

Why the EC must be overhauled, now!

And in an unprecedented practice of enumeration, witnessed this year, the hurried enumerator, if an apartment was lucky to receive one, filled in forms for male voters only (receipt whereof was never given, incidentally). When asked about enrolment of female voters, he said that a separate enumerator (a female one, as he said) would come to enlist the female voters. And that promised female enumerator never came.

ALI AHMED

ALTHOUGH the ill-effects of the appointment of Justice MA Aziz as chief election commissioner (now on forced leave) will, unfortunately, continue to be felt for many years to come, its immediate outcome started surfacing with his dogged insistence on preparing a fresh voter list in the face of opposition from all informed quarters.

It took a really sinister turn when he continued to flout orders of the High Court Division to update the existing roll instead of going ahead with his pet project of a fresh one. It is only when the highest court of law in the country, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, where he had been serving as a justice prior to his appointment as CEC, ordered for updating the existing list in keeping with the existing practices in this regard, did Justice Aziz stop openly flouting it, and appear to have very grudgingly asked his people to go from house to house to prepare the list.

Why I call it "very grudgingly"

is apparent from the gross irregularities in the list, having unardonable omissions of eligible voters, often of an entire village or neighbourhood, as we gather from reporting of both electronic and print media. And the much-talked-about false voters' inclusion is admittedly there in the list prepared by the EC.

The enumerators sent after the orders of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court to enlist eligible voters by going from house to house must have, I suspect, had some sort of an order not to do their works properly. They must have been sent perhaps to give an appearance of abiding by the court's order, not really to follow it.

As one of the television channels reported the other day, enumerators, who went to some of the apartment complexes in Gulshan area, did not care to go to all the apartments, and enlisted only a few of the eligible voters, leaving the rest in the lurch.

The experience of this writer, and that of many others living in apartment houses in Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, and

Dhanmondi areas of the city, as gathered after discussing with many of them, is similar in pattern. An enumerator paid a hurried visit to some of the apartments in a complex, got some forms filled in, never to return with the receipt, which, I am told, is supposed to have been given.

And in an unprecedented practice of enumeration, witnessed this year, the hurried enumerator, if an apartment was lucky to receive one, filled in forms for male voters only (receipt whereof was never given, incidentally). When asked about enrolment of female voters, he said that a separate enumerator (a female one, as he said) would come to enlist the female voters. And that promised female enumerator never came.

This happened not only in the present writer's and his neighbours' apartments only but also in many of the other apartments in the neighbourhoods mentioned above. In one interesting development, the wife of a living ex-CEC, who, in her own rights, is a fairly well-known poetess of the country, has been left out of the voter list in the manner nar-

rated above.

This, we have reasons to suspect, cannot be accidental. Can it be presumed that the female voters of unknown loyalty have been left out so that roughly an equivalent number of "fake" female voters of proven loyalty can be made to vote for candidates of a certain political affiliation?

This mechanism is easy with female voters, who might wear "burkha," especially in city areas, where nobody around recognizes such voters. With a loyal Election Commission and very pliant election officials this mechanism can be deployed with a silky smoothness, and make a candidate winner, who might otherwise have lost had genuine voters been properly enlisted and allowed to vote for the candidate of their choice.

Despite the political turmoil created around the Election Commission and its voter list, and the government's belated admission of mistakes therein, nothing substantial appears to have been done to rectify the errors. I have so far received no visitor from the EC, nor have any of the many friends and acquaintances I have talked to, although some or all of the eligible voters of those households are left out of the voter list.

We are becoming increasingly convinced that this so-called attempt at rectification is merely

a propaganda technique to provide a sop to national and international public opinion, and nothing more. After all that has happened and is still happening, one need not have a particular political affiliation to understand that the Election Commission as it now stands, even without Justice Aziz, either does not mean to hold, or is simply incapable of holding, a free and fair election, the cornerstone of a democratic system of government.

The so-called reform of the EC, so far attempted, has starkly exposed the political bias and pathetic incompetence of the reformers, whoever they may be.

A credible election is a sine qua non for democracy, and the need for an unbiased, neutral, efficient and independent Election Commission is simply a must to cause that to happen. I, along with the rest of the unbiased people home and abroad, would have been happy if it could be said of the present Election Commission even with the CEC being on forced leave.

The jolt that democracy would get, and the permanent and irreparable damage that this country would suffer, if we fail to hold the next election in a free, fair and credible manner, is too bad to contemplate. We would therefore urge upon all the players in the field, including the



president of the country, who has, unfortunately, already made his role questionable by taking a series of debatable decisions, to bring their thoughts back on course for the long-term interests of the country and democracy to re-constitute the Election Commission, changing the existing one lock, stock, and barrel, and encourage the reformed EC to seriously cross-check the countrywide voter list before the nation goes to the

next polls.

