

One-sided election and the 14-party siege programme

Does either serve the nation's interest?

THE greater majority of the people of Bangladesh acknowledge that the 22 Jan election will be bereft of any meaning and will be unable to solve the current political impasse. That is also the position of most of our development partners, who have made no secret of it. Apart from the lustre of an all-party participation of an election, the validity will be missing in the victory of the winners. We regret that the Chief Advisor has failed to internalise the gravity of the situation, and, driven by a most partisan outlook, is determined to go ahead with the election on the scheduled date, come hail or high water. His attempt to invoke harsh measures to maintain law and order has given Professor Iajuddin an even more partisan appearance.

By the same token one is at a loss to determine what the agitation programs of the 14-party combine have been able to achieve from them so far, and if anything at all what might it gain for it in the future? Apart from adding to the public miseries there is very little political mileage that the grand alliance has derived from its siege program. If anything, it is losing sympathy from all quarters, even those that are sympathetic toward its cause. To public life certainly, but even more damaging has been the effect of the siege on our economy.

We are perturbed at the 14-party alliance's alleged plan to go for continuous hartal. We wonder whether it realises the harmful effect of such a program, given the hardship that the public are already mired in. It runs the risk of not only further losing public sympathy, it will risk public ire for the sufferings that people will have to endure in future. Surely, causing suffering to the citizens and to the economy cannot be the objective of the mega-alliance. We would like to advise strongly against such a program.

When the people have to undergo economic hardships because of the political programs, from where recovery of losses is painful, the common man's perception of the political struggle loses its meaning and the very significance of the political position is sighted.

It appears that both the alliances, in their bid to derive political mileage, have lost sight of the most important factor, the interest of the country and its people.

Fertilizer crisis

Head it off for a good boro crop

FARMERS in the northern part of the country are once again facing a crisis due to inadequate supply of urea fertilizer despite claims made by the Bangladesh Fertilizer Association (BAFA) that there is enough of its stock in the country. It has been alleged that a good part of the problem is due to the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) selling to retailers instead of selling directly to farmers. Besides, the situation is further complicated owing to corporation's failure to release adequate quantity of fertilizer to the dealers from its buffer stock since November, whereas the earlier practice had been to release the goods from September.

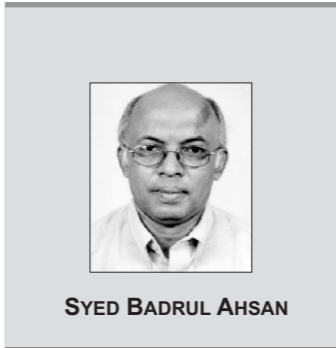
Whatever amount of fertilizer farmers are able to lay their hands on, they are having to pay per bag a much higher price between Tk 400 and Tk 425, while the price paid earlier was between Tk 295 and Tk 300.

To top it all, the major factories are also producing below their respective capacities. We don't know whether any import is in the pipeline.

Today Bangladesh is self-sufficient in food and certainly much of the credit for that goes to our industrious and innovative farmers along with timely and adequate supply of various inputs including fertilizer over the years. Admittedly, one of the lesser reasons for supply shortfall could have been the disruption in the transport networking caused by siege program (oborodh) and the foggy weather yet the fact remains that there is more to it than that. Clearly, the main problem lies with the production deficit and distribution anomalies. We strongly believe that fertilizer crisis recurs due to sheer bad planning including inefficient and corrupt management practices on the part of the concerned agencies.

At the outset of the boro season we cannot afford such an input shortage in the northern region of the country where seasonal food deficit remains a major concern.

This tribalism we are passing through . . .



WE are living through incredibly horrible times. On a television talk show -- there are far too many to handle these days -- an on-again, off-again BNP politician feigns worry about the damage that could be done to a bicycle owner if picketers let the air out of one of his tyres.

His adversary, a Jatiyo Party man, tells him and his presumed audience with a flourish that if General Ershad is not allowed to be a candidate at the next election, all of Bangladesh will be on fire.

At Sonargaon Pan-Pacific, Begum Khaleda Zia cites a European Union report about lapses in the voters list prepared under the Awami League administration, an assertion that the EU finds hard to verify.

How do you explain what has lately been happening to us as a nation? And what do you have in hand to satisfy yourself that God is in heaven and all will be well with our world?

