

Voter list correction

All loose ends must be cleared

We are happy that at last the work for correcting the voter list has been undertaken by the relevant authorities. This was very much the call of the general public. It is indeed a stupendous task given the large number of anomalies that exist in the voter list and given the time and manpower available to the Election Commission (EC). These are the two challenges we would like to point out to the EC and hope that it will take immediate measures so that we have a voter list that is as close to being error free as possible. However, as our reports show today, that the early results are not only confusing but very disappointing.

Reportedly, the enumerators will go door to door to check whether any eligible voter is left out and also eliminate over one crore excess or duplicate names from the list. But the citizens are yet to be convinced fully that the left out names will be included this time around. And, the manner in which the enumerators are going about doing their work leaves more questions in our minds as to whether they will be able to finish the job within the given time.

An acceptable voter list being the universal demand at the moment as the first step towards holding a free and fair election, any casual approach taken to meet the deadline would backfire with stern consequences. Already reports are reaching us from the field level that many enumerators are working without proper guideline and some of them even complained about complex instructions that many voters are least interested to comply.

We strongly feel that there is no alternative to having a correct voter list, for which huge sums from public exchequer have been spent in two phases. We also feel that the EC officials who continued with the work of preparing an incorrect voter list despite the High Court and Supreme Court instructions should be held responsible if the correction work remains unfulfilled. There is no reason why the officials concerned should be given full immunity when the question of national election is at stake.

Sliding law and order

Full time advisor for home needed

We are highly concerned at the increase in crimes of all nature and dimensions. The fact that there has been a jump in the incidents of crime in the month of November from the previous month, acknowledged by the police headquarters, speaks for itself. While there is a law and order subcommittee of the caretaker government we are not sure whether it has been able to meet so far to take any vital decision with regards to law and order.

This is but inevitable, with the caretaker government too busy with the tasks of untangling the numerous complicated knots prevailing in the political arena, and the responsibility of the home ministry being with an overburdened chief advisor and president, it is not surprising that the administration has been unable to pay any serious attention to this matter.

With the election round the corner the caretaker government must simply meet the challenge head on the deteriorating state of law and order. Reportedly, many known criminals are coming out of hiding. Apart from that there is the matter of illegal weapons that need to be traced and recovered. More and more of small and light weapons, as we see from press reports, are waiting to be pushed in from across the border. These will certainly cause a serious law and order problem during the run up to the election, unless addressed now.

We feel that the main bottleneck is vesting the portfolio of the home ministry with the president who is already burdened with far too many ministries, to be able to give this matter the attention that it deserves. We, therefore, suggest that the president seriously consider putting the home ministry in charge of an advisor on a full time basis. And if the president should still consider keeping it under his wings, the next best option would be to delegate the authority of conducting the daily operational functions that requires quick decisions to one of his advisors. It will save time and obviate a circuitous decision making process.

Frankly, there is simply no alternative but to get down to the business of tackling the criminals with a strong hand here and now. We want an election free of intimidation, threat and duress.

The changing face of terrorism



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

Throughout history Western hard power has only been successful when broadly supported by the people, it is essential that the voters, in the present case in Bangladesh, are warned of the societal and economic exclusion in the global community essential for socio-economic development of the country that they exercise their franchise, not for a life of tranquility after death but one in which they and their children can live in peace and prosperity in this life.

If general elections are held, albeit dependant on enabling conditions demanded by the 14-party combine for holding free and fair elections, then the Bangladeshi voters will have to take a decision whether they should vote for the Jamaat-e-Islam, which for all practical purposes had allegedly been stoking the fire of religious militancy in Bangladesh.

"The principal beneficiary of the messy political equations has been the increasingly influential Islamist fringe," writes Brussels based International Crisis Group in its report on Bangladesh, "led by the legitimate governing parties like Jamat but extending to the violently militant JMB and JMB. Circumstantial evidence as well as cold political logic suggests that underground terrorist groups have been cultivated and sheltered by those in power."

Islam does not preach violence. The terrorist groups among the Muslims calling themselves "purists" for their strict interpretation of the Holy Quran and the Hadith and recalling the history of the battles between Sallalidin the Great and

oppression."

