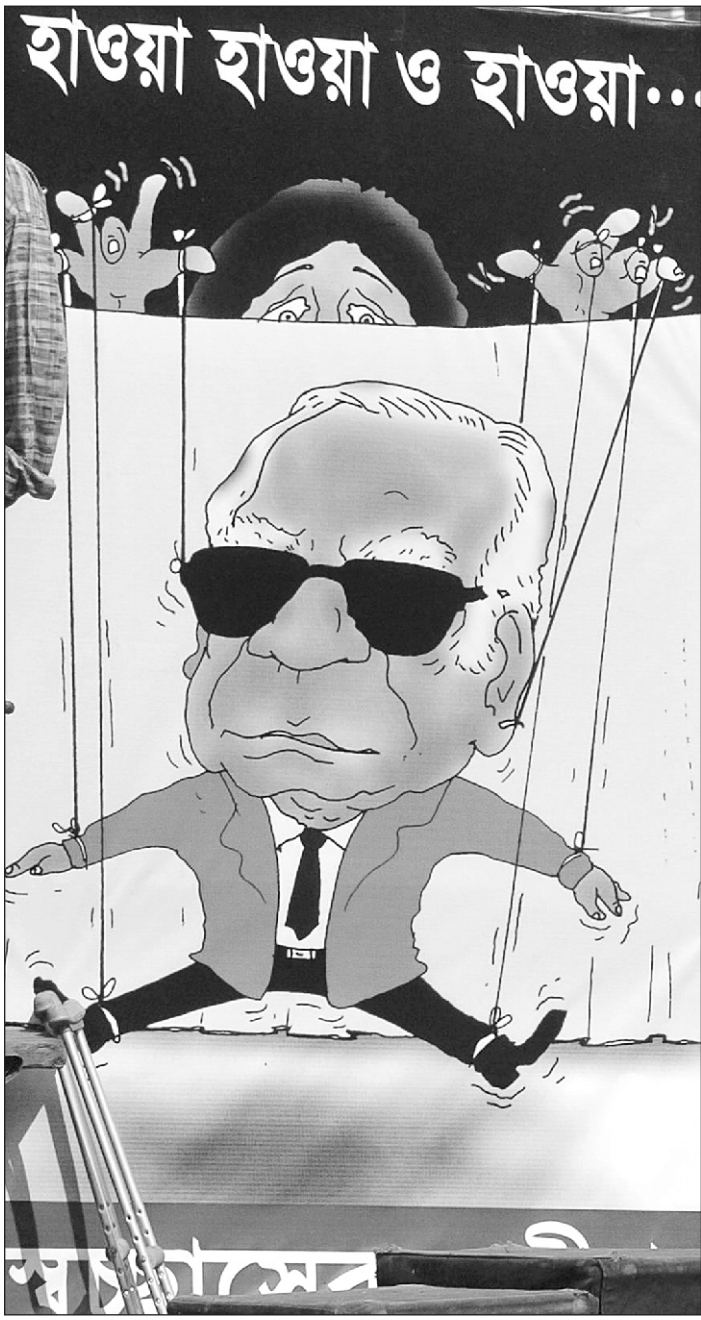
Our leaders, instead of crediting the editors and op-ed columnists for their positive role in shaping political discourse and public policy, castigate them as partisan conspirators. They underestimate people's perceptions about them, about what they do and if their actions are inconsistent with what they say.

In her recent campaign speeches Khaleda keeps reiterating that if reelected she will eliminate corruption. A few days ago, she referred to politicians who left BNP and joined LDP as being corrupt "also." The word "also" signifies that there are many corrupt people still harbouring around her.

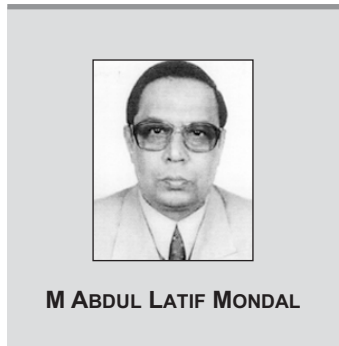
To make people believe that Khaleda will eliminate corruption, we want to see her expelling politicians whose ministries topped the list of TIB's corruption ranking sequentially. We want to see her proscribe the corrupt from getting nominations from her party, although this will leave only an honest few to contest in the elections, given that others have already left to join the LDP. Of course, she mustn't disqualify herself from election contest, because without her, who will be in the front line to fight corruption.