For these past many days, as the Awami League-led fourteen-party alliance has plunged into yet one more phase of a blockade program, there has been recurrent, insistent talk of a state of emergency, or even martial law,

It is a state of fear that rears its head through the stones and bricks and tear gas shells on the seamy streets. On January 10, 1972, it was not like this. There were dreams forged that day. We did not know that the nightmares, more numerous than the dreams, lay in ambush, waiting to pounce. We know now, with tears streaming down our cheeks.

being clamped on the country. There are all those soldiers patrolling the streets, and all those policemen pursuing the agitators, all of which gives you the impression that the centre is about to collapse.

Well, the centre has not caved in. But when you have a president-chief advisor who has all the time in the world to meet the chiefs of the armed services and the police but none at all for his council of advisors, you wonder how much more of such pressure the state can take.

Iajuddin Ahmed tells you he cannot go beyond the ninety-day limit stipulated for the elections to be held. He has got it all wrong, say all those lawyers more conversant with the constitution than he.

There is Article 106 that enables him to make a reference to the judiciary, a point the president clearly ignores or fails to notice. Meanwhile, Kamal Hossain, the man upon whom fell the onerous task of drafting the constitution back in 1972, today stands accused of sedition and must face the law to defend his integrity as a citizen. Irony becomes overarching.

Things cannot get more bizarre than what you have already stumbled into, you might tell yourself. But you would be wrong to think along these lines.

Things will get even worse.

When you have an administrative system that cannot, or will not, punish the bureaucrats clearly involved in conspiracy against the constitution and the state (read here the Uttara clandestine meeting of a few weeks ago), you realise with a start how weak and anemic a condition the republic has been pushed into.

Call it tribalism that has begun to eat away at our vitals, call it the rise of clan politics. For those of you with a deeply pessimistic bent of mind, there could be the spectre of a Somalia taking shape in the rice fields of this country.

Like you, like me, there are lots of people beginning to worry if someday the United Nations, or a similar institution, might not be tempted or expected to step into the minefield Bangladesh has been mutating into. That might sound like stretching things a bit too far, but do not discount the possibility.

When we welcomed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman back home from Pakistani captivity on a day like today in January 1972, there were all the dreams we thought we were shaping before us, for ourselves and for our children. Nothing could hold us back from reclaiming our heritage as a nation of secular democratic beings.

There was our poetry to sustain us; and around it gleamed the essence of the politics the founding fathers had shaped for us to build on.

But then things went badly wrong. In a democratic, secular Bangladesh, we watched with horror the many coups d'etat that left all our heroes, in politics and in the battlefields of 1971, dead and maimed.

The men we were certain we would punish for war crimes (and these were the local sinister elements who guided the Pakistan army in its macabre mission of hounding and murdering Bengalis) are today powerful beings who tell us, we who waged war for freedom, that we are destroying the country through asking for democracy.

Never in the history of mankind has there ever been a society quite like ours.

We have held fast to the glorious tale of the war of liberation. Ironically, we have repudiated the men who fashioned that tale, all because of a certain weakness of morality in us.

We speak here of partisanship. Soon, we could be talking of tribalism. We may not have a Farah Aided in our midst, but we do have the uncomfortable, unenviable spectacle of mediocre politicians taking us all down

Might is right

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

IS it too naive to portray -- with oblique reference to the age-old saying: Might is right -- the current situation and the caretaker government's dogmatic attitude to hold a meaningless election?

It is being discussed in various quarters that the AL-led alliance is being repeatedly outsmarted by the BNP-led alliance's outstanding power of brain. It may not be untrue. However, will it be out of context if it is contended that it is more the brawn than the brain that is making things happen for the latter?

On February 15 1996, the election was a controversial one due to non-participation of a major political block. But, was the constitution so nakedly circumvented then?

Admittedly, since there was no provision for caretaker government at that time, the election was supposed to be held under a party government, which had no chance to put on the garb of non-party, neutral label. But, will the January 22 election not epitomise the scenario where a land is

His call for emergency has, however, been very rightly contravened by his professional colleagues as that will only put Articles 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, and 42 of our constitution in abeyance. Thus, snatching away people's freedom of movement; freedom of assembly; freedom of association; freedom of thought and conscience, and of speech; freedom of profession or occupation as well as rights to property.

viewed as a moger mulluk (where might is presumed as right)?

