

Political parties and CA's address

Yes to early election, but it must be free, fair and credible

THE reactions of the major political parties or alliances to the recent address of the Chief Advisor are, in our view, positive. Both the fourteen-party alliance and the four-party combine have expressed the hope that the elections will be held as early as possible. That hope is also entertained by the country at large. Moreover, the Chief Advisor has himself promised the country that the elections will be held at the earliest possible time. It is thus interesting and surely encouraging that there is now a consensus about the need for early elections.

We would like to make it clear that we share the sentiments of the political alliances about the elections. More importantly, we understand the compulsions on which they have based those sentiments. Since the goal of a political party is an attainment of power, it is only natural that the political classes will emphasise an early return to a democratic political process. However, as we at this newspaper have regularly stressed, there should be a road map to elections that must be followed in order for a credible voting to take place. We have said so earlier and we will say again that a necessary first step towards the elections is a cleansing of the corrupt system that is now in place. The influence of black money, the preponderance of muscle power and other forms of corruption must be rolled back before a universally acceptable election can take place. It is a matter of satisfaction that Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has echoed such national concerns in his recent address to the nation.

A thorough recast of the Election Commission has been a long overdue demand of the nation. It is a demand that very large sections of politicians have made in recent times, one that we have unequivocally agreed with. The CA's stress on a reconstitution of the EC, coming as it did with the resignation of Justice MA Aziz from the post of Chief Election Commissioner, has vindicated the collective national stand.

All said and done, it is now for the country to ready itself for a healthy electoral exercise. Dealing with the godfathers of crime, ensuring a proper law and order situation, preparing a proper voters' list and initiating moves for ID cards are priorities the political parties should acknowledge. Fundamentally, there must be a well-prepared, level playing ground before we can have elections, of course at the earliest of opportunities.

Deaths in custody

A matter of grave concern

AT least 19 people were reportedly killed while in custody of the combined law enforcing agencies all over the country during last ten days from January 12 to 21. A number of well-known watchdogs have alleged that out of 19, four deaths took place while the arrestees were in custody of the army and the remainder under RAB and the police due to 'crossfire' and other factors.

Deaths due to crossfire of alleged and listed criminals while in custody of the RAB were all too well-known and have been drawing flak from Human Rights bodies.


Public in general including the various political parties have welcomed the declaration of emergency. This was further strengthened with the caretaker government taking a stance on bringing about stability in the country by creating the 'right' atmosphere for a free and fair election.

The role of army, particularly in terms of maintaining law and order during election times has been generally accepted by the people. Besides, a creditable role on UN Peacekeeping mission that they are playing has earned them a high image to the outside world which they must preserve at any cost.

We would, therefore, like to urge the caretaker government to make a serious note of this matter of custodial deaths. In the name of law we must not even unwittingly be seen to be flouting any legal norm. Why must any suspected or listed criminals in custody be not subjected to due process of law and convicted if found guilty.

Needless to say that such deaths are also bound to create a kind of fear psychosis amongst the people at large. The government would do well to make sure that the law enforcers remain within the bounds of law.

Asad's martyrdom and January 1969



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

There was decisiveness about 1969 that marked it out from other years. It was the year when Ayub Khan talked to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on equal terms, after years of persecuting him with the full fury of the machinery of state. Abdul Monem Khan, Khan Abdus Sabur Khan, and every other Bengali hanger-on of the junta, were blown away in the gathering storm. Towards the end of the year, on Suhrawardy's death anniversary, Bangabandhu told us, to our delight, that this land would henceforth be known as Bangladesh.

SHAHEED Asad Day has come and gone. That is as it should be. That is as it has been all these years.

When Asaduzzaman died of bullet wounds on January 20, 1969, he simply joined the ranks of all the heroic figures who had before him buttressed our struggle to uphold our cultural and political traditions.

All these heroes, you might care to notice, turned into icons once they fell victim to the ferocity of the state of Pakistan. And naturally too, for the state of Pakistan was a mechanism that had little need for, or appreciation of, Bengali aspirations.

It then fell on us, those who spoke Asad's language, to carry the cause forward, always through rivers of death, always through turmoil, before the struggle reached a destination.

The destination that Asad and his fellow Bengalis set for themselves in that very defining year was obvious. The regime of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, having presided over a decade-long system of economic and political exploitation of the Bengalis of Pakistan, would have to go.

