

ID cards and voters' list

Looking at the technicalities

A couple of advisers in the caretaker government have let it be known that the preparation of ID cards as part of the electoral process could take a long time. That may be understandable, up to a point. What matters now is how soon, or if at all, the nation's voters can be provided with ID cards before the forthcoming general elections.

There are quite a few concerns that arise here. There is, for starters, the thought of the overall IT strength, indeed the human resources, the authorities can draw on as they plan to produce the cards. It then follows that the caretaker government as also the country must be satisfied that we have the requisite technical ability to follow through on the plan. What happens if there is an inadequacy where such ability is concerned?

One of the most significant aspects of the projected ID card issue relates to the costs such a move will entail. The caretaker administration as well as the Election Commission ought to be able to let the country in on the details here. Obviously, the expenses involved in a preparation of ID cards must cover the wider issue of whether we have the requisite technical know-how to take IT facilities to voters across the country, which fundamentally means the rural regions.

It will be futile to begin an ID card program and then have to abandon it in the face of poor planning. The fact that there are as many as nine crore voters in the country cannot be obscured. The question, therefore, is whether IT methods as they operate at present are capable of ensuring an ID card for each one of these voters. Since the provision of ID cards naturally includes photographs, the authorities would be well-advised to satisfy themselves that the images of all voters can be obtained in the time they have before them, meaning before they can organize the elections.

Now, the matter of ID cards notwithstanding, there remains the perennial issue of a proper, foolproof voters' list. Yet here too our experience has been rather upsetting given that there are now three voters' lists we must contend with. Which one of these can the country make use of? One perhaps knows the answer to that question already. The likelihood is that we will need to go into the business of a voters' list all over again if we mean to have a credible election. That will, as in the matter of ID cards, require time. And since they will, it would only be proper that the caretaker authorities call in experts to determine the time needed to go through such an exercise.

Once that is done, let the matter be placed before the political parties. In the final reckoning, it is on how long they can wait before the polls take place that everything depends. Let, therefore, a clear view emerge from the corridors of government in this regard.

New leaf in Nepal's history

A vibrant journey towards democracy

A new chapter has commenced in the Himalayan kingdom's long and chequered history. Not only has a new interim constitution been approved by the house to pave the way for a future republican government in Nepal, it has opened the way for accommodating an outlawed group that till nine months ago was fighting the Nepalese government to establish a socialist system in the country.

The Maoists had been fighting the centre since 1996, the conflict costing close to 13,000 lives. And they may soon be a part of the interim government. As Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala told parliament, it was indeed a day of reconciliation among all the political parties and the people.

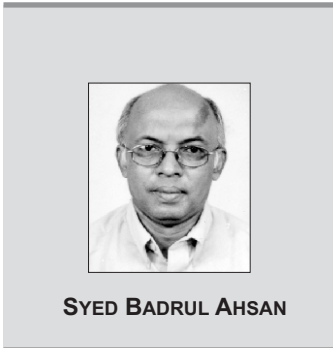
What attracts one's attention in the new dispensation in Nepal is that not only have the rebels join the parliament, some marginalised groups and civil society activists are also to become members of the parliament as a part of the Maoist share of parliament seats.

Situation in Nepal has moved quickly since the king was stripped of his powers early last year. And we cannot help but suggest that the political developments in Nepal in the last twelve months have some relevance to us in Bangladesh. We cannot but notice the sense of compromise that was displayed by both the 7-party alliance and the Maoists after having joined the common cause of overthrowing the government of King Ganyendra.

The give and take attitude and the positive psyche of the parties to relent from stated positions for the sake of peace and future of the country have helped Nepal to transit from a very volatile situation of a year ago to an environment shorn of conflict and discord.

There is still some way to go before election is held and a new constitution is drawn up, but we wish the people of Nepal well in their march towards democracy, development and peace.

All the wrongs that need to be righted



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

PUTTING ANH Akhtar Hossain back to his old position is good news. Putting him in his place is better news. No, we do not gloat over the fact that an individual has had the unenviable experience of being embarrassed by the authorities. But we do take immense pleasure in acknowledging the righting of a wrong, a wrong that ought not to have been committed in the first place.