Abraham Lincoln was so right when he said: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time."

Dr Abdullah A Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.



An overview of the president-cum-chief adviser's address



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

PRESIDENT/Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed's address to the nation at midnight of November 22 revealed, among other things, that the Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz was going on leave for three months, and the decision for appointment of two more election commissioners, which, according him, "should end the political stand-off."

There have been mixed reactions to the president/chief adviser's address. BNP has "welcomed the president's decision on Election Commission reconstitution," while Awami League has termed the address "ambiguous, mysterious, and obscure."

The AL has, however, termed the CEC's going on leave as "victory of the people's movement." The Supreme Court Bar Association has rejected the president/chief adviser's address, saying that "it has disappointed the nation." So,

BARE FACTS

The president did not say what would happen after the expiry of the leave of the CEC. Will he resign from his post on the expiry of the leave, or will he return to his post? Rumour has it that he had decided to step down; but his backers advised him not to resign from his office but to go on a long leave instead. If he does not voluntarily step down, or, if he cannot be removed on the findings of the Supreme Judicial Council constituted by the president, then there will be no bar for him to return to the post of the CEC. But, will it be acceptable to the people?

the question arises as to what extent the developments/measures outlined in the president/chief adviser's speech will help resolve the on-going crisis, and contribute to the holding of a peaceful and fair general election

The president/chief adviser claimed in his address that he was not at all ready to assume the office of the chief adviser, but he had to do so to preserve constitutional continuity, which was under serious threat due to the critical situation arising out of confrontational politics, and the worsening law and order situation. But this does not clearly explain why the president offered himself as the caretaker government chief in a meeting with BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL general secretary Abdul Jalil at

Bangabhaban on October 28, before exploring all the constitutional options available for appointment of the chief adviser.

The AL rejected the proposal outright, but the president went on to appoint himself chief adviser. A writ petition has, however, been filed in the High Court to issue a rule to the president/chief adviser to show under which authority he is holding the office of the chief adviser. The petition says that the president, without exhausting the mandatory provisions of Article 58C (3), (4), and (5) of the constitution, has assumed the office of the chief adviser, violating the oath of office which he took to protect and defend the constitution.

In his address, the president/chief adviser announced that CEC MA Aziz had informed him

over telephone that he was agreeable to going on leave for three months, on condition that he could stay in the country under full government security. Truly speaking, the CEC's going on 90-day leave is nothing extraordinary. It is learnt that his immediate past predecessor went abroad on a long leave and returned to his office on the expiry of the leave.

The president did not say what would happen after the expiry of the leave of the CEC. Will he resign from his post on the expiry of the leave, or will he return to his post? Rumour has it that he had decided to step down; but his backers advised him not to resign from his office but to go on a long leave instead. If he does not voluntarily step down, or, if he cannot be removed on the findings of the

Supreme Judicial Council constituted by the president, then there will be no bar for him to return to the post of the CEC. But, will it be acceptable to the people?

The president has said that in the exercise of power conferred by Article 118(1) of the constitution he has decided to appoint two more election commissioners. In spite of the CEC's proceeding on 90-day leave, total reconstitution of the EC continues to be the major demand of the AL-led coalition and other parties, excepting the BNP-led alliance.

While discussion with the major political parties and alliances is necessary on the issue, the president should finalize the names of the two new election commissioners in consultation with the advisers. Only those persons who have reputation for non-partisanship, efficiency and honesty should be appointed.

It is also not clear whether one of the two would-be election commissioners will be given temporary charge of the post of the CEC. Meanwhile, election commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman has authorized himself to act as the CEC. Thus, despite the optimism expressed by the president, there are indications to suggest that the political impasse centering on the reconstitution of the EC cannot be broken immediately.

The president/chief adviser told the nation that in order to make the ensuing general election free, fair and impartial, the government has made changes in the sensitive posts in the civil and police administration at different levels. But reliable sources suggest that many officers known for their partisanship are still occupying sensitive posts at different tiers of the administration. Particularly, the field level administration (which is mainly responsible for conducting the elections) designed by the immediate past regime has been kept largely intact, as the deputy commissioners (DCs), superintendents of police (SPs), upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) and officers-in-charge (OCs) have been transferred from one district while still holding the same positions. This has prompted an adviser, who is a veteran bureaucrat, to say that: "the transfers have not been meaningful for election."