There was the morality that was constantly being shredded by the junta. The extent to which the Ayub regime's insensitivities to Bengali aspirations would widen the chasm between East and West Pakistan was later to be revealed by the Bengali political observer (and minister in the Yahya Khan government) G.W. Chowdhury.

In London on a health-related trip in 1971, at the height of the Bangladesh liberation war, Ayub told Chowdhury that he could not understand the Bengali desire for autonomy, when the fact was that he had given full authority to Monem Khan, the Bengali governor of East Pakistan!

Here was a classic instance of a Pakistani leader -- and it did not matter whether he was civilian or military -- confusing the powers given to a lackey with the constitutional autonomy demanded by an entire population.

It was such dark truths that Asad and his compatriots struggled against or going back in time, to the background of the Language Movement of 1952.

Maybe we could, or ought to, push ourselves further back to the day when in March 1948, when Dhirendranath Dutta first informed the Pakistani state that Bengalis mattered in Pakistan, that the language they spoke could not be kept outside the national legislature. Overall, it is a simple matter of history we are speaking of here.

Asad's contribution to the emergence of Bengali nationalism in the 1960s remains salutary, to a point where it is now perfectly right to argue that our history might well have followed a different course had Asad's martyrdom not come to pass.

But -- and this is a deep, dark thought -- even as you and your generation recall Asad, and remember those eyes from which the light of life faded rapidly through a loss of blood in January 1969, you ask how much of that history have we passed on to our young.

Worse, how many among us have tried holding on to that history in our frenzied, albeit tottering, march to the future?

The teaching of history is important. Where nations do not know their history, or remember in selective manner the bits and pieces that can help them justify their well-calculated arrogance or unambiguous ignorance about their past. It is the fate of men and women that goes through a process of battering.

You could console yourselves with the thought that we have not battered our history but we have merely pushed it under the rug. Or, maybe, in these terribly mediocre times we have little time to dwell on the past? That last bit would be the worst humiliation we can heap on ourselves.

When we recall Asad every January, it is our history we are trying to beat to a pulp. And we do that through our collective failure to let today's young in on the circumstances that led Asad to his death, and so propelled us into a deeper appreciation of the difficulties before us.

The degree of historical importance that ought to have come into a study of the brief life and swift death of Motiur, the Nabakumar Institution pupil whom Pakistani security murdered in that same year, has not happened.

Turn the pages of historical memory; you will be appalled at the short shrift we have given to Professor Zoha, the scholar who succumbed, again in that turbulent era, to the predatory instincts of the Ayub Khan junta.

An observance of a death anniversary, or a celebration of a birthday, will not, by itself, strengthen a society's grip on the traditions upon which it has grown and continues to grow.


As long as the stories of the illustrious men and women who have shaped our history, through dying in abnormal political conditions, do not become part of the collective national psyche we will remain in danger of losing our future.

You cannot reach out to the future if you let your past atrophy. But that is precisely what has been happening in the case of Sergeant Zahurul Haq. How much do we know of him?

Yes, he was one of the accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. And, yes, his Pakistani jailors killed him even as he stayed in confinement in the cantonment.

But ask any adult for any further bits of information he can come up with about the life and dreams of Zahurul Haq, you will likely draw a blank.

Why this apathy?



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

BARE FACTS

The chairman of the commission, Justice Sultan Hossain Khan, is on record as expressing his determination to initiate action against corrupt persons, whoever they might be. For instance, while addressing a discussion meeting on the "Role of Lawyers to Resist Corruption," on July 31, 2006, at the Supreme Court hall room, the ACC chairman said that the people who whitened black money would not be spared.

commission to institute suo moto investigations against corruption. It says that the ACC can institute suo moto inquiry against corruption, or on the basis of application from the aggrieved persons.

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For instance, while addressing a discussion meeting on the "Role of Lawyers to Resist Corruption," on July 31, 2006, at the Supreme Court hall room, the ACC chairman said that the people who whitened black money would not be spared. The Commission would also look into corruption of the high-ups.

Again, while talking to UNB on October 31, the ACC chairman, in reply to a question as to why the Commission did not take action based on newspaper reports

against corrupt ministers, lawmakers and leaders of the immediate past BNP-led alliance government, said that the Commission might take action if there was evidence in newspaper reports on corruption.

Second, besides newspaper reports on corruption, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) is known to have published so far eight reports on corruption in different sectors since 2000.