A lot of experts have already said that there is no constitutional bar to extending the tenure of the caretaker government beyond ninety days. The president must do it to hold a credible election. If he does so, he risks displeasing the people who brought him to his present position, but history will judge him as a great saviour of democracy and long-term interests of the nation.

Rarely has so much depended

on one single individual of almost unmentionable political background, in the not-too long history of this nation, for the welfare of the country as it now does on the president. Would he not, at this fag end of his life and career, rise to the occasion and render one excellent historical service to his nation?

The writer, a former Member of the National Board of Revenue, is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Is it wrong to be rich in Bangladesh?

The fact that there is so much poverty around us makes us live in fear. Every rich and middle class person is desperately security conscious. We live in fear of those left behind by the system we created. But can we continue to live this way? Why this insecurity? We need to care for our poor if we are to live safely. We live in insecurity because we know that we have neglected the poor and are afraid of their wrath.

HASANAT ALAMGIR

IS it wrong to be rich? Why has everyone been bad-mouthing rich people lately in Bangladesh? Are not there rich but good people living there any longer, or are they a near extinct, or already wiped out, social class? Since when did affluence and goodness become mutually exclusive? Is it the wrong time to be rich in Bangladesh, and to live with dignity? Who degraded the rich there and associated all sorts of filth with wealth?

When I was growing up -- I am talking about the early and mid-eighties, not the Jurassic period by the way -- I used to hear stories of the rich who were distinguished and generous -- they founded schools, colleges, mosques, temples, and madrasas, donated to the youth and social clubs and programs, fed strangers, gave to paupers and established charitable hos-

pitals. They were pro-people -- an esteemed segment of the society. We read in our primary school textbooks the biographies of wealthy merchants like Haji Mohammad Mohsin. It was a dream of the middle class to be famous and generous like them.

Quite startlingly, the rich of Bangladesh could not keep up their good name. They turned themselves into a deplorable and disgusting social class. Now riches means corruption and greed, riches stands for land-grabbing and loan-defaulting, riches denotes hoarding, smuggling, black-marketing. The rich, give us an impression of meanness and wickedness.

This should not be the case. No one should be against the rich. Every nation must create wealth for its people. They must move from poverty to prosperity. However, there is no nation that does not have poor people. What is expected, however, is that,

while the rich continue to live in luxury, those who are poor must also have access to some basic necessities of life.

Wealth brings responsibility. Many of our problems are due to poverty. Many of us try to figure out why democracy seems to be failing in our country, whereas it operates in most developed nations as a vehicle for promoting good public governance. Recent examples of malfunctioning democracy in large countries like Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Philippines signal that democracy may not be a panacea for all societies, especially where most people are poor.

A man who cannot feed his children for days, or whose children cannot go to school, will surely be indifferent about democracy if he is offered money by an unworthy aspirant to an elected office. He wants his benefits immediately, even if

they come from an evidently criminal politician. During nominations for an election we see that candidates are bought and sold like cattle. Poverty undermines democracy and progress. It encourages emergence of idiots as leaders, thereby injuring our future.

It is, indeed, wrong to be rich and not care for the poor.

No public sector program in Bangladesh has been effective, so far, in reducing poverty. Why can't we get sensible people on board to solve our problems? Why did we fail every single time we got the chance to get the right people? Or, is it that whoever we select becomes blind to the needs of our poor when he is in power?

Do we care about our poor? They live on the footpaths and slums, and we walk pretending that we do not see them. They have no food, yet we eat in posh restaurants spending Tk 1,000 per meal -- a poor family's whole month's worth of food. They beg, knock on our windshields; we say we do not have change.

They cannot send their children to primary schools; we send ours to Tk 10,000-a-month private schools. They have no livelihood and no future.

However, being desperate, when they start mugging and stealing our law and order agency extorts whatever they earn, and, if nothing works out, we just develop elite forces to annihilate them.

Is it their fault that they are poor? Or, is it the failed policy makers who made them so? No jobs, no food, no hope, no future -- yet we expect them to follow the law and all the social niceties. They can die of hunger, but they cannot disturb our well-being. We will live and let them perish.

Continued ignoring of poverty will obviously bring danger. The recent emergence of Islamic militancy is because of the exploitation of some very poor, hopeless, youths. The incidents of Phulbari, Kansat, and Shanir Akhara also send out similar signals that the have-nots and the disadvantaged are losing patience quickly; they are looking for alternatives to the status-quo.

