

Flawed voter list

Correct it since all the parties now agree on this point

WITH only 12 days left before the election, already boycotted by the grand alliance and widely viewed as unacceptable on various grounds, the Election Commission has failed to fulfill even the basic legal and constitutional requirements insofar as the voter list is concerned.

The draft voter list, as per the provision incorporated in the Electoral Roll Ordinance, 1982, is supposed to be on display in different local government offices in the constituencies for scrutiny by both the candidates and the members of the public before the election schedule is announced. Nothing of the sort has happened and all that the EC could come up with is a vague number of the total voters (93 millions), that, too, less than two weeks before the election. There is yet no district or constituency-wise break-up of the voters. That's a direct violation of the constitution that the caretaker government is claiming to uphold so vehemently.

The point has to be raised in view of the political uncertainty that has created a total deadlock in the country. There is no doubt that the voter list has emerged as a major issue with the grand alliance terming it flawed beyond the limits of acceptability. Their stand on the matter is nothing new, but what has been added to the complex situation is the BNP chairperson's statement on the issue, which implies that her party doesn't reject the AL claim that the voter list is flawed.

The BNP chairperson has put the blame on the previous AL government during whose tenure the list was updated, but the fact remains that such an accusation amounts to acquiescing in the fact that the list is flawed. BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan went one step further by saying that the BNP would prepare a 'correct voter list' if it is voted to power in January 22 elections.

So there are two very substantive reasons to reject the list. First, the rules concerning preparation, revision, display for public scrutiny, and finalisation of the voter list have been violated blatantly. Secondly, the BNP itself has in so many words implied that there are flaws in the list.

It is not too late for the caretaker government to look at the situation from a pragmatic point of view, refer the issue to the Supreme Court, and spare the nation the trouble of holding an election that will be farcical, to say the least.

Capture of more JMB terrorists

Rearing their heads in political turmoil?

RECENT capture of another group of JMB terrorists with large quantities of explosives and other indigenous devices must come somewhat as a relief to us all. It was a good job done by RAB and the other agencies involved in the operation. However, it causes us concern too.

It has been our contention that there was no reason to think that we had heard the last, or seen the end, of the JMB terrorists after the capture of the top leadership of the group in March last year. A group that could carry out simultaneous bombings all over the country did not take root in one day or one month. It has taken a long time to germinate and had been in existence long enough to have motivated a number of their cadres to become suicide bombers. That, fairly sophisticated equipment were found in their possession, and in large quantities, is indicative of their well-entrenched tentacles in the country; and that they have regrouped and ready to strike is amply clear. Their choice of this particular time to undertake their operations is no surprise either.

It is only to be expected that such elements would take advantage of the current political strife and the void that exists in the political and administrative arena, where attention of all, particularly the law enforcing agencies have been taken up by the need to attend to the different political programs. Also, we are without a full-time advisor to look after the home ministry, which at this particular time, happens to be the most important ministry, that being under the Chief Advisor and the president himself. With a leadership that is soft and with the current political agitation, the distractions will play in favour of those that want to create instability in the country.

The law enforcing agencies must be prepared to encounter and defeat new tactics of these elements. It is very clear that the terrorists are prepared to resort to different tactics and undertake all sorts of ruse to conduct destructive and subversive activities in the country, as is apparent from the fact that the arrested JMB cadres have been found with RAB uniform in their possession.

We must not let our guard down. The government must put these elements on the list of priorities to apprehend, and undertake all measures to ensure that neither are they given the scope nor the ground to carry out their destructive activities.

Europe and energy security

Though the Europeans have a genuinely hard choice in hand they have to act quickly, because energy security is no more a theoretical notion but a bitter reality. Moscow has already effectively used this weapon, and there is no plausible reason to assume that it would resist from using it again in the future.

IMRAN KHALID

"ENERGY security" is a relatively new term, but it has been gaining currency with alacrity in the global political system, particularly in the European part of the world.