The common Western suspicion of the Muslims grew stronger due to their belief that the Muslims were horrified by the fundamental debasement and moral corruption in Western society and of the West's tolerance of every sort of decadence and consequent Islamic contempt of a dissolute culture. The Muslim's "contempt" of Christianity was falsely based on the premises established by a kind of atheism/agnosticism among the modern day Westerners, resultant of the simultaneous assault by the followers of Marx and Freud – one contending that evil springs from unjust social conditions created by unfair political systems while the other saw it as a product of psychological dysfunction.

Regrettably the term "Islamic fundamentalism" that has gained global currency though the term "fundamentalism" originated in Christianity and can be misleading if used in equal measure for Saudi Arabia, Libya or Iran who have entirely divergent political systems. Resurgence of Islam was occasioned by deep malaise typified by

widespread feeling of failure and loss of self-esteem, failed political system and stagnant economies and to an extent to the US policy towards political Islam.

The US policy of support to hard-liner repressive Islamic regimes making democratic and non-violent opposition as a non-viable option and US tolerance of "democratic exceptions" in many Islamic countries on grounds dictated by Cold War dynamics are now being accepted as having been counter-productive to Western interests. Added to this fallacy has been perhaps the cardinal sin of total US support of Israel in the Arab-Israel dispute, one contending that evil springs from unjust social conditions created by the dynamics of US domestic politics as opposed to the realization by large number of Europeans that Israel poses the greatest danger to global security.

Thoughtful Muslims are skeptical about US neutrality in brokering a Middle East peace. As Professor Stephen Zunes keeps on reminding the fact that from the time of the crusades through European colonization and the Iraq war western Christians killed far more Muslims

than has been the case in reverse and the Muslims have a very strong sense of this historical fact.

Albeit Christian oppression was not confined to the Islamic world and had victims across a wide spectrum of different religions as evidenced by the Rwandan carnage inflicted by the Catholics on their co-religionists; and the non-differential racism practiced in the US between followers of the same faith. The intra-religion conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants as between the Shias and the Sunnis diminish the claim of moral superiority of one religion over another. Such claim is not only irreverent and pugnacious but is fraught with the risk of losing the quintessence of the "greatness" of the different faiths.

Political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami have, despite universal condemnation throughout the Islamic world of the carnage of nine-eleven, raised questions as to whether radical Islam can constitute a serious alternative to Western liberal democracy. If one were to take Afghanistan as an example one would find that despite the chaos that envelops Afghanistan most of the people seem relieved at being freed from the repressive Taliban

regime. In case of the Iranians after more than two decades of clerical rule it is generally believed that the youth who constitute the majority of the Iranian population would like to live in a freer and more liberal society.

Empirical study on Islamists and terrorists found them to belong

"significantly above the average in their generation." It has been said that like fascism, Marxism-Leninism in their heydays, militant Islam attracts highly competent, motivated and ambitious individuals. But militant Islam is also a function of poverty and the spread of free market and capitalism leading to islands of prosperity is probably an important factor in the rise of political Islam. The West may be well advised to look for a solution less confrontational and more based on diplomatic and economic engagements so that militant Islam loses its support within the Islamic world.

Undoubtedly, President Bush's declaration that US respects the faith of Islam; former British Foreign Secretary's admission of the existence of Christian, Jewish and Sikh fundamentalists; and Tony Blair's call to reach out to the Arabs and the Muslims would deny militant Islam political space it seeks.

Because throughout history Western hard power has only been successful when broadly supported by the people, it is essential that the voters, in the present case in Bangladesh, are warned of the societal and economic exclusion in the global community essential for socio-economic development of the country that they exercise their franchise, not for a life of tranquility after death but one in which they and their children can live in peace and prosperity in this life.

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Bullet bulletin



MJ AKBAR

BYLINE

There was one kind of security that never appeared on any horizon: poverty security. How safe are resurrecting nations like India and China from the anger of their own poor? China recorded 86,000 "insurrections" in one year, and there are 170 districts in India that have become bases of a Maoist movement. This anger will not be kept at bay; it will seep into the comfort zones of the privileged unless it is assuaged by wealth distribution. That is the real, and common challenge, that faces India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. What is true of a nation is true of the world.

peace since the Second World War.