How much do the poor actually want? What do they want? Is it that hard to provide, by quality leadership and fair governance, what the poor want -- even with our limited resources? They want to have a dwelling to live in, a job to be able to buy food for

their children, access to basic health care, and education for their children. Are these not the basic essentials of life? Are they asking for too much? If a state cannot provide these then why does it exist?

A nation with a large population of poor will invariably fail to progress, and insecurity will be the order of the day.

No one will disagree that the poor are easy to use to create unrest, violence, robbery, arson, looting, murder, election malpractices, and other social vices. The fact that there is so much poverty around us makes us live in fear. Every rich and middle class person is desperately security conscious. We live in fear of those left behind by the system we created. But can we continue to live this way? Why this insecurity?

We need to care for our poor if we are to live safely. We live in insecurity because we know that we have neglected the poor and are afraid of their wrath.

It is not wrong to be rich. But it is indeed wrong to be rich like the rich of Bangladesh.

Dr Alamgir is a Director of a Canadian Agency on Occupational Health and Safety.

A returnee's tale

I firmly believed that a Canadian degree with work experience would definitely put me into the gear to resume my career in Bangladesh without too many problems. Not even in my wildest dreams could I anticipate how many surprises were waiting for me.

TOWID KHAN

OCTOBER 1, 12:35 am. Zia international airport was brimming with people and humid temperature. It had been quite a while since I last tasted the bitterness of this sort of climate.

I came home with a view to help the country and myself with the knowledge I gained over the years in Canada. The telecom industry was booming with no boundary and impediment. At least that's how it seemed from Canada.

Working with networking as a complimentary employee for GlaxoSmithKline, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world, definitely kindled the fire inside me to go back to my homeland and apply what I had learned.

I firmly believed that a Canadian degree with work experience would definitely put me into the gear to resume my career in Bangladesh without too many problems. Not even in my wildest dreams could I anticipate how many surprises were waiting for me.

I had been trying to contact several potential employers in Bangladesh while I was in Canada. Surprisingly enough, they never even replied to my application or e-mail. When you send nearly 10 e-mails to a single HR manager, you can expect at least a courtesy response from him, can't you?

Still I was hopeful. I came back and started applying for jobs like crazy; anywhere and everywhere. Seven days passed by and I didn't get any call. A week is definitely not enough to get a call from a potential employer given that a first-class 2nd from the national university has to wait nearly 18 months to get a decent job.

I decided to call some of the companies to see what they thought of my resume and my experience in IT. I won't be using any names here. I wish I could, though. An HR manager of the biggest mobile phone service provider addressed the issue of my undergraduate GPA. It took him no more than one minute to look at my on-line resume and articulate the sentence: "Your GPA is

... not good."

Certainly he was efficient enough to look at GPA before paying any attention to work experience, degree, and soft skills. I acknowledged his statement with due respect and pleaded with him to look two inches below and address another fact, that I had more than one year of work experience in Canada following my graduation.

He then mentioned that the company he works for takes students from the best engineering school in Bangladesh and from some other government engineering colleges and universities. I asked him if he cared for North American degree and work experience. He mumbled for nearly 15 seconds and said both yes and no. Having understood the fact that I am not good enough to work in this company, I thanked him for giving his valuable time and hung up.

On a beautiful November morning, I got dressed for success and went out with copies of my resume and cover letter. The first company I went to informed me that they only

consider on-line submission, for any hard copy of resume is garbage. Fair enough.

I moved on to the next one. The next potential employer was kind enough to accept my submission. I asked the front desk officer if I could talk to the HR manager. He told me to just leave the resume and pray. No one is allowed to see the HR manager.

I went to see the first HR manager I had spoken with. I was not lucky enough to meet him. However, he kindly asked me to leave my resume at the front desk and informed me that on-line submission would be good enough. I was pretty sure that my resume would be in the garbage within five minutes of my leaving the office.

I dropped off my resume to many potential employers, hoping to get a call. One month went by. No one called. Whenever the telephone rings, I ran to grab it. But alas! It is my friend who called, not anyone offering an opportunity.

Finally, the call came in! The interview was on the next business day. I went to the interview and it lasted for three minutes, resulting in a waste of Tk 120 for my transportation. Having understood my shortcomings, I started studying with new technology, hoping to ace the

interview by any means.