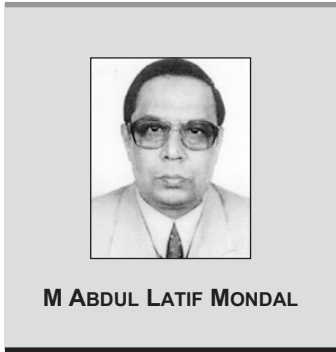
Two recent incidents have further highlighted its strategic importance to the Europeans specifically. One, in early January 2006, when Russia instigated a European energy crisis by cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine to subjugate the newly elected government of President Viktor

Yushchenko. Since the Russian gas pipelines to Western Europe also pass through Ukraine, a palpable drop in the gas pressure was also felt in European cities.

This episode simply jolted the Europeans to the realization of the bitter fact that they were inordinately dependent for electricity and gas on Moscow, which was not hesitant to use it as a political and strategic tool to dictate its terms.

The second incident is the demise of Turkmenistan's authoritarian President Saparmurat Niyazov last month, which has

Khaleda Zia's press conference: An overview



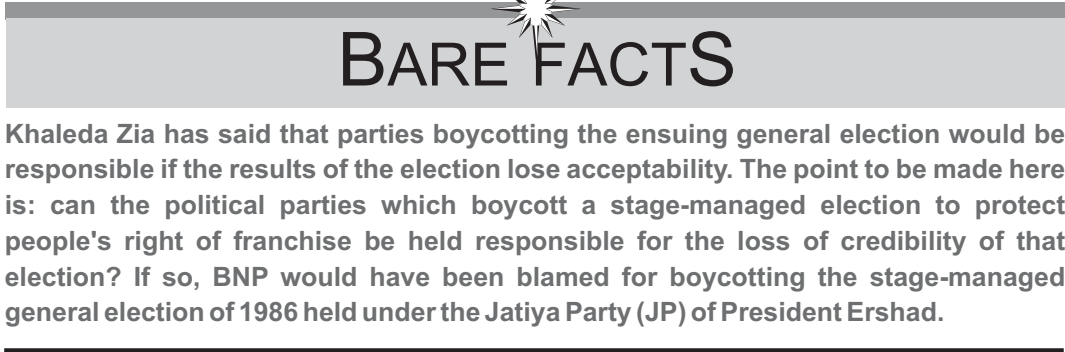
THE immediate past prime minister and BNP chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia, in her recent (January 5) press conference speech in the Dhaka city blasted the AL-led combine for staying away from the scheduled January 22 general election and warned that the boycotting parties, not the participating ones, would be responsible if the results of the election lost acceptability.

The AL-led combine has termed Khaleda Zia's press conference speech as "false, misleading, and self-contradictory."

An attempt has been made below to analyze the main points of Khaleda Zia's speech in the said press conference.

As stated above, Khaleda Zia has said that parties boycotting the ensuing general election would be responsible if the results of the election lose acceptability. The point to be made here is: can the political parties which boycott a stage-managed election to protect people's right of franchise be held responsible for the loss of credibility of that election?

If so, BNP would have been blamed for boycotting the stage-managed general election of 1986 held under the Jatiya Party (JP) of President Ershad. Rather



the people praised BNP, and its chairperson Khaleda Zia earned the laurel of "uncompromising leader."

Again, the general election that was held only two years after in 1988, following dissolution of parliament by President Ershad in view of the decision of resignation by the MPs of AL, Jamaat-e-Islami and other individual MPs (who participated the 1986 general election), was boycotted by the main opposition parties namely BNP, AL, and Jamaat-e-Islami. Were the BNP, AL and Jamaat-e-Islami held responsible for the boycott of that widely rigged general election which failed to receive acceptability both at home and abroad?

Khaleda Zia has urged all to take part in January 22 general election, as it would, according to her, strengthen the democratic process. But, has a congenial atmosphere for holding the election been created?

The chief adviser has failed to act as a catalyst between the contending political parties so that one or the other major party would not boycott the election. In its editorial (January 5), The Daily Star has cateloged the failures of the chief adviser. In brief, these are: first, the chief adviser neither tried to nor could he gain the confidence of the

Awami League-led alliance as a major partner in politics knowing full well that only a broad-based election is the essential guarantee for credibility of the polling exercise. Secondly, he not only failed to work collectively with his colleagues in the advisory council, but sometimes appeared to work at cross purposes. Thirdly, he has failed to depoliticize the administration left by the immediate past BNP-led alliance government.