For instance, corruption database 2005 prepared by the TIB shows that the government suffered a loss of Tk 526.27 crore in 2,128 corruption incidents. It reveals that due to corruption in the local government and rural development sector alone, Tk 208.9 crore went down the drain.

Among the 47 sectors that came under the TIB's scrutiny, education, police, health and family planning, local government and rural development and private sector were the

top five corrupt sectors, while the secondary education department has the highest incidence of bribery.

How many inquiries did the ACC initiate against ministers (a minister, according to the Rules of Business-1996, is all powerful in his ministry, and all business allocated to a ministry/ division shall be disposed of by, or under the general or special directions of, the minister-in-charge), secretaries, departmental heads and officials concerned on the basis of TIB's corruption report-2005?

Third, absence of rules to be made under the Act is sometimes cited as a bottleneck in instituting inquiry and investigation. While the need for rules, which are reportedly awaiting government approval, is not ruled out, it does not prevent the Commission from initiating suo moto inquiry against reported (media-report or otherwise) corrupt activities of the concerned ministers, lawmakers and leaders of the BNP-led alliance government.

It is mentionable that rules are framed for the elaboration of the provisions of an Act creating a statutory public body. In the absence of rules, the Commission is known to have already filed a number of corruption cases where the ministers, lawmakers and leaders of the immediate past alliance government were reportedly not involved.

In fact, the neutrality of the Commission itself is not beyond question. Although parliament passed the bill for establishment of an independent ACC on February 17, 2004, the Commission became functional after about ten months, in November 2004, with the appointment of its chairman and two commissioners.

The then main opposition AL, and some others, raised objection to the appointment of the chairman and two commissioners for their alleged involvement in the past with the then BNP-led ruling coalition.

The chairman and one of the commissioners denied their involvement with the then ruling coalition. Besides, the chairman vowed to launch a "jihad" against corruption. Unfortunately, that has not happened.

Even after the establishment of the ACC, the Transparency International ranked Bangladesh

It is then not wise to expect our children to know the truth. But truth, again, can be pushed aside only at great peril to the country, to the individual.

What happened in January 1969 was a decisive development we have chosen, correctly, to call a mass upsurge. The eleven points the student community came forth with in its battle for a reassertion of Bengali rights were in themselves symbolic of the overall Bengali desire to break free of the provincial straitjacket that East Bengal had turned into as East Pakistan.

It is these eleven points, entwined with the genesis of a resurgent Bengali nationalism as exemplified by the Six Points of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that constituted the essence of the struggle in early 1969.

The on-going trial of the accused in the Agartala case, the widening sphere of Bengali political radicalism, the slow, steady and rising articulation of demands for the release of Mujib from imprisonment were all hallmarks of a new era in Bengali politics.

In effect, 1969 was the point where Pakistan began to wane in the Bengali consciousness. And yet the story of that year has not been told in full. Those who watched that year take shape and dimension have remembered with a mere shrug.

Those who were not around only happen to know some names, with little or nothing of the historical background, which ought to come attached to those names. It then becomes reasonable to ask: "Where have our political classes and our historians failed?"

If the full import of the role that Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani played in gathering popular movement against Ayub Khan in January 1969 is today missing from memory. It does not relate to those born in a free Bangladesh, our national interests surely go through a process of mauling.

His jalao-gherao movement was looked upon at that time as an invitation to disaster, but it served the Bengali cause very well. When he threatened to march with his fellow Bengalis to the cantonment to have Mujib freed, the Pakistan army panicked.

All history loses meaning and all nations lose their way when events of epic proportions are reduced to being mere footnotes in the story of a people's progression through time.

In early 1969, history was being made in East Bengal. The students who came together in increasing numbers to instill more power to the political struggle were -- each of them -- bricklayers in the making of the times.

Men like Tofail Ahmed provided a new dimension to the cause, one that was at once fiery and without ambiguity. Why have the minstrels who have sung of our past not brought the tales of these young men home to our children?

There was decisiveness about 1969 that marked it out from other years. It was the year when Ayub Khan talked to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on equal terms, after years of persecuting him with the full fury of the machinery of state.

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Asad, Motiur and Zoha did not have a free Bangladesh to live in. But Bangladesh lives through their sacrifices; through a remembrance of the principles they lived and died for.

Why not take time off to learn a little more about them, about their dreams and fears as they went through life?