When we remember the gentle bitterness with which Anwarul Kabir Talukdar spoke, not long ago, of the infractions and the lapses at the ministry he headed briefly before making his way out of office, we know that justice, even fractionally, has at last been done.

Of course, there is the right of every individual to move up in life, in his career. But there is, too, a very necessary accompaniment that must come with the exercise of such rights. Those rights, all rights, must be deserved.

ANH Akhtar Hossain has not been able to convince the country that he deserved to be placed where he was by people who simply had little, or a convoluted, notion of how civil administration functioned. It is, we will say once more, good that a manifest wrong

GROUND REALITIES

It all comes down to a question of right and wrong. The surveillance that a particular set of politicians has been placed under ought to be followed by foolproof inquiry into their coming by windfalls in the last few years. There are the rags to dubious riches stories that call for exposure. Let the exposing be done, without mercy and without relent

has been set aside.

But that, you might be inclined to pipe in, is a mere piece of all the action that remains to be taken in so very many areas. And you would be right to think so, for there are around you and me all those bits and chunks of darkness we will surely be expected to scythe through if we mean to restore morality and good government in this agonized country.

Let the mind wander to thoughts of education, of how mercenary intentions have lately been coming into a system upon which the long-term welfare of the nation depends.

When the authorities of Motijheel Ideal School decided, arbitrarily and without any reasonable shadow of logic, to enhance admission fees for children from around eighteen hundred taka to more than six thousand, they created the perfect conditions once more for all of us to raise all those old questions about the abominable state of our academia.

You look around for explanations for such behaviour; and when you do not come by those explanations the only conclusion you can draw is that we have all fallen on bad days. But that would be a terribly short-circuited way of observing these social conditions we go through. A better understanding of circumstances would

be to remind ourselves that, as a nation, we are in a pit. And we are still plunging.

That, however, is not the way the authorities of Ideal School would define the situation. The headmistress has already been riled by the protests of the guardians. She does not see the point, which is that a very large number of guardians who would like to place their children in her school may be earning in a whole month what she demands for the admission of a single child to her institution.

There is a malady abroad in the land. In these past many years, spots and dashes of the dark, if not exactly evil, have wormed their way into our sensibilities, enough to make us immune to all the corruption we once thought would never be part of our political and social landscape. It is this imperviousness to the bad and the dark and, therefore, the ethically unacceptable that now gnaws away inside us. Our immunity to assaults on our sensibilities has now come to a pass where putatively respectable men indulge in questionable deeds with impunity, and then expect to get away with those deeds. Or is misdeeds the right word here? But let that be.

What cannot be permitted to go unquestioned, though, is that deeply disturbing matter of why

three photojournalists were detained by the authorities of Bangladesh Open University, without so much as fear of the law coming into the hearts of those who made that reprehensible move.

You expect idealism to come forth from academics. You expect them to keep you informed of all the good that can come through keeping the environment safe, through making the trees around us secure from the predatory instincts of men.

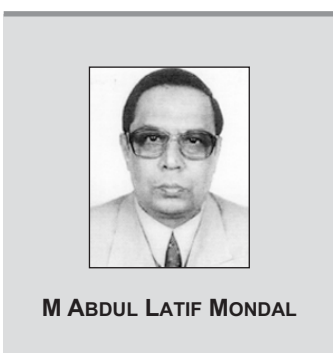
But when your teachers turn predators, when it is the trees on the campus of Bangladesh Open University that become the target of collective greed, you cannot but marvel at the quality of duplicity that underpins the times you inhabit.

And yet a shrugging acceptance of conditions as they are will not do. That is because it is the innards of our society, which are, today, in bad shape.

It is a state that can be neutralized through penalizing transgressors of the law, beginning certainly with the serving, terminated and supernannuated bureaucrats who came together not long ago in the conspiratorial hours of the night in Uttara.

The inquiry into such an instance of badness ought to have produced good results. It did not, for there were those who simply

Fertilizer and diesel crisis brewing



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

FOR nearly two weeks, shortage in supply of fertilizers and diesel in the country, particularly in the northern and western districts, has been in the news. The Daily Star's reports (January 9 and 13) have described how the short supply of diesel and fertilizers, in particular, urea, has already affected vegetable cultivation and is going to hamper boro cultivation in 16 northern districts, commonly known as the granary of the country.