It needs no repetition that one of the most important prerequisites of a transparent and fair election is a voter list that is perfect in every sense, acceptable to all. Other than the BNP-led alliance, the absence of a perfect voter list is a matter of concern, not only to the voters and the political parties, but also to other countries which are interested to see that the forth-coming general election in Bangladesh is held in a free, fair, and impartial manner with participation of all political parties. Mention may particularly be made of the US, Canada, and the EU.

It may be relevant to quote here from the House of Lords debates on 30 November 30, 2006 on Bangladesh election, 2007. Lord Avebury (Liberal Democrat) said: "According to

the Washington DC-based National Democratic Institute, the electoral list contains 14 million more names than the voting population. Since there is massive anecdotal evidence that large numbers were prevented from registering by intimidation, the scale of the problem is even greater. The true number of phantom voters, if the missing names are added to the excess 14 million, could be 20 million on the most conservative assumptions. The previous list, estimated to contain a mere 2 million phantom voters, totalled 76 million, so one can see from the proportion of phantom voters that the errors would be large enough to affect the result even if the mechanics of the election at the polling stations were impeccable. Without an immediate and resolute attempt to correct the register, the opportunity for massive fraud is obvious."

Baroness, Lady Uddin (Labour) said: "There are serious allegations that votes will be rigged to hand victory to the BNP/Jamaat alliance. I am deeply concerned that those allegations are likely to remain unresolved, especially in the light of the disappointing lack of communication between the main two parties. There are also

accusations that the amendments of the voter list will favour the BNP in particular at the polls, as has been said."

Khaleda Zia has found disqualification of the JP chairman HM Ershad to contest election the only reason for the AL-led alliance's not participating in January 22 election. There may be some truth in this statement. But the question that haunts the people's mind is: would there have arisen any circumstances leading to barring Ershad from contesting election if he had stuck to his decision to stay with the BNP-led alliance? People's perception is that BNP and the president-cum-chief adviser had their hands behind it.

Khaleda Zia in her speech has sought all-out cooperation of the armed forces and law enforcing agencies for peaceful polls. It rests with the CTG and the EC to engage the armed forces in aid of civil power for maintenance of law and order during election. At present, BNP is like any other political party in the country, and it was not Khaleda Zia's business at this moment to seek cooperation of the armed forces for peaceful polls. BNP has not actually changed its ruling mind-set.

One positive approach has apparently emerged from Khaleda Zia's speech. She has tacitly referred to the idea of seeking Supreme Court's reference for taking more time to hold the election with all parties' participation, although she expressed her doubt whether the Awami League would accept the higher court's interpretation, if there is any.

Mentionable that excepting BNP and its allies, all other political parties, the civil society members and the press have been appealing to the president

for making such a reference to the Supreme Court within the ambit of the Constitution (Article 106). Above all, the Constitution is for the good of the country and its people.

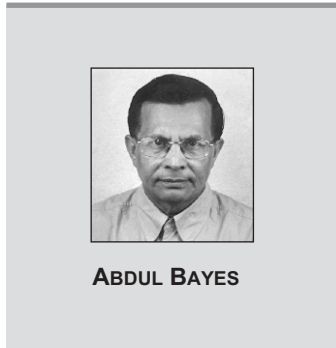
Although the president in his statement on January 6 categorically stated that the ensuing general election would be held on schedule although a political camp withdrew from the race, the latest media reports suggest that he has softened his attitude and has given a green-signal to three of his colleagues in the advisory council to initiate a fresh move to bring all the parties to the ensuing parliamentary election even if it meant holding the polls beyond the constitutional 90-day timeframe.

The three advisers have already held discussion with the BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and are expected to hold discussion with the AL general secretary and coordinator of the AL-led 14-party alliance, Abdul Jalil, any time. In that case, the ball is now in the court of the two major political alliances.

Professor Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank have brought rare honour for the country by winning the Nobel Peace Prize 2006. Bangladesh has already been recognized as the world's largest Muslim democracy for over two decades. The whole nation is eagerly waiting for a last minute solution to the existing political impasse to facilitate holding election to the 9th parliament freely, fairly, and impartially with participation of all political parties, so that Bangladesh continues to stand with its head high as a democratic nation.