The president/CA in his latest statement expressed his determination that the election on January 22 would be held in a free, fair and impartial manner. Yes, a nice piece of joke at least! He also made it unambiguous that there is no room any more for reference to Supreme Court for extending the time.

Meanwhile, the FBCCI president Mohammed Ali advised the president to declare emergency. He also observed that even a rickshaw-puller is now well aware that the president/CA could not exhibit neutrality.

His call for emergency has, however, been very rightly contravened by his professional colleagues as that will only put Articles 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, and 42 of our constitution in abeyance.

Even an early withdrawal from Iraq may not be likely. Even the Iraq Study Group's report does not prescribe a quick and unconditional withdrawal. What it suggests is dispersal of the US troops within Iraq for a different mission. Then there are larger questions: having permanent American bases on Iraqi territory, or who would extract the Iraqi oil and export it.

The future Iraqi state's, or successor entity's, ties with Israel is an important consideration. These questions remains to be answered. And it is relevant to know how they will affect Pakistan and the Taliban, respectively.

Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorism. Americans now define Islamo-fascism as their enemy. This is a regrettable formulation. The idea is close to "clash of civilizations." Jihadis say it is a war against Islam. This is not true. The Americans had, in fact, funded the same Islamic forces that today confront them. The threat should be seen for what it is. Muslim terrorists attacking western targets mainly hurt Muslim societies of their origin. Islamists' physiognomy should be clearly seen.

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorism. Americans now define Islamofascism as their enemy. This is a regrettable formulation. The idea is close to "clash of civilizations." Jihadis say it is a war against Islam. This is not true. The Americans had, in fact, funded the same Islamic forces that today confront them. The threat should be seen for what it is. Muslim terrorists attacking western targets mainly hurt Muslim societies of their origin. Islamists' physiognomy should be clearly seen.

their system of rough and ready justice; they have been killing informers of the Pakistan army and foreign troops in Afghanistan.

The claim of Nato commanders and the Karzai government is that the Taliban have havens in Pakistan. It cannot entirely be denied. Nor can Pakistani assertions that the Taliban have their sanctuaries in Afghanistan be flatly denied. The fact is that the Taliban have found roots in the tribal societies of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

They are a common problem for both countries, and unless both countries fight them together, and with imagination and ideas rather than mere bullets, none can come out of it covered with glory.

Islamabad needs to think deeply on the implications of what the Americans are saying and doing vis-à-vis Pakistan. American President George

Bush's commitment to his buddy, President Musharraf, may be firm, but Washington's insinuating and feeding material to the American media is detrimental to his friend.

What the Americans are after is not clear. They seem to want a change. But they are not sure about General Musharraf and are definitely looking for alternative policies for Pakistan to adopt.

But one factor needs to be remembered: Have the Americans failed to achieve their objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan? Their troops were not picknicking. The idea that Mr. Bush was merely foolish to undertake wars for their own sake is nonsense.

As far as one can see, he pursued a defined geostrategic goal. The purposes for which the Americans have spent treasure and blood are not likely to be thrown overboard, despite the Democrats' electoral victory.

Even the early withdrawal from Iraq may not be likely. Even the Iraq Study Group's report does not prescribe a quick and unconditional withdrawal. What it suggests is dispersal of the US troops within Iraq for a different mission. Then there are larger questions: having permanent American bases on Iraqi territory, or who would extract the Iraqi oil and export it.

The future Iraqi state's, or successor entity's, ties with Israel is an important consideration. These questions remains to be answered. And it is relevant to know how they will affect Pakistan and the Taliban, respectively.

Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorism. Americans now define Islamo-fascism as their enemy. This is a regrettable formulation. The idea is close to "clash of civilizations." Jihadis say it is a war against Islam. This is not true. The Americans had, in fact, funded the same Islamic forces that today confront them. The threat should be seen for what it is. Muslim terrorists attacking western targets mainly hurt Muslim societies of their origin. Islamists' physiognomy should be clearly seen.

There are at least four Jihadist strands: the first believes in the Islamic State idea as evolved in Pakistan; it aims at a caliphate.

the road to muddy disaster.

A state that is in free fall, you might suggest, will shatter when it hits rock bottom. And yet look at the positive side of it. Whatever goes down must come up. That is the feeble hope we exist on, as a society.