The dialogue between the BNP secretary general and the AL general secretary before the CTG's assumption of power had no valid reasons to fail. But it did, and the mess created by the previous regime has been passed onto the CTG, which is something unforgivable. The president/chief adviser's speech has not even indirectly blamed the previous BNP-led alliance government for passing

their willfully created problems onto the CTG.

The chief adviser apprised the nation that he had instructed his advisers to concentrate more on their respective ministries, bring back discipline in public life, and ensure the formation of an elected government. This is all right. But the fact remains that although the chief adviser enjoys the status and privileges of a prime minister, he is not the chief executive. The CTG has to work as a team, and the chief adviser is the team leader only. But the media reports and insiders suggest that there exists "mistrust" between the chief adviser and the advisers.

The primary responsibility of the CTG, as stated in the constitution, is to carry on the routine functions of the government and to assist the EC in the holding of general elections peacefully and fairly. Thus, it is binding on the chief adviser to consult the advisers on routine functions as well as on policy matters, if any, of the government.

The president/chief adviser has stressed the need for maintenance of law and order to hold free and fair elections, and ordered the relevant officials to carry out their responsibilities neutrally, by rising above fear and intimidation. There cannot be two opinions about it. But maintenance of law and order will require, among other things, recov-

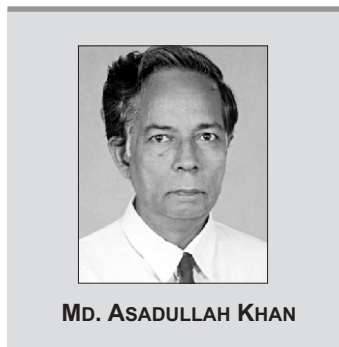
ery of illegal arms, and that step should begin immediately.

In his speech, the president/chief adviser appealed to the political parties and the people to contact the EC if they had any complaints or advice regarding election as per rules, and hoped that all concerned would start electioneering without delay. He appealed to the political parties and the people to keep national interest above all else, and urged the government officials to play their respective parts. He firmly hoped the people of Bangladesh, and all concerned, would extend their sincere cooperation in holding the election freely and fairly within the scheduled time.

The president/chief adviser's above appeal definitely deserves our appreciation, support, and cooperation. What, however, is needed is that the chief adviser and the advisers must work in unison to resolve the on-going political impasse, and create a level playing field for holding the ensuing general election freely and fairly with participation by all the political parties and political alliances. The chief adviser and the advisers are facing an acid test and they must succeed.

M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

The president's ivory tower



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IF we needed proof that the president's actions for holding a free, fair, and credible election were just frivolous attempts, a charade, or a joke on us, the people, it was in the president's assuming the office of the chief of the CTG without exercising the options laid down in the constitution.

Immediately after President Iajuddin Ahmed took over as chief of the caretaker government the question arose whether he could solve the country's contentious problems relating to the holding of a free and fair election when he was weighed down with 11 important ministries apart from the monumental task he had to shoulder as president of the country, none of

BITTER TRUTH

Once more it has been established that the keys of the CTG lie in the hands of someone in a remote tower. And once again a government in transition is, in a sense, being held to ransom, dictated to not by fairness but by individual agendas and party politicking. The upshot of the present cataclysmic situation is that the conflict and clashes will escalate and, sooner rather than later, spill onto the streets of the country.

which he can perform with distinction.

In any case, only someone completely unaware of the ground realities would look to the president as intermediary for the feuding parties. Now the EC restructuring issue, the only agenda before the 14 party led opposition and people of all shades of opinion, regardless of party affiliations, has set the country's political cauldron boiling.

With a not too rosy track record during its tenure in power, the BNP-led alliance is afraid to face the people's mandate. With the set-up they have arranged in all levels of the administration, they want to snatch victory through fake voting, and that's the reason they are reluctant, or rather afraid, to effect

any changes in the EC on the plea of safeguarding the constitution.