War merely shifted its theatre of operations to Asia, Africa and Latin America. What is the corpse count of the last 60 years? No one knows, except that we are still counting in the bloodstained crevices of Rwanda memory, or the daily bulletins of Iraq.

I have not checked the dictionary, but it seems logical that bullet should be a philological cousin of bullet. How many have died in Iraq already? Half a million? Less? This much is certain: each dead man, woman and child, whether Arab, American or British, has relatives and friends who will live the pain and alchemise their anger into some stream of political lava.

This lava has already scalded the principal architects of this war, George Bush and Tony Blair. Both have aged twenty years in five. Both have been defeated by Iraq, although their nations fight on. Both are in the process of handing over leadership of this conflict to a successor. Blair will go in a few months.

Bush will struggle through a blinding mist for a little longer, having, in the words of Lee Hamilton, co-chair of the American Iraq Study Group,

depleted America's blood and treasure. And moral authority.

Sequence dominates the headlines, consequence rarely gets honoured by similar attention, since it kills deviously, in silence, with a slow poison that courses through the sinews of society. One of the most startling statistics I heard is that there are now five million heroin addicts in Pakistan. That means, roughly, that one out of 30 Pakistanis is an addict. Heroin is a war crop of Afghanistan, a by-product of a quarter century of invasion, turbulence, civil war and occupation. The Taliban have much to answer for, but in one respect they were right: they burnt out poppy cultivation. Before they were defeated Afghanistan's share of the world's drug supply was down to seven per cent. This year, Afghanistan will supply 90 per cent of the world's street drugs, and production is at such a record all-time high that prices of heroin are going to fall in the dark alleys of America, Europe and Australia.

What is the cash flow of the Afghan drugs trade? Not billions, but trillions of dollars.

Who gets rich from this business? Not the Afghan farmer, who gets a pittance. The value addition from field to Amsterdam street is 500 times. How does Afghan poppy reach every corner of the civilised world? On Aladdin's flying carpet? In the secret pouches of medieval "Islamic fundamentalists" in the pay of some dreaded "Caliph"? The business and cash flows are run by men who drink gin and tonic, or bourbon and rye, or champers in their yachts before they write a cheque to political lobbies of their choice in flourishing democracies. This is the largest cash-flow of any business with effective supply lines, protection, managers, wholesalers, dealers, criminals and profiteers on various rungs of the ladder before it reaches the victim.

Such a volume of trade cannot be hidden. It travels through land and sea, on trucks and ships. Can you name a single instance in which a supply operation has been busted by Nato, which has 37,000 troops in Afghanistan? When asked, Nato's commanders blandly reply that destroying the drug trade is not part of their mission. Thus is the corrosive price of war paid, from the

blood that flows on the battlefield to the heroin that courses through young veins.

Peace is impossible without security, which of course is the problem. Security has many dimensions: intellectual, historical, perceptual, basic, empirical, and even acquisitive. "Energy security" has brought armies to endless swathes of sand for a century, as hungry nations want control of the source of this resource.

Michael Friend, an American expert, points out that India was the focal point of the Great Game played out between the superpowers of the 19th century, Britain and Russia. In the 20th, India was replaced by oil. Oil has no ideology: the Bush administration had no qualms about negotiating an oil pipeline with the Taliban before 9/11.

"Islamic fundamentalism," a term which contains more inaccuracies within two words than might be found in a book, was never a problem. Energy is as much the concern of tomorrow's economic powers: India imports 70 per cent of its energy needs, and the figure will rise to 85 per cent in twenty years. China's foreign policy is crafted quite substantially by its energy needs.

Boundaries are a more obvious definition of security, or its opposite: they remain the most turbulent lines of history. Only those regions who have made boundaries virtual have found peace. India and China found a formula, under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping, when they stored all claims in the locker rooms of the foreign office and committed their nations to peace and stability on the border. The claims did not disappear.

They merely disappeared from view. That was the basis of the trade we see today.

