

Action against criminals

Due process of law must be upheld

NO fewer than 12,000 people have been rounded up by the security forces in the past week. From the perspective of law and order, the action is certainly understandable, given especially the prevailing election-related situation in the country. At the same time, though, it is our feeling that the operations now being undertaken ought to be based on the specific goal of creating a long-term social ambience of peace and normality. We are constrained to make such a point here owing to the experience we have had in the past. Every time a general election has come round, the law enforcers have gone after criminal elements and illegally held weapons with a bang. At the end of it all, there was just a whimper that was heard. For obvious reasons, therefore, we would not want the old experience to extend itself into the present. Briefly, we as citizens would like to see some real, true action on the ground without the unsettling feeling that all such operations may turn out to be ephemeral.

The matter of specific goals coming into the present law and order operations basically means a need for the security forces to focus attention on individuals with specific cases against them. We would like to believe that those who have so far been netted by the law enforcers are truly accused of criminality. But there is always that rather disturbing question of how many innocent people may have been pulled in along with the bad ones. The point, as such, ought to be clear: the act of detaining people must not ignore the fundamental tenets of due process of law. Where such a process is not upheld, there is the clear risk of a whole swathe of people being subjected to harassment through action that is patently arbitrary. While we realise that the army has been given sweeping powers of arrest, we do note that even such powers must have the line drawn somewhere. That somewhere is a respect for the right of every individual taken into custody to be protected from maltreatment and for his family to be kept aware of his whereabouts. Action geared to an upholding of the law cannot come through a flouting of certain provisions of the law.

There is one last point we would like to make here. In all the operations being carried out to nab criminal and allegedly criminal elements, it is important that the law enforcers resist the temptation of being discriminatory or selective about the people they mean to haul in. That being the premise, a very useful purpose will be served if strenuous efforts are expended towards taking the godfathers of crime into custody, above and beyond a mere nabbing of their followers.

Formalin in edibles

Perpetrators should be punished

FOR quite sometime we have been hearing about the use of a highly hazardous chemical like formalin by unscrupulous traders in fish and fruits to make them look fresh. Although there is no proof of extensive use of the material in fruits, the use of the chemical in fish has been confirmed by Prof A B M Faroque of the Department of Pharmacy at the University of Dhaka, who in his year-long research of samples collected from several markets of the city, has found the presence of formalin and artificial colours.

So dangerous is the chemical that even its indirect consumption has the potential of causing extreme irritation in the consumer's digestive tract leading to peptic ulcer. It can even cause cancer.

Formalin is generally imported from Italy and China for use in our plastic and tannery industries. The chemical has now made inroads into the hands of traders at the kitchen market. So there is the great need for surveillance over the sale of hazardous chemicals in the market and their end-use.

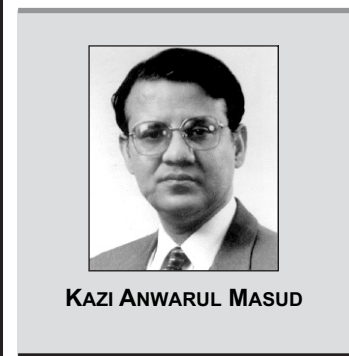
Fish are consumed by all classes of people in the country. It has been on the daily diet of consumers as an obvious source of protein. But they are ingesting poison in the name of protein.

Let the unscrupulous traders be marked as foes of the people. We need to take them to the court. Let no one guilty of the offence escape the wrath of justice on any pretext whatsoever. But for all these to happen, there is the pressing need for enacting a consumer rights protection law.

For all we know, Dhaka can be reached from the farthest corner of Bangladesh in five to six hours, thanks to good road network, so that the use of the chemical to prevent fish going stale is only a commercial ruse.

Let market surveillance teams be formed equipped with identification kits to detect the presence of the chemicals in edibles. Those who revel in making money at the peril of human lives cannot go unpunished.

Satanic Verses and Bangladesh



ONE wonders whether the violent Iranian reaction to Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses was a precursor to 9/11 as a defense to the latent fear of the Islamists over the blanketing influence of Western culture that the most conservative elements among the Muslims consider as degenerate.

Though it may sound heretic, surprisingly despite strict code of conduct prescribed for the males for aberrant sexual behavior, "honor killing" is far more prevalent regarding character misdeemeanor of the females than indiscretion by the males.

In other words females have to be held and protected like Dresden china because of her alleged fragility under strict supervision of the male members of the family till the husband and his family take over the responsibility.