I am tempted to say that I applied to a company through a channel. But I guess, there is still a maintained hierarchy when you apply for jobs even through a reference. Such as, one resume is referred by the managing director and another resume is referred by the technical manager. By default, the resume referred by the managing director will definitely get preference, no matter what.

Anyhow, my channel in that telecom equipment vendor company called me the other night. I must admit that I had been bugging him via phone and e-mail for quite a long time. As a result, he couldn't resist but to give me a call. He is a very smart guy, and he smartly explained the following scenario.

The job seekers tend to blame the HR people. But I guess the HR guy is just a scape-goat. My reference mentioned that sometimes the HR couldn't do anything except ignore potential candidates. The HR in Bangladesh is there just to call the guy to come for an interview. The technical manager or the managing director does the main selection. If the techno guy says yes but the head says no, it is a no. In terms of references, obviously the more powerful the reference is,

the less chance it has to be rejected. I guess that is a universal truth. What baffles me is that we, the returning Bangladeshis with foreign degree and work experience have to work so hard for a job where our overall percentage is not even 0.1% of the total job seekers.

If we have to struggle for survival in our own country, how come we are expected to come home and work? It infuriates me when I see that being a foreign national was not an impediment to start my career in Canada with close to zero work experience, whereas I am unemployed people in my own country.

Anyways, the smart guy, my reference, was so smart that he cleverly made it clear that I should not waste time on him. I am a smart guy as well. It clicked! I smartly understood what he meant, and moved on.

I didn't want to publish this, nor did I intend to when I first started writing. I write to bring an end to my pain through my writing, also to prevent others from the same mistake. No wonder brain drain has been an issue in this country.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Thirty-five years on

The strangeness of it all is that every single person knows the truth. A few may have blinded themselves to it in their own parochial interests, but the greater mass knows it all. And that is where all my hopes lie, each time I walk the streets of Dhaka and see the street urchins, beggars, rickshaw-pullers, everyone struggling to make a living. I just hope we can all wake up in time to save a nation. Thirty-five years has already been too long.

SYED NADEEM AHSAN

I am one of the children of the post-war period. To be more precise, I was born a year after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was murdered in the night. I have missed the times history was reshaped for better or worse in this country.

Like most of my generation I grew up studying text-books that had carefully doctored history. In fact, like many I grew up with an indifferent attitude toward the country. The politics has always been totally confusing, and I realized very early that to make a decent, honourable living I could not afford to focus on anything except my immediate road-map of life, sketched by my family and teachers.

I never really bothered about politics, not even when I saw abject poverty all over the country while every politician seemed to own the most expensive car. I know you get the picture. So what prompted me to think about it today? It was a documentary I watched with my friends, Muktir Gaan, as part of our December 16 homage earlier on the day. I had heard and seen pictures of the liberation war before, but this is the closest I have ever been to the war.

I left the theatre trying to answer a question: What does this war mean to me? It is temporary bouts of pain for all those who so bravely went to fight against the Pakistani forces, pain that comes and goes only on those special days. The next day the past has to be left in the past as we move on to face the struggles of the common man in this country.

A second question leads from my first and that is: Where did we go wrong? Was it when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman pardoned all the traitors to this land? Was it when he was murdered for the sin of having been larger than life, or is it that the Pakistanis had succeeded in

crippling the nation when they killed our intellectuals en masse, leaving a vacuum, only to give rise to a generation without any moral values? I do not know the reason but what I do know is that we went wrong, very, very wrong.

As I watched the brave young men and women who waged the liberation war, in that documentary, I realized that they were far greater people than we can ever be. They took their stand against a much more powerful enemy. For us, we can hardly identify who the enemies are, even when we can, we lend them a platform to have their say.

I almost feel like believing that a whole nation has been brainwashed by some bizarre force, but I know that's not the reason. A more sound, more credible reason is perhaps that the common man knows that life doesn't change much for him, no matter who is in power, and so each time he looks for immediate gains. And this is what has brought us to this situation today.

A country in the hands of corrupt men, men who have compromised with themselves and have compromised the country, a constitution that is used to serve specific needs even while we know that it was written for upholding higher moral values and not vice versa, this is the reality we live through.

The strangeness of it all is that every single person knows the truth. A few may have blinded themselves to it in their own parochial interests, but the greater mass knows it all. And that is where all my hopes lie, each time I walk the streets of Dhaka and see the street urchins, beggars, rickshaw-pullers, everyone struggling to make a living. I just hope we can all wake up in time to save a nation. Thirty-five years has already been too long.

Syed Nadeem Ahsan is Assistant Manager, Marketing, Etcetera Bangladesh Pvt. Limited.