The daily Ittefaq's report (January 13) shows how short supply of diesel and fertilizers are going to adversely affect boro cultivation in the western districts. The New Nation of January 13 shows how fuel and fertilizer crisis may hit boro cultivation in the northern region of the country.

The Financial Express of January 10 has written that growers in northern districts are now facing an acute shortage of urea fertilizer and diesel during this peak

BARE FACTS

This year's aus production has failed to achieve the target. There are all indications that aman production will also not meet the target. The main thrust should be on the next boro crop. All possible facilities and assistance must be rendered to farmers to attain a production level that will surpass all other previous records of boro production in the country.

plantation season of boro crop. Reference may be made to more such reports from the print media.

Rice is the staple food of Bangladesh, providing about 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake, and about 75 percent of the calories in our diet. It is a fact that food grain (rice and wheat) production has been more than doubled since independence in 1971.

The sustained efforts by the successive governments had a salutary effect on the production of food grains that reached 26.75 million metric tons (mmt) in 2000-2001, which was till then the highest production of food grains in the country.

But the increasing trend of production of food grains could not be sustained. Food ministry sources reveal that in 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, production of food grains stood at 25.90 mmt, 26.69 mmt, 27.44 mmt, 26.13 mmt, and 27.59 mmt against population of 131 million, 133 million, 135 million, 137 million, and 139 million, respectively.

This shows that food grain production could not keep pace with the annual population growth rate.

Among the three major rice crops aus, aman, and boro, aman continued to top the list until 1997-98. Available statistics show that in 1998-99, aman was replaced by boro as the highest producing rice. Since then, boro has continued to top the list.

For instance, in the FY1997-98, aman production stood at 8.85 mmt while boro production was 8.14 mmt. In the FY 2002-03, boro production stood at 12.22 mmt while aman production was 11.12 mmt. In the last FY (2005-06), boro production was 13.98 mmt while aman production stood at 10.81 mmt.

It is also to be noted in this connection that more areas have been brought under boro cultivation while the areas under aman cultivation have remained more or less the same.

Boro rice cultivation has got both advantages and disadvantages.

Important advantages of boro rice cultivation are: first, yields of high-yielding variety (HYV) boro yield is higher than yields of other types of rice; second, boro crop is normally resistant to natural disaster; and third, there is no overlapping with any other major crop.

But the problems that the farmers frequently face are short supply of fertilizer and diesel, and non-availability of electricity during boro season. We are aware of the fertilizer crisis in 1995, as well as of the diesel, fertilizer and electricity crisis during the boro season of 2006. We have even seen the killing of farmers when they demanded electricity to irrigate their boro crop.

While aman, the next important rice crop, requires little irrigation since it is typically grown, in the most part, when the monsoon is in full swing, boro rice is grown completely under the irrigated ecosystem during the dry period.

The scarcity of diesel and fertilizer, and their high prices, make rice production in general and boro production in particular, costly. The

and deliberately went into deception through coiling the issue around other, clearly inane issues.

The men who ran the cameras, and from the intelligence people, that night had an awfully big truth about themselves to conceal. Their benefactors did make sure the concealment came in, slapped in concrete.

But it does not have to be that way, for these men, ranging from car-owning and apartment-buying assistant secretaries to high flying secretaries, are elements whose deliberate violation of service rules ought to be enough to bring them into interrogation rooms.

There must be some good men and some good women bold enough to look evil in the eye and shoot those darts right into the center of that shameless stare.

Which now brings us to that small matter of what we must do about the Election Commission. Justice Mahfuzur Rahman and his friends (and that includes the leave-spending Justice Aziz and SM Zakaria), having been part of a sordid plan to put the country through grinding pain for months on end, should now be asked to take the road to retirement and necessary inactivity.

But let that not be a wiping off of the uncomfortable sparks the Election Commission has set off, one after another, in these past many months. The degree of intransigence of those who have kept the commission in their grip, the incalculable and unimaginable financial sins committed in the name of producing voters' lists that deliberately papered over political realities in a safeguarding of vested interests, et al, are acts that call for full-scale inquiry for overall public interest.

result has been high prices of all varieties of rice even during harvesting seasons, which seriously affects the poor and the lower middle class in particular, as 50 percent or so of their earnings is spent on procuring rice.