A glimpse into traditional sub-

GOING DEEPER

One may argue that the suicide thrust upon Socrates and the denial that earth was round at the behest of the powerful theocracy would have left the world less enlightened, and therefore, dissociation from the norm is sometimes not only beneficial but also necessary. Culturally, modernity has given us freedom from tradition in the form of individuality, freedom from primordial loyalties which tribalism demands, and hence the freedom to chose one's partner in life.

continental society would portray that in the olden days the elder female members were no less enthusiastic in their strict supervision of the young lest they bring shame to the family's honor by being "bold" which in today's world would be considered as common behavior.

After the world has been blessed with modernity and hordes of Third World immigrants have crossed their shores for foreign lands for economic and intellectual betterment, the women from these far away lands feel wearing of a veil as contrary to traditional mode of behavior in the "land of the unfaith" where the Muslims have chosen to live.

Yet the likes of Gordon Brown and Jack Straw have drawn so much vitriolic criticism for their "unseemly" comments about Muslim women in Britain wearing

veils.

Even if one were to accept the wearing of veils as a part of freedom of religion and freedom of practicing one's own culture, undeniably the French decision prohibiting ostentatious display of religious symbols appear to be eminently logical and less threatening to the mainstream western culture.

Whether such ban goes against the grain of religious teachings remains debatable. But there is no doubt that societal accommodation with tradition and with the norms that go with daily life of the majority people in any society is less revolutionary and less convulsive.

Being different is not necessarily creditable. Instead of making waves it is generally advisable to go along with others.

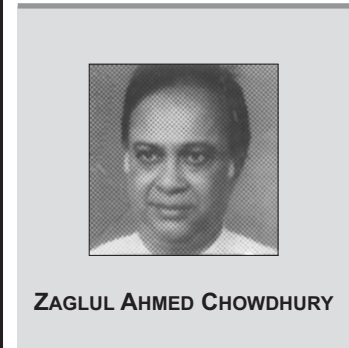
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Eastern societies being steeped in communitarian values where community's needs are given priority over individual choice, so Asia being wrongly awarded the sobriquet of Antarctica of Freedom, the enslavement of females in varying degrees, both through denial of political rights and routine physical and mental torture inflicted upon them, is easily accepted by the

Nepal moves further in a positive direction



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

The developments have raised hopes for permanent peace in the Himalayan land locked country, which not long ago experienced the twin problems of struggle for restoration of democracy and leftist insurgency. Democracy has been restored mid last year following a bloody and intense agitation that saw the capitulation of the King Gyanendra to peoples demand.

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Now, another glorious chapter is being added to the history of the picturesque Nepal as the government and the "Maoist" has vowed to make every effort to turn their country into a land of peace and harmony, ending violence and instability in the poverty-ridden nation.

Prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala and radical leftist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as "Prachanda" signed a landmark peace accord recently and now they are following it up with other positive steps.

The Government-Maoist peace deal sometime ago was made possible after long and difficult talks belying skepticisms in certain quarters whether the two sides would eventually be able to ink the deal despite enough progress made earlier towards this direction.

Certain sensitive issues hindered the process of the signing the deal, but the government and the rebels lived upto the expectations of their countrymen and well-

wishers outside. This was a great day for Nepal when two sides inked he accord amidst tremendous national rejoicing.

Efforts for such an understanding between the two sides earlier seemed to have hit snags with fresh fears that they may fall apart on certain crucial issues governing the pattern of rule for the nation and mechanism about the coming national elections.

But they admirably demonstrated remarkable unity in the anti-King pro-democracy agitation despite their differences on some matters. The King surrendered to pro-democracy mass agitation earlier, but the sensitive relationship between the government and the Maoists remained a matter of concern for many.

But things have changed for the betterment. The Maoist, under the deal, has joined the present interim government and has mingled in the conventional politics. The pact provides that the Maoists will place their weapons under UN supervision.

The status of the arms of he Maoists is a complex issue since they are not willing to give up the weapons hat they collected and gathered obviously with much effort during the long insurgency. The problem has been resolved by involving the UN.

Another desirable but difficult

matter awaits as two sides are now working for a new constitution and elections for a constituent assembly to draft the constitution for the country will be held by mid this year.

This decision met another key demands of the ultra leftists, who want abolition of monarchy in any form in Nepal. The present parliament, which was scrapped by King Gyanendra in February 2005, was restored following people's movement spearheaded by both political parties and the Maoists.

Despite differences, two sides joined hands in the anti-King movement that led to capitulation of King Gyanendra. But fears persisted on how the new democratic government and the Maoists would bury their major differences, but this has also been largely allayed.

Notwithstanding the narrowing down of differences on a variety of issues, two crucially important subjects like the fate of the arms now in possession of the rebels and the future of the monarchy were defying total understanding between two sides.

