

President can still stem the tide

The nation deserves nothing less

THE commonest of concerns that has the nation reeling in uncertainty is if any of the major political alliances finds it impossible to participate in the national election the electoral results to ensue would be a total anathema to democracy roundly unacceptable at home and abroad as a sham. For all the good this nation has accounted for in the face of daunting challenges and is capable of achieving notwithstanding the wily self-seeking machinations of a time server or two, the overwhelming majority cannot think that the nation has worked for it, far less deserve it.

Nevertheless, the ground realities speak of a different stripe of negativity of partisan meanness that should have been out of season now. The relative difference between a good sounding news is lost in a high decibel mischievous act before even echoes of the former have had a chance to die down. So, terribly mind boggling has been the decline and twist in traditional equations and respectability between persons in authority. The 14-party alliance is pushed to the wall by the authoritarian flair of the President and the Chief Adviser. BNP is growing more and more insistent on a showdown line. In this perspective, the election that the nation is all for taking place on time appears to be more and more uncertain.

The opening that came with Justice Aziz going out of the scene on leave to catapult the 14-party alliance on an election orbit has been all but squandered by the President's unconscionable and provocative actions. Yet, the common thread of feeling across the country is that the President can help the scenario immensely by taking three concrete steps: one, in his chief advisory role he should cease to play a presidential stereotype, and instead play team leader's role, consulting his advisers and drawing from their experience and reputation who are there on invitation rather than by self-choice. Two, he should convene a meeting with the major political parties to try and build a national consensus on revocation of the unilaterally declared poll schedule and arrive at an agreed one. There is scope for rescheduling the polls given the 42 to 45-day time range that applied during the two previous caretaker governments' time. Finally, address the issue of 1.3 crore unexplained voters in the list by proceeding to repair at least the major fault lines for which time is still available.

If one were to go by the track record of the President and Chief of Caretaker Government, our suggestions are perhaps likely to be ignored but we have no hesitation in asserting that he could only do so to the peril of democracy and his place in our national history. There is something left in him, people would still like to believe, to enrich his course of action with some across-the-board consensus and robust sense of propriety.

Uttara rendezvous probe

Smacks of cover up

THE surprise circular from the establishment ministry with regard to launching a probe into involvement of all government officials in political meetings since 1996 smacks of attempts to cover up the misdemeanor of the government officials who met in the house of a politician on Friday last. The circular from the establishment ministry, issued on Monday, mentioned that under presidential directives, a three-member probe committee will not only investigate the Friday night's meeting, but also officials' involvement in the 1996 "Janata Mancha" and similar meetings held in 2001.

But what appears confounding is the fact that the original order from the council of advisers of the caretaker government was to start the investigation only into the latest incident at Uttara. It only leaves one with the plausible answer that the overzealous establishment officials and cronies got hyperactive to please some "bosses" behind the curtain. No doubt they have shown disregard to the decision of the advisers of the caretaker government, the constitutionally appointed decision making body in the country at the moment.

In an expected reaction, one of the advisers told the media that the council would only take cognizance of the probe committee report based on their original advice and directives. Any deviation from that would be cause for a thorough review of the report by the council of advisers. Do we foresee the probe going on in snail's pace and never reaching any conclusion?

This is yet another example of how sordid the entire administrative system has become under the not-so-sensitive leadership of President Iajuddin Ahmed. There is total confusion as to who is instructing whom, and how much clout, if any, the advisers enjoy in taking strong decisions. What has happened in the case of issuing the investigation circular is deplorable as far as accountability and transparency are concerned in the administration. Overriding the directives of the caretaker government advisers is tantamount to violation of service rules. We strongly feel a separate investigation would be the most prudent step at this moment to bring some semblance of credibility to Iajuddin's caretaker government.

Problematic power sector

The total number of power plant units in Bangladesh is reported to be 64 at present. Out of them, 18 units are more than 30 years old, 25 units are between 15-30 years old, and the remaining 21 are less than 15 years old. Thus, a substantial number of power plant units in this country are old. As the age of a power plant increases, so does the risk of failure of its components. Therefore, increased efforts are necessary to keep them running without unscheduled interruptions. The issue of aging power plants is, however, not unique to this country. It is a reality now, both in developed and developing countries. Worldwide, a substantial fraction of power plants are currently operating beyond their original design life.

DR ASMA HASEEB

POWER crisis is nothing new in this country. It has been estimated that the chronic power outage in Bangladesh generally results in a loss in annual industrial output of about \$ 1 billion (about Tk. 7000 crore). Recently, however, the country has witnessed its worst ever power crisis. In October, the power generation went down to about 3000 MW against a peak demand of about 5000 MW.

The fact that new power plants

could not be built during the past years is bad enough, but the unscheduled and frequent shutdowns of the existing plants have made the situation utterly unbearable. At one time, about 20 power plants were shut down. The recent crisis in the power sector is the outcome of the accumulated effects of multidimensional factors whose origins include politics, corruption, poor management and inefficient technical practices. The present article deals with a few technical issues related to the power crisis of this country.