But hope does not turn things around. A condition where a former dictator is welcomed into a rightwing alliance because he revives in his lot with it, and then is reviled when he deserts it for a centre-right coalition, offers the perfect explanation of the decline we have gone through.

Suddenly the former military ruler becomes the pivot around which politics revolves. Suddenly, a man who once talked in lewd terms about Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia -- and we speak of Shah Moazzam Hossain -- finds himself feted in the BNP by the Begum. Syeda Razia Faiz, having once deserted the Muslim League to be in Ershad's Jatiyo Party, joins the Shah in joining the Begum, for reasons that remain unconvincing.

And then you go through a tremor of sorts when you spot Anwar Hossain Manju sharing space with the four-party alliance. Politics has no last word about it, as some will tell you. How else can you explain the speed with which a few elements quit the Liberal Democratic Party to form a new faction of it, all with an eye to the loaves and fishes these questionable elections might offer up?

Sheikh Shawkat Hossain Nilu walks out of Ershad's party, hoping to reap his own benefits. He will get nowhere, for Ershad is the Jatiyo Party.

The confusion gets to be knot-

tier. Principles are pushed under the doormat as expediency takes over, turns into a farce, progresses into being a comedy before pushing itself into a state of the tragic. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Moudud Ahmed, having been part of a corrupt, incompetent administration speak in grandiose terms of the inviolability of the constitution.

That sanctified document is nowhere to be spotted as the police herd all those day labourers and dissolute young men, cattle-like with a long rope linking all their thin and thinning hips, into prison. These men say these uniformed men with a straight face and in a clear state of lying, are people who will cause trouble on the days of the blockade. No one tells the police they are humiliating the constitution through misusing that rope.

The constitution, in ways that we did not think were possible, has been made to hang over our heads as a Damocles' sword. Using it as a pretext, businessmen ask for an imposition of a state of emergency.

That would be convenient, for they would then resume making profits even as the rest of us would lose the right to pronounce judgment on the issues.

It is a state of fear that rears its head through the stones and bricks and tear gas shells on the seamy streets. On January 10, 1972, it was not like this. There were dreams forged that day. We did not know that the nightmares, more numerous than the dreams, lay in ambush, waiting to pounce. We know now, with tears streaming down our cheeks.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is former Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

Barrister Zahir's concern.

Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly conspicuous that the BNP leaders are enjoying an unprecedented ruling party such as the advantage in this caretaker tenure. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed's remark to a private TV channel, following Khaleda Zia's latest press conference at the Sheraton hotel, truly reflects the reality. He stated that she still has an air of being the prime minister and this very attitude is an obstacle to holding a free and fair election.

Interestingly enough, the BNP-led alliance is, perhaps, not going to be satisfied with the elections only. Some of its influential leaders are even contemplating on staying in power for quite a long period and if possible, full 5 years tenure after being declared "elected" on January 22. Some leaders also opined that the government elected on January 22 elections would be in a position to solve the contentious issues.

They also alluded to their desire of restarting the old "dialogue game." However, in another private TV channel program, pre-eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain,

too, contented that BNP-led alliance people have still the striking feeling that they are the government.

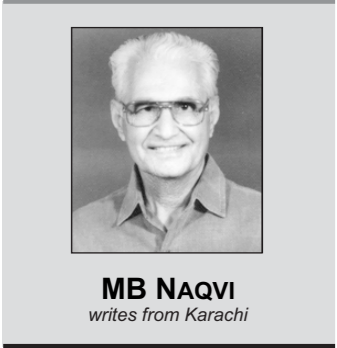
With this vigour in mind they are dreaming of creating a land after their will, not after people's will. He, however, hoped that people assisted by Allah would shatter this design.

In another private TV channel program BGMEA leader Annisul Haq also sought divine help to get out of the quagmire. The reason to mention the comments is not to praise fatalism but to point to the bare fact that all walks of people have turned vulnerable.

I believe the common people wholeheartedly want a participatory, free and fair election for a peaceful future. Fingers are thus solemnly crossed and eyes up to the sky to get the nation freed from the unbearable "might is right" state of affairs.

Kazi SM Khasrul Alam Quddusi is an Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

Terror war is here



PAKISTAN PM Shaukat Aziz returned the other day from Kabul as empty handed as when he went there in the first place. One will not ask who told him to undertake this visit. In the joint press conference President Hamid Karzai employed a diplomacy that reminded one of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's performance in the UN in 1960s. The mutual trading of barbs was unseemly. Had Islamabad done its homework? Karzai could only be echoing the US ambassador and Nato commander there.