Obviously, the government wants to continue with the Westminster system of democracy while the Maoists in principle believe in the one-party communist system, which, however, is not a bone of contention at the

people in the east.

One would, however, be surprised at the extent of domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment that take place in the west as well. It is believed that some religious edicts, followed in the east without any question, permit physical chastisement of women believed to have gone astray.

The irony of implementation of punishment meted out to these unfortunate women is generally done through fatwa (religious edict) by semi-literate Maulanas or Imams of mosques (village religious leaders) who often do the bidding of the village landlords at save the real culprits to the expense of the victims.

This automatically brings up the question of women empowerment. India reportedly has reserved seats for women at different tiers of political institutions and in government service. The composition of the delegation representing Maoists in Nepal and the seats given to women in the interim Parliament is revolutionary in Nepalese context.

In Bangladesh too seats in Parliament (though the process of their election is subject to controversy) and women quota in government jobs are notable. Yet these achievements and more would be at stake if the Islamists are given representation in

moment. But the ultimate shape of the monarchy is certainly at the heart of the differences.

The prime minister and some parties in the present seven-party alliance coalition favor continuation of monarchy without any executive power, but the ultras are against it wanted to turn the country as Republic.

They even want trial of King Gyanendra for what they say amassing wealth in the poverty-ridden country and atrocities committed during the pro-democracy movement.

The government has stripped the King of key powers including control over the armed forces, automatic accession to the throne on family lines and limiting their properties. But favors the continuation of the throne in line with Britain, Japan or Thailand.

The Nepalese throne has been badly bruised by the present King by his absolute power and atrocities to crush the movement seeking democracy. The people of the country seem divided on the fate of monarchy while an effective monarchy is simply out of question.

But this has rightly been kept in the backburner so that this thorny issue does not hamper other positive developments.

The contentious issue that had appears to defy an understanding was the status of the arms that are in possession of the Maoist cadres. The government wants them to disarm, but "Prachanda" is not ready to give up the arms so easily.

After all, they were able to develop a more than 30,000-strong force in ten years and are unwilling to deposit arms to the government. The issue assumed significance and complexity as the elections are drawing nearer.

But now two sides have reached

Parliament through the next election totally disproportionate to the votes they get nationally only because of their alliance with major political parties (Jamaat-e-Islami got 4% in 1986; 12.13% in 1991; 8.61% in 1996; and 4.29% in 2001 elections to the Parliament).

Despite getting less than 5% of votes cast Jamaat got 17 seats in Parliament in 2001 elections because of being a member of four party alliance. On the other hand Awami League got 40.21% of the votes cast in 2001 elections (highest percentage among all parties) and got 62 seats in Parliament.

The point made here is simply this: any alliance with Islamists will only increase their influence disproportionate to their support from the voters and will ultimately lead to "one man-one vote-one time" formula Islamists are said to favor globally.

Most Bangladeshis are devout Muslims and will vote for secularism (not atheism) as the voters have demonstrated time and again. Wearing veils should not be our aim.

National prosperity translated in improved standard of living should be our priority. We have to fix our priorities before the world passes us by.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is former Secretary and Ambassador.

Dialogue of the deaf

The primary task of the caretaker government is to hold a free, fair and impartial election. But for purposes of social cohesion and harmony the caretaker government may extend its agenda beyond election to wide ranging long delayed and sorely needed social reforms of far reaching consequence to elect honest and competent candidates in the Parliament for the good and welfare of people and society. Such a perception will change the style and substance of the caretaker government.

ABDUL HANNAN

ONCE again there is the talk of dialogue with two major political parties with a cluster of proposals by the caretaker government. If the past experience were any lesson, the renewal of talks for consensus would be a disconnected and desultory dialogue of the deaf.

It would be a mixture like before, a self-defeating purpose, a cry in the wilderness, a wild goose chase and a futile quest of the illusory Holy Grail. People do not want to see the miserable performance of the honorable advisers being abused again as errand couriers slide back and forth to two feuding major political parties running amuck to grab the spoils of election victory by any means.

It would be good to remember that an election is only part of collec-

tive responsibility of the advisers. Their most important job is to run the current administration of ministries and department assigned to them.

Besides, the contending political parties by their stubborn attitude and arrogant rejection of overtures by advisers have forfeited the right of being consulted by the caretaker government.

The new caretaker government has taken charge of authority under extra ordinary circumstances of grave national crisis teetering on the brink of catastrophic civil war, violence and bloodshed. The situation calls for crisis management by unilateral dispensations beyond ordinary political approaches.

The advisers need to concentrate on their ministerial responsibility and leave comments on any development. Or leave decisions on election matters to a spokesman or press officer in the office of the chief

adviser of the caretaker government in order to avoid sending conflicting messages and working at cross-purposes.