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Since the replacement of an old power plant is becoming prohibitively costly, it is often desirable to extend its life beyond the original design life. Efforts are, therefore, being made worldwide to extend the lives of aging power plants, and there has been marked progress in recent years in plant life extension technology. For extending the life of an existing plant it is first necessary to predict its longevity, which involves the assessment of its remaining life.

Life prediction allows the smooth operation of the plant by avoiding unscheduled shutdowns caused by the untimely failure of aging components.

Power plants comprise of

machines like boilers, turbines etc which operate under rather extreme conditions in terms of temperature, pressure, stress,

chemical environment etc. In the ultimate analysis, the materials used for fabricating the components of these machines have to survive such adverse conditions. Very often, the unscheduled shutdown of our power plants and the resulting outages are caused by the failure of materials of these components. The performance of materials largely depends upon, among others things, the conditions under which they are used.

Therefore, monitoring and control of the operating parameters of power plant machinery, so as to comply with the specified limits, are so vitally important. The conditions of components can deteriorate drastically when the operating parameters exceed the specified values due to improper operation/monitoring. For instance, for a certain grade of steel that is used at high temperature, an operating temperature exceeding the specified limit by even a couple of tens of degrees (say 250°C) can cause a ninety percent reduction in component life.

As our economy expands, we will need more and more power.

In order to run the existing power plants smoothly, without unscheduled outage, it is time that we employed life prediction and, eventually, life extension technologies. For life prediction, the materials of different components of the power plants have to be examined non-destructively as well as destructively in order to find out the extent of accumulated damage. Both, macroscopic and microscopic investigations are necessary for this purpose.

The Department of Materials and Metallurgical Engineering (DMME) at BUET has the expertise and the basic facilities to conduct such investigations. So far, DMME-BUET has carried out analysis of the causes of failure of various components of different power plants and fertilizer factories in the country. A comprehensive collaborative scheme between the power sector and research institutions like BUET can allow the life prediction of our power plants on a routine basis.

Long-term collaboration between the power industry and relevant research institutions is necessary to develop an indigenous technology base in the power sector. We should also create an enabling atmosphere in the power sector where technical personnel can excel, and are free to apply their professional judgments without any pressure from any quarter.

Whichever party/coalition wins the forthcoming general election will face a gigantic challenge in the power sector. The political parties should, therefore, take this matter seriously, and duly emphasize this in their election manifestos. The need for the establishment of an indigenous technology base should be explicitly recognized in our power sector policy. And this should be followed by coordinated actions to create such a technology base within a reasonable time frame.

We should, therefore, develop our capability to smoothly operate and manage an increasing number of power plants in the future. This necessitates the building up of a strong technology and human resource base in our country to maintain and service these plants. In this country, we have been operating power plants for decades. But little technology transfer, if any, has taken place so far in this sector. This has been highlighted once again by the recent unscheduled shutdown of a large number of power plants, simultaneously.

Transfer of technology is something that does not happen automatically. This is particularly true for power plant technology. Power plants are complex engineering systems whose smooth operation and maintenance require multidisciplinary knowledge including electrical, mechanical, materials and chemical engineering. For technology transfer to happen in the power sector, deliberate, dedicated and multidisciplinary efforts

The irked advisers



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

The acting CEC has already attracted controversy by his not-so-hidden arrogance and intemperate remarks. Even in such a situation it is still possible to tide over the difficulties at the Election Commission by appointing a non-controversial and respected justice of the Supreme Court, or a known honest public servant, as chief of the constitutional body. Along with this, the much talked-about controversial election commissioner may also be sent on leave. The EC needs fresh air to move forward.

honourable advisers continue to function if it becomes manifest that the advisory council does not have the executive teeth to make its presence felt in the transaction of official business. Slowly, but disconcertingly steadily, the impression has gained ground that the chief adviser's decisions are influenced by quarters beyond the advisory council.

Dr Akbar Ali Khan has already, very refreshingly, said in a TV interview that he does not take anything beyond the official transport and security force in his current assignment. The import of his statement is not lost on discerning observers who would like to believe that some other advisers, who have proven track records of social acceptability and professional honesty, may not like to continue in positions of ludicrous uselessness. Surely our president would not like to countenance such a scenario. Therefore, he needs to take demonstrably effective actions, like a real guardian. To begin with, the counsel of the advisers must take precedence.

One has to remember that conditions, as they are now in Bangladesh, are not like that of 60s, when so-called strongmen bulldozed their way through for quite sometime before being ousted by mass upsurge. In a globalised world, the actions of our president-cum-chief adviser would invariably affect world opinion. The House of Lords on November 24 commented in a statement that

acting Chief Election Commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman cannot deliver a fair election.