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

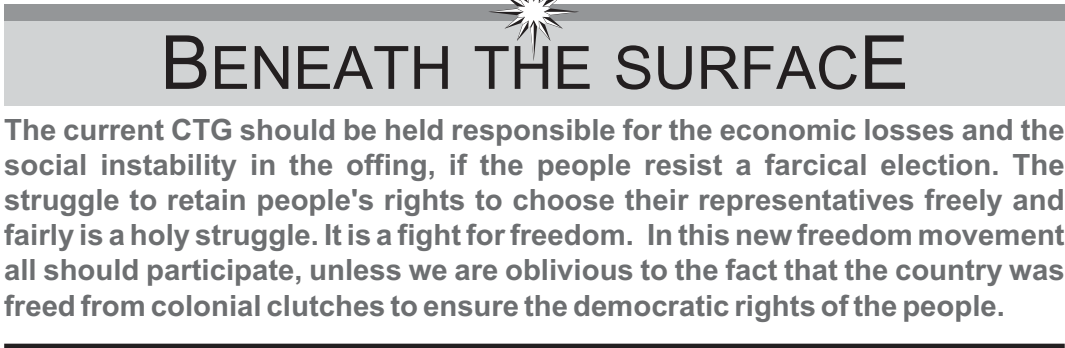
The root of all crises



THE Federation of the Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) held an emergency meeting on January 6 to ventilate their views about the current political conundrum. This was not surprising in the wake of an upcoming blockade program of the grand alliance to press home their demand for the resignation of the chief of the caretaker government (CTG) Professor Iajuddin Ahmed.

After all, admittedly, business and commerce are the backbones of the economy, and any impingement on their proper functioning might take a heavy toll not only from the business community in particular, but also from the society as a whole.

But what drew our attention to that meeting is one important observation. According to Mr Mohammad Ali, the acting president of FBCCI, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed is the main villain of the piece at the moment, and this is understood even by the



rickshaw-pullers.

Professor Iajuddin is said to have not displayed any notion of neutrality so far. The federation also asked the CTG to shift the date of election through a reference to the Supreme Court.

On the other hand, scanning of the editorials of the major newspapers over the last few days reveals the failures of the current CTG, especially the partisan role played by the chief of the CTG.

To be more authentic on this allegation, we can also refer to the views of the former advisors of the CTG and eminent personalities from the civil society that was published in various newspapers. The opinion polls taken by the private TV channels -- and for that matter the TV talk shows -- also seem to identify Professor Iajuddin Ahmed as the main hurdle towards holding a free, fair and neutral election in the country.

By and large, the consensus is that the country faces serious crisis because of only one per-

son, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed.

It has long been alleged that, especially on two grounds, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed violated the constitution of the country: first by proclaiming himself as the chief of CTG without exhausting all the options, and second, by not taking into cognizance the views of the advisors on different issues in right earnest.

In fact, the constitutional provision relating to the CTG says that the decisions of the CTG should be taken on the basis of consultation.

For his failure on the latter count, four of the eminent advisors have already resigned. The resignation of the famous personalities from the CTG cabinet clearly sent the message that the president was dictated by the advice of the informal advisors of a particular "bhaban" rather than those of the formal advisors that he himself selected for holding a free and fair election.

Professor Iajuddin also deceived the nation on several

occasions. In television speeches, he assured the nation that he would fill the EC with neutral persons. To the nation's utter surprise, the persons he chose appeared to be followers of the BNP-Jamaat alliance.

Again, despite the constitutional provision that a genuine voter list is a must for holding a general election, the chief of the CTG had been harping on one provision of the constitution -- holding an election within 90 days! Meantime, the CTG has deliberately wasted roughly two-thirds of its total time without making any move to hold a free and fair election.

This means that an election will be held on January 22 whether the country has a genuine voter list or not, whether the CTG chief is neutral or not, and whether all parties participate in the election or not.

And, as we presume, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed is seemingly prepared to sacrifice his life for the cause of holding a

farcical election to send his pet party to power again.