A designated media center for press briefing in the office of the chief advisers would be most appropriate and decent so the media persons do not have to chase and hunt down advisers on the street outside the gate of the office of the chief adviser of the caretaker government.

It is now over a week since the chief advisor has assumed office and it is time he addressed the nation or a press conference to spell out his future course of action program.

This is the defining moment for the newly constituted caretaker government to face up to its challenge and opportunities by taking charge of the driving seat. They should firmly take decisions deemed appropriate in the best national

interest in order to be able to accomplish its assigned task of holding a free, fair and impartial election as soon as possible.

Much of the success of the new caretaker government rests on the leadership performance of chief adviser Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed. People expect that he should exercise extreme care, caution and discretion and demonstrate his honesty of purpose in discharging his responsibility.

A section of the press has already called into question the manner in which he assembled his council of advisers. However, he deserves the benefit of doubt as an honest broker.

People have great expectation from the new caretaker government.

Unlike the previous ineffectual and failed caretaker government headed by self appointed and much derided Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, the new caretaker government, strengthened by a state of emergency and undeniably backed by patriotic Armed Forces who showed remarkable restraint and resolve, has the distinct privilege of enjoying the legitimacy of overwhelming support. They have the goodwill of the people, the civil society, businessman and the international community.

Now there is no scope for ambivalence or to dither and falter. The caretaker government must prove that it has no axe to grind, no political tight rope to walk and no broad appeal to seek.

The valedictory speech of Professor Iajuddin forced down his throat on January 11 announcing his tragic abdication of power as a chief adviser of the caretaker government clearly spelled out for the benefit the new caretaker government problems that need to be addressed in order to create conditions for holding a free, fair and acceptable election.

The problems enumerated by him are preparation of a correct voter list and voters identity card and transparent ballot box, limitless corruption and politicized police, bureaucracy and higher courts of judiciary.

All the new caretaker government needs to do is prepare an action program to urgently come to grips with the problems with courage and determination to bring about the needed reforms.

The top priority task of the new caretaker government is the reconstitution of Election Commission, which has lost all its credibility and trust. No reform of the election commission is possible under the

existing suspect commissioners who should be requested politely but unequivocally to resign in national interest, theirs constitutional invulnerability notwithstanding.

What we need urgently is the appointment of a tough and taciturn chief election commissioner with character and integrity beyond reproach and a track record of unblemished administrative experience and knowledge.

When India with population of 1.1 billion of diverse language and religion, race and cast can do with one chief election commissioner assisted by another commissioner, we certainly can do without the epidemic rise of six election commissioners.

If the right and correct person is chosen, all concerns regarding correct voter list, introduction of voters identity cards, transparent ballot boxes, cleaning of politicized administration relevant to election, recovery of unauthorized possession of arms and eligibility of candidates for election by providing reports of their assets and election expenses and educational qualification will be automatically taken care of.

Normally, the primary task of the caretaker government is to hold a free, fair and impartial election. But

for purposes of social cohesion and harmony the caretaker government may extend its agenda beyond election to wide ranging long delayed and sorely needed social reforms of far reaching consequence to elect honest and competent candidates in the Parliament for the good and welfare of people and society.

Such a perception will change the style and substance of the caretaker government. One such pressing agenda is the eradication of all encompassing sleaze, graft and corruption from the society by punishing hoarders of black money and bank defaulters.

The instrument to achieve this goal is to reconstitute, root and branch, the so-called independent Anti Corruption Commission, which regrettably was allowed to remain completely dysfunctional and paralyzed since its inception three years ago.

The other problem that needs to be addressed is the eradication of subversive activities of Islamic extremists in Bangladesh. It is common knowledge that all the governments without exception over the last three decade since 1975 have vied with each other to pander and patronize the rise of political

Islam. This naturally proliferating growth of Madrasas, not out of love for Islam, but for political expedience to reap dividends by way of electoral support from the simple unsuspecting Muslim believers.

Slowly and imperceptibly the result today is the threat to future stability, growth and development of the country by Islamic militants tolerated or ignored by the government as a policy of appeasement to its Islamic coalition partners in the government.

The caretaker government will make contribution of lasting significance if they can bring down these elements with a heavy hand to wipe them out once and for all by exemplary punishment.

Given strong will and conviction, the objectives can be achieved. The effort of the caretaker government to separate the judiciary from the executive has already been crowned with a spectacular success. If it can achieve the rest of objectives, the devious, dissembling and plundering culture of politics, abhorrent of defeat in election in our country, it will yield to what is right, decent, dignified, just and honorable.

Abdul Hannan is a former press counselor in Bangladesh UN mission in New York.