Islamabad remains under pressure from Karzai's Afghanistan, Nato-led ISAF forces, and America and Britain. They want Islamabad to fight more resolutely and unreservedly the war on terror.

American and British media have openly criticized Pakistan's conduct in the Federally-

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorism. Americans now define Islamofascism as their enemy. This is a regrettable formulation. The idea is close to "clash of civilizations." Jihadis say it is a war against Islam. This is not true. The Americans had, in fact, funded the same Islamic forces that today confront them. The threat should be seen for what it is. Muslim terrorists attacking western targets mainly hurt Muslim societies of their origin. Islamists' physiognomy should be clearly seen.

Administered Tribal Areas, especially the September 5 settlement with North Waziristan elders. The American government, too, appears to blame Pakistan for aiding the Taliban. After all, the Taliban were Islamabad's protégés.

The Taliban represent a political force that is casting its shadow over much of the sub-continent. They certainly have their admirers in important places in Pakistan, particularly in the leadership of the six religious parties alliance, MMA.

In many parts of tribal territories, especially in North and South Waziristan, in Bajaur and some surrounding districts of the NWFP, the Taliban's influence is widespread. They have started operating as a distinct, virtual state. While Islamabad rules during the day, the Taliban take over during the night. They are able to impose

Even an early withdrawal from Iraq may not be likely. Even the Iraq Study Group's report does not prescribe a quick and unconditional withdrawal. What it suggests is dispersal of the US troops within Iraq for a different mission. Then there are larger questions: having permanent American bases on Iraqi territory, or who would extract the Iraqi oil and export it.

The future Iraqi state's, or successor entity's, ties with Israel is an important consideration. These questions remains to be answered. And it is relevant to know how they will affect Pakistan and the Taliban, respectively.

Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorism. Americans now define Islamo-fascism as their enemy. This is a regrettable formulation. The idea is close to "clash of civilizations." Jihadis say it is a war against Islam. This is not true. The Americans had, in fact, funded the same Islamic forces that today confront them. The threat should be seen for what it is. Muslim terrorists attacking western targets mainly hurt Muslim societies of their origin. Islamists' physiognomy should be clearly seen.

There are at least four Jihadist strands: the first believes in the Islamic State idea as evolved in Pakistan; it aims at a caliphate.

Mullah Omar's administration simply refused.

The Muslim Brotherhood's ideal is the second. Although Egypt does not follow Hanafi Fiqah, the Muslim Brotherhood's ideal runs closely parallel to that of Maulana Maudoodi's. The two have interacted since 1920s. The third school had been little heard of but is now recognized as Salafis and Wahabis of Saudi Arabia.

They are even more austere than other Islamists. They are even more intolerant of minorities, especially Shias, than the Taliban. But their influence is now spreading throughout Arab lands. In practice, there is no serious difference between Sunni concepts of a caliphate.

The fourth is the Shia version. Fortunately, Shia jihadists do not exist because, for them, jihad can only be authorized by an Imam, and the current Imam is not available for consultation. Within Iran, they did establish what is a close parallel to the Sunni Islamic State, with virtually the same characteristics.

Muslim states are mostly underdeveloped and economically backward. They need to free their societies of feudalism's chains and to produce more wealth through development and distribute it equitably.

The Muslims want the same things that other people want

anywhere. They want freedom to move around, to speak their mind, to engage in political activity when they want and, of course, economic opportunity of suitable work. They need education; they need health services; above all they need economic security and equality under rule of law. People now also want social security. These ideas are entirely secular and they can only be met in a simple secular democracy.

Any religion-based state of medieval concepts will be a misfit today, and likely enough it may serve the imperial purposes of this or that industrial power. Common Muslims urgently need to concentrate on specific social, economic and political problems here on this earth. The hereafter can best be pursued by performing the defined rituals and prayers and being good. Does God want Muslims to remain poor, illiterate, and disempowered?

The jihadists' debate about secularism and Islamic idealism is nonsense. It is all about a state. A state is, ipso facto, secular; it is about something that some will do on this earth. What people can do is a secular reality. A caliph has to be enthroned by jihadists. That will be a political act of the people, and the end result will also be a secular entity.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.