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In my last column I made a brave, if naive, claim. I thought that the latest furore about exotic forms of killing, that of former KGB operative Alexander Litvinenko by polonium 210 had nothing to do with the circumcised. On Thursday, he was finally buried in a radioactive-proof coffin. His last rites were performed in a London mosque. A few days before he died, Alexander converted to Islam. A fascinating story is beginning to emerge. He was a KGB agent in Chechnya, where he made friends with a leader of the rebels... Watch out for more details, but this is a story that will travel from the gloom of espionage to the imagination of innumerable minds. Wars are fought outside the headlines as well.

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Foreign assistance for election



BY THE NUMBERS

The watchful eyes across the world are now set on Bangladesh to observe the way it holds its election, meaningful for its future development and stability. It is quite clear that we need foreign assistance for educating the voters and creating awareness among them for free and judicious exercise of their voting right. Donors and stakeholders should also help in terms of international election observation, intensive monitoring, and providing physical facilities.



ANM NURUL HAQUE

HERE is hardly any controversy that the future progress and stability of Bangladesh depends largely on the way the upcoming general election is conducted. This is why the donor agencies and other stakeholders have an obvious interest in the ensuing general election and why they are ready to extend assistance for holding a free and fair election in the internal affairs of the country.

Recognizing the upcoming general election as crucial for Bangladesh's democracy, the

Tuesday Group, a group comprising the foreign diplomats stationed in Bangladesh, took initiative to hold a seminar in November 2005 on International Electoral Best Practices, with a view to discuss political problems particularly the reform of Election Commission (EC) and election process. But the BNP-led alliance government declined to permit the Tuesday Group for holding the seminar, saying that such move would amount to interference in the internal affairs of the country.

Terminating the general election in

leaders of Bangladesh that the world body is concerned over the political situation here stemming for electoral issue. Jenness said the secretary general had sent him to offer UN support to free and fair election.

Jenness, like US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher who visited Dhaka earlier in November, with same intention on his agenda, urged the conflicting political camps to resolve their differences over the election through dialogue in a spirit of compromise.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs John Gastright, arrived in Dhaka on December 4 in an errand to help resolve the prevailing political deadlock over the ensuing general election. He also urged all political parties to show a flexible approach and think with an open mind to have a creative solution to the crisis over the upcoming election. He, however, expressed his opti-

mism that Bangladesh is going to have an election, overcoming the crisis and it will be the most monitored polls ever in the country.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI), a Washington-based international affairs body, is also taking much interest in holding a credible election in Bangladesh. NDI conducted a survey on the integrity of our voter list and claimed that 13 percent voters of the current electoral roll (1.22 crore) was either excess or duplicate, which may make election result not credible.

Considering the much-talked about report of the NDI, the EC has launched a door-to-door visit program from December 8, to identify the erasable names of voters enrolled in the voter list. An undisputed voter list is the most important prerequisite for holding a fair election and the highly controversial EC has miserably failed so far to accomplish the task amidst widespread allegations that the updated

voter list contains over one crore fake voters.

Bangladesh, a country already plunged into enormous economic, militancy and political problems, is now facing the biggest challenge of holding the general election, free and fair with participation of all political parties. The crucial factor in conducting a credible election is the credibility of the EC. But the EC's credibility has already been undermined in a series of events. Politicization of the EC has created suspicion and misgiving in the public minds about its ability to hold free and fair national elections.

Foreign envoys and powerful individuals from abroad have tried frantically to settle political disputes. It really tramples our national prestige when our political leaders need external mediation to resolve an internal matter. The watchful eyes across the world are now set on Bangladesh to observe the way it holds its election, meaningful for its future

development and stability. It is quite clear that we need foreign assistance for educating the voters and creating awareness among them for free and judicious exercise of their voting right. Donors and stakeholders should also help in terms of international election observation, intensive monitoring, and providing physical facilities.

A free and fair election is what millions in Bangladesh are now craving, with the next general election only a few days away. Unfortunately, the rigging of election in the country happened so often in the recent past and is still a real threat. The people of this country have made many sacrifices for democracy and it is only their indomitable spirit that has prevented the avalanche of rigged elections from engulfing the democracy.

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