But shockingly, as legal luminaries in the country think, the constitution has been violated with the president assuming the office of the chief advisor without exercising the options laid down in article 58C (3), (4), and (5). We might recall here that Justice Mahmudul Amin Chaudhury did not decline to head the caretaker government, rather he was made to feel embarrassed by oblique references over telephone, by the military secretary to the president, as to whether he would feel embarrassed like Justice KM Hasan. He made it plain that he had never felt embarrassed during his career as a judge, and when it came to fulfilling any consti-

tutional obligations, the question about shying away from that responsibility did not arise.

Unhappily, the present tumult that the president has been confronted with has its roots in his taking the reins of administration, both as dispenser and arbiter, in such a complex situation in our national history, presumably as a consequence of unusual pressure mounted on him by his mentors. So much so that the president appears to be caught in a pincer once again.

Presumably, President Iajuddin Ahmed's quixotic action in summoning CEC Aziz and the whole EC hierarchy to Bangabhaban, and asking them to announce the polls schedule, was linked to the BNP chairperson's visit to Bangabhaban

earlier that day. Unhappily, the president has, it seems, been driven by dictates from a party behind the scene, rather than by his own conviction and a sense of neutrality.

Yet, even though no one underestimates his instinct for survival, the president's room for manoeuvring is shrinking by the day. By not taking up the monumental task of restructuring the controversial EC, he has diminished all hopes for a fair and credible election from the beginning. The ongoing protest marches that are still very peaceful might take the shape of a mass upsurge, claiming many lives as well as the destruction of property and loss of business and export earnings.

With Justice Aziz gone for the time being, the election conducted under Justice Mahfuzur Rahman and his associates -- commissioners SM Zakaria and Hasan Mansur and their cronies and appointees of their choice -- will neither win the soul of Bangladesh, nor will it earn credibility in the outside world.

On the other hand, mobilizing the army on the flimsy pretext of the law and order situation, and mass

movement on genuine demand of the voters, would be a short-sighted policy, and would wreak such havoc that a government brought to power by such fractured mandate would find it difficult to contain.

History has taught us that the response to extremism, resentment, and violence -- whether in intent, strategy or action- rooted in genuine demands -- was always counterproductive. Paradoxically, that the president-cum-chief-advisor has taken charge of 11 important ministries at such a critical time at once makes hopeful as well as apprehensive. If he plays second fiddle to the government, the drift will continue; if he is proactive the BNP allies could get restive.

BNP chairperson and ex-prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia, in her usual manner, descended on the advisors of the CTG, seemingly with the force of a tornado, while addressing a views-exchange meeting with diploma engineers, Peshajibi Parishad, on November 16, almost treating them as employees of her fiefdom.

Continuing her attack on the

advisors, who are vastly qualified and have earned expertise in their specific fields, but are now powerless with no important portfolios at their disposal, presumably at the insistence of some invisible hand behind the scene, she retorted: "You are talking too much while doing nothing. Perform your duties according to the constitution."

Furious and fuming with rage, she reminded all about the progress the country has achieved during the alliance government's tenure in power, referring to the recent UNDP report that billed Bangladesh as the golden boy of South Asia, and asked how could this be possible if the government had plundered everything.

Predictably, the president-cum-chief advisor's rescue plan rests on the conviction that a gullible and ignorant electorate could be saved from itself. On the other hand, BNP and its allies, sensing an impending electoral rout and collapse of their coalition team, have fallen back to recklessness bordering on intolerance. Presumably they are seeking to subvert democratic choice by organized deception.

To our utter shock and dismay,

politics in the country continues to defy prognosis. Heaving a sigh of relief at the talks going on between the advisors and political parties recently, conventional wisdom held that Bangladeshi politics had returned to its roots. It took only a few rounds of negotiations for that wisdom to be consigned to the dustbin, because the rescue plan that the advisors very skillfully prepared did not receive adequate response from the president-cum-chief advisor who has the final say in all matters relating to governance and EC restructuring.

Once more it has been established that the keys of the CTG lie in the hands of someone in a remote tower. And once again a government in transition is, in a sense, being held to ransom, dictated to not by fairness but by individual agendas and party politicking. The upshot of the present cataclysmic situation is that the conflict and clashes will escalate and, sooner rather than later, spill onto the streets of the country.

Md Asadullah Khan is a columnist for The Daily Star.