An indication to this effect is that, despite the declaration of the major political parties to abstain from the general election, the professor hardly felt the need to consult his newly appointed advisors. In fact, he committed himself to hold a farcical election on January 22 by using the arguments that were placed before a press conference the other day by Begum Khaleda Zia.

The professor is poised to hold a free and fair farcical election, notwithstanding the economic costs of holding such an election.

Maybe an election is going to be held on January 22, keeping the major political parties out. Would that election be an acceptable one? It is a grave lapse that the EC could not produce a voter list even two weeks before the general election.

All major political parties decided to boycott the election and resist its occurrence. It seems that the chief of CTG, the advisors and BNP-Jamaat alliance are all happy with the decision. In fact, that is the kind of election they were seemingly looking for.

The advisors are also singing the song of constitutional continuity or constraints. But they deliberately forget that the constitutional mandate also asks for a fair voter list before holding an election. Without a fair voter list the election cannot be fair and credible.

For the last two years the major opposition parties and development partners have been hammering on this issue, but the EC has been turning a deaf ear to that. About Tk100 crores have been spent in the name of preparing the voter list but, sadly speaking, the whole amount seems to have been wasted by the EC. The so-called advisors of the current CTG are silent on this issue.

The present advisors to the CTG are functioning as mere messengers of the chief of CTG. The chief feels no obligation or desire to take into account the views of his advisors. We are astonished to see that the advisors are playing the roles of messengers. It is a shame on them to be treated like that. Unfortunately, when expedience grips us, conscience takes a back seat.

The current CTG should be held responsible for the economic losses and the social instability in the offing, if the people resist a farcical election. The struggle to retain people's rights to choose their representatives freely and fairly is a holy struggle. It is a fight for freedom. In this new freedom movement all should participate, unless we are oblivious to the fact that the country was freed from colonial clutches to ensure the democratic rights of the people.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

gas crisis in Europe. A disruption of gas supplies from Turkmenistan to RosUkrEnergo (gas supply agent), owing to a power struggle, has all the potential to kick-off a chain-reaction-style gas crisis in Europe.

There is a growing feeling in Europe that Moscow is consciously working towards the establishment of a "gas cartel," stretching from Algeria to Central Asia, to use as a political and economic weapon in its dealings with Europe. Although the officials of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), which was created in May 2001, claim it to be a talking-shop only and not a cartel-in-the-making, the Europeans are quite wary of its proceedings.

In a recent report by the Nato's economic committee there is a detailed explanation of how

Moscow has been trying to a draw Algeria, Libya, Qatar and central Asian countries into a Russian-backed cartel "Opec for gas" which will straddle about two-thirds of the world's total gas reserves and wield huge control over the gas market. At the same time, Moscow is alleged to have been bullying the Western energy companies, which have invested in the energy sector of Russia, to relinquish majority stakes in favour of their Russian counterparts.

Against this backdrop, it does not come as a surprise to see "energy security" being discussed at EU proceedings and Nato meetings. But the problem is that, despite being aware of the impending energy security for quite some time, the Europeans have not been able to draw up a

clear cut long-term plan to handle the situation, and they have not been able to develop a unified energy policy and strategy to deal with Moscow's belligerent attitude.

The fact is that, excluding academic debates of experts at the EU forums, there is dearth of seriousness among the European political leaders to tackle the issue that may turn into the most critical security concern in the coming days.

One factor, obviously, is difficulty in finding a "convenient and safe" alternative so as to dilute Russia's influence on the energy market. For obvious reasons, the only alternate option could be importing liquefied natural gas or erecting new pipelines to transport oil and gas directly from Central Asia or the Caucasus to Europe.

But, again, this is very expensive and intricate option. To pre-empt

any energy cut-off by Russia, the Europeans need huge investments to build new supply lines -- also reserve supplies -- and a well-knitted distribution channel throughout the region. Ostensibly, this is an extremely expensive task, which means gigantic diversion of money and resources from social sector development programmes to build this alternative.

Though the Europeans have a genuinely hard choice in hand they have to act quickly, because energy security is no more a theoretical notion but a bitter reality. Moscow has already effectively used this weapon, and there is no plausible reason to assume that it would resist from using it again in the future.

Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.