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The right to vote is undoubtedly a very vital element of human rights. The deliberate trampling of such right will, no doubt, cause concern beyond our country. The absence of acceptable polls may seriously affect the internal security situation, which our polity can ill afford. Somehow holding the election without ensuring a broad-based participation of mainstream political parties would be an extremely myopic step, the devastating consequences of which are still fresh in public memory. Concerned citizens hope and pray that the wise advisers will ultimately be able to convince the chief adviser about the enormity of the issue.

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No people's victory on horizon

The BNP, in its public appearance, is clearly shaky, and sounds almost silly. For example, their demand for an election schedule, by-passing the plea for reform of the CEC, and Begum Zia's recent defence of the price hike is out of tune with the current sentiments of the country. If the 14-party, with the new Liberal Democratic Party, acts now by agreeing to elections, however imperfect, it would be the best opportunity to wreck BNP at the polls, as they must pay the price for their misrule and shocking corruption.

NIZAM AHMED

In animal nature, when two dogs fight over one bone it is usually the third that runs away with it. Similarly, if secular democracy cannot work due to unending confrontation between the two big parties, the new ones to run the show would be those believing in more violence and hostility to all democratic norms.

Despite the claims, and celebration of the 14-party combine, of people's triumph in removing the CEC, by sending him on leave, and before that in successfully opposing the appointment of Justice Hasan as the chief adviser, many question and refute their assertion of a people's victory.

The country paid a hefty price because of the 14-party resistance programs, including the tragic deaths that these protest rallies usually bring. The general people are not an organised entity like active political supporters and are, therefore, least able to express, collectively, their dislike of such politics that go against their economic and social rights. Sometimes though, through the media, but rarely, people have voiced their helplessness and their absolute disgust at blockades and other forms of disruptions that block their civic liberties.

The hawks in the 14-party alliance do not realise that there would be many thousands more street protestors in the city if they

declared all programmes compulsorily peaceful with respect to people's civic right, condemned violence as a policy, and expelled those involved in it. Presently, their politics is foolish, their technique impractical and outdated, and their claims of a people's victory not well grounded. Their politics offers no hope to the general people for better things to come and are purely about flexing their combined muscle power, as gang leaders do, and using that power to achieve selfish political ends.

The real victory of the people will be when the country is calm, and when the leaders resolve their differences and issues peacefully indoors, or in the parliament, without making the country bear the high cost.

It is, however, most regrettable that the perception of the people that corruption had exceeded all bounds during the recent BNP rule was overshadowed by the street demonstrations, violence, and continuous blockades of the 14-party, diverting the issue from the public mind and from the new government. The blockades have, instead, reunited and revitalized the BNP camp, and made the caretaker government ineffective in taking action, as it first did by arresting General Ershad for his 10-year misrule and corruption.

Bangladesh's intelligentsia, and the suddenly subdued civil society, should denounce political violence as they denounce black money and corruption, or else see the country sink further into lawlessness and mayhem. Furthermore, people should reject the inane divide in the society between the pro-liberation and the anti-liberation groups, propagated by the Awami League and its supporting leftist

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USA to respond to allegations of corruption. US politicians do not put up blockades on the streets.

Increasingly since 2000, American elections have faced fraud allegations and indictments. There are even accusations of involvement of foreign governments. The New York Times on October 29, reported that: "US federal government is investigating the takeover of a leading US manufacturer of electronic voting systems by a software company linked to the leftist Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez."

US presidential elections since 2000 had been very close and there were claims of fraud, and lengthy litigations thereafter. Like Britain or Canada, where vote rigging is little, the Americans are considering photo ID cards, and investing in better ballot machine boxes, like the high value street ATMs of commercial banks, that are difficult or impossible to rig. John Fund pleads for a condition where there is minimum litigation to decide a result, and a dependable system where the people can choose through clean ballot castings.

Prior to the recently [2006] held mid-term polls in the US, the US House Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi, the next Speaker of the House, had loudly declared, that her: "Greatest concern is over the integrity of the count ... from the reliability of electronic voting machines to the worries that Republicans will try to manipulate the outcome." Indeed, the Florida episode in the 2000 US presidential elections was a wake-up call for many who disbelieved in the electoral forgeries that have existed in the US election system since long.

These are serious matters, but well-operated and independent investigating agencies exist in the

USA to respond to allegations of corruption. US politicians do not put up blockades on the streets.

If vote fraud remains unresolved, as it will, our politicians should strengthen the courts, so that the courts can quickly decide results where the voters could not. Do our courts have the capacity to pass quick judgements on voter related lawsuits? America has strong judicial courts that address, not always satisfactorily, election related frauds, and it is only reasonable that Bangladesh should develop its judicial and investigative systems, along with the Election Commission, to deal with electoral scandals.

The US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Ms. Butenis, often asks for fair elections, but when the electoral system is under serious scrutiny in her own country, by which wisdom does she expect it from another? She should plead for a strong judiciary, a free media, and non-politised law and order agencies, not only to foil corrupt means on election day but also to punish those who engineer spurious voting. The people will then be winning, but not by show of strength on the streets as now; that transfer the high cost to others.

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