Production target of food grains in FY 2006-07 has been set at 32.98 mmt (aus:2.22 mmt, aman:13.18 mmt and boro:16.74 mmt and wheat 0.83 mmt), about 21 percent higher than last year's actual production.

The first rice crop of the FY 2006-07, aus has already been harvested. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), this year's aus production was 1.51 mmt, about 13 percent less than last year (1.75 mmt).

Harvesting of aman for the FY 2006-07 is going on. Available information suggests that there will be shortfall in achieving the aman production target of 13.18 mmt. Maximum production may reach 12 mmt.

Here lies the importance of not only achieving the boro production target for this year, but also of exceeding the production target if possible.

Although the incumbent caretaker government (CTG) will remain busy with the holding of the 9th election to parliament peacefully, fairly and impartially, yet it has to give utmost attention to avoiding any crisis in the availability of fertilizer, diesel and electricity to farmers for making boro cultivation

By all means, see these gentlemen out but, at the same time, make sure that they answer to the country for all the wrong things they have done, and for all the right things they have not done, during their time at the Election Commission.

It all comes down to a question of right and wrong. The surveillance that a particular set of politicians has been placed under ought to be followed by foolproof inquiry into their coming by windfalls in the last few years.

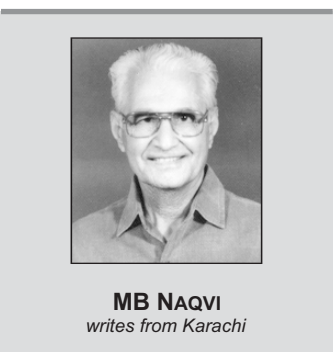
There are the rags to dubious riches stories that call for exposure. Let the exposing be done, without mercy and without relent. There is the mediocrity, which leaped ahead of excellence, and so speared our notions of justice and fair play.

It is here that the balance requires to be restored. In politics, the profitable trade that has come into awarding of parliamentary nominations is in urgent need of uprooting, for if it persists it will be all the bank-loan defaulters, all the gun-running elements, indeed all men and women experienced in living life on corruption who will snatch our dreams and our poetry right out of our hands.

A nation that builds dreams in rainbow colours cannot be expected to plod endlessly through a ubiquity of nightmares. Ironically, though, our nightmares have always lengthened, and our paths have always disappeared into a region of darkness that did not have to be.

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Genie out of the bottle



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PRESIDENT Pervez Musharraf, in a recent speech, has heavily underlined the problem of sectarian strife in the Islamic world. He said that a catastrophe stares the Islamic world in the face. There is no doubt about the gravity of the current situation. Something obviously has to be done.

The threat of widening of the sectarian divide is a product of the Iraq war. More by design than by default, the Iraqi state is well on its way to destruction. The world is witnessing that process unfold. Three separate states might eventually emerge as independent entities. It is said that it may happen by default. But this is hard to understand.

America is chockfull of area

PLAIN WORDS

Earlier the Sunnis subordinated the Shias, and now the Shias will try to do the same. This is unwise. Let both live in a modern secular state and have equal rights enforced by rule of law. This is a master solution that can be relied upon. This is the only way to unite all Muslims everywhere. There is no other basis on which Muslims can be united, and live peacefully in a common state where different ethnicities and sects have to live together.

experts on Middle East. They should have known that Iraq was clumsily put together in the early 1920s by lumping together three separate Vilayats of the Ottoman empire.

Each of these Vilayats was a separate ethnic entity, viz. Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the middle and west, and Shias in the south. After the First World War, the Sunnis have been dominant and they had kept down both the Kurds and Shias -- actually a pre-Iraq legacy.

Indeed, Shias outside Iran were at the bottom of the heap for historical reasons. That is how history happened.

The problem today is that the reaction to the American invasion resulted in the creation of a resistance.

Originally, the Sunni and Shia

militias worked together, particularly Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdi army. They all hated the American invasion. Then, by subterfuge and much international intrigue, al-Qaeda was inexplicably allowed to enter the fray, and they, more or less, took over the resistance.

They converted the purely nationalistic resistance into a Shia-Sunni conflict by attacking venerated Shia shrines. As it happened, historically the Americans had won the confidence of Shias as well as Kurds with marriages of convenience on both sides, and these survive. Americans are still well-placed with these two communities.

The largely Shia government in Baghdad is an American creation that represents a convergence between the Shias and the

Americans, parallel with the American-Kurd understanding.

How the Sunni resistance, surprisingly quickly, came under the leadership of what is being called al-Qaeda is not at all clear. This al-Qaeda seems to have limitless money, limitless equipment, explosives, and men.

The logistics of al-Qaeda's war against the Americans and Shias has not been investigated with the customary thoroughness by American and western experts. This fact seems to have much significance.

Controlling the consequences of the Shia-Sunni conflict is sure to be very hard. This conflict was greatly facilitated by the simple American device of talking in terms of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds

as entities to be satisfied.

Recognizing them as separate entities, and dealing with them separately, helped these entities become modern communalisms, which has re-ignited the historical hatred among the three communities.

Musharraf has urged the Pakistanis to provide what is, in fact, a leadership role for the Islamic world by being moderate and democratic, and by electing the kind of persons that President Musharraf likes.

This self-serving device of talking about a major issue that is worrying the people, and slipping in the question of consolidating his own power is a tale to the marines. Couldn't Pakistan's foreign service have perceived that no Arab recognizes the right of any non-Arab to talk about Islam, much less to lead the Arab world?

They think that Islam and the Arabic language are inextricable, and non-Arabic-speaking people can only be second rate Muslims. Pakistan has tried since the 1950s to assume the leadership of the Islamic world, and has repeatedly been rebuffed -- and ridiculed.

Remember King Farook's biting remark that Islam was born on August 14, 1947. It is about time that Pakistanis gave up day-

dreaming.

Anyhow, the problem needs to be analyzed. There have been historic wrongs suffered by one or the other community, particularly by the Shias who were at the bottom of the heap in Iraq and in various other states including Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

They are now beginning to think of acquiring power for themselves in the name of democracy. Preaching to the Islamic world that division and internal strife will hurt everyone is useless. No one listens to sentimental lectures from Pakistanis. Indeed they laugh at the Pakistani's naivete.

The fact of the matter is that a sound and generally acceptable principle has to be employed to work out new solutions to old problems. The only principle that rises above communalisms and separate ethnic distinctions is the right of self-determination, rule of law, and equal human rights for all.

That is to say, employing democratic norms, no one is superior and no one is inferior. All historic wrongs can only be corrected by democratic principles. This can, and will, be the solution to the age-old problem between the Sunnis and Shias in Iraq.

Earlier the Sunnis subordinated the Shias, and now the Shias will try

to do the same. This is unwise. Let both live in a modern secular state and have equal rights enforced by rule of law. This is a master solution that can be relied upon. This is the only way to unite all Muslims everywhere. There is no other basis on which Muslims can be united, and live peacefully in a common state where different ethnicities and sects have to live together.

It can be said that the bullet has already been fired; the genie is out of the bottle. The civil war in Iraq is indubitably gaining momentum. This means that Iraq will have to be divided, and three separate states would probably emerge, just as the invaders had meant to do, to start with.

If Iraq cannot be kept united, let the rest of the Islamic world come together and lay down the principles that all should follow; one's recommendation has already been given. It is still possible that Iraq can become a loose federation or, the same thing, a confederation.

But that is contingent on democratic principles being employed by all, and full and equal rights have to be given to all sections of the population. This would take a lot of doing.

But Iraq was, after all, a secular society, and this virus of clashing

Shia-Sunni communalism has recently been injected from outside. There is still a faint hope. But the rest of the world has to be prepared for a three-state solution of the Iraq problem in the short run.

What will happen in the long run depends, of course, on what the Americans and the major powers will do, and how the local population will react. The dynamics that will determine the shape of the Middle East will necessarily be complex.

Pan-Islamists, without keeping democratic precepts center-stage, only make things worse by needless sentimental preaching and meddling. They should think hard and arrive at fair solutions that the rest of the world can accept.

We must somehow get out of the habit of thinking that we Pakistanis have a God-given function to preach to the rest of the Islamic world. It is late in the day, but still a conference on the Middle East, either among non-Arab or Arab states, can hope to bring the Muslims together and possibly sort out some of the problems.

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