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as the most corrupt country for the fifth consecutive year in 2005. In 2006, Bangladesh was placed in the third position in the list of the most corrupt countries.

It is a fact that the BNP-led alliance government established the ACC. But, it is also equally true that the government did not want the Commission to be effective.

The government created several obstacles, by tussling over the appointment of the secretary to the commission, by declaring the defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption staff as government reserve employees and asking them not to work for the commission until rules were framed, in spite of the then attorney-general's opinion that they could continue in service until withdrawn by the government, by approving a skeleton staff for the Commission against the proposal of the Commission, and by delaying approval of the rules.

The people pinned their hopes on the ACC to act as a watchdog against corruption, particularly by the top brass in politics, bureaucracy and big businesses. But their hope has not as yet materialized. The time has now come for the Commission to rise to the occasion to materialize the people's expectations and demands.

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

The voters of Bangladesh are in adverse selection trap, and escaping this trap has become an insuperable challenge for the following reasons:

- Most voters are generally non-political and easy to deceive.
- People who are groomed to become politicians while being students are the ones who often lack the ability to succeed elsewhere.
- The voters are given a limited number of desirable alternatives.
- A vast majority of our lawmakers are political neophytes, listed as businessmen, who often use money and official power to dupe voters.

What recourse is there to minimize the dilemma of adverse selection and moral hazard in politics? There is virtually no alternative to a responsible, free, media and transparency, as the foremost resort. Politicization of any form, in any branch of the government, must be made taboo.

Politization of any form, in any branch of the government, must be made taboo. Political candidates must put out their qualifications, skills and lifetime records of all activities for the Election Commission's scrutiny and media analysis, and all political parties must espouse this practice earnestly if our democracy is to survive, and a benign government to come into public service.

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Is politics the road to riches?

NO NONSENSE

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exploiters, bribe-takers, money-makers, black-money holders, loan defaulters and so on, as in the "business of politics."

The phrase "business of politics" is deliberately used to reflect that nearly 80% of the lawmakers in the last parliament were businessmen, most of whom were barely qualified to understand the implications of the basic laws in the constitutions, let alone initiate any bills on their own in the Parliament.

What really motivates people to join politics in Bangladesh? Professor Yunus articulated the motives, reflecting the experience of the overwhelming majority of the common citizens.

In his interview with the AFP, he said: "Nothing gets done unless you pay bribe. It's a part of life. It's about power, power to make money. There is no ideological thing, simply who gets the bigger booty."

Did Professor Yunus fabricate these observations? Why not ask the people wherever you meet them? But on January 19, both AL and BNP leaders concomitantly launched broadsides against Yunus, challenging his observations and dismissing them as expressions of arrogance.

His indictment of the already disparaged politicians of the country was so stinging that both Abdul Jalil (AL) and Mannan Bhuiyan (BNP) came out with rabble-rousing reactions.

The essence of their defense is that there are still dedicated and selfless politicians who work for people's interest. They pleaded that such an all-encompassing judgment is an unfair indictment of the honest politicians.

It is true that there are still a few dedicated and self-sacrificing politicians. But these precious few may also be considered guilty of being corrupt simply because of association with their corrupt friends and colleagues.

Professor Yunus thus grouped them in one basket. What's wrong with that, if "one is judged by the company one keeps?"

For example, the ministries of both former ministers, Nazmul Huda and Manan Bhuiyan, topped the list in corruption in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Both ministers raised *cris de coeur* against TIB officials, to no avail.

Nazmul was tranquilized and subdued by a subsequent parliamentary standing committee's charges of corruption (DS: January 7, 2004) against him on import of CNG-run auto-rickshaws, and allocation of land for CNG filling stations.

In a democracy, the role of the electoral process is twofold: To select the benign politicians (serving public interest), and to discipline the malignant politicians (rent seekers or wheelers and dealers) if they are elected.

The malignant politicians are entrenched in the business of serving the interest of family, friends, and party functionaries.

The notion that free market always produces the best outcome relies on the assumption that market participants have all available information. But what happens when the information is imperfect, that is, when asymmetric information exists, where one side of an activity has more information than the other side?

The literature on asymmetric information is divided into adverse selection, which embodies the upshot of misinformation (that is, hidden information), and moral hazard, which represents the hidden (previously undisclosed) motives consummated after the selection was made.

In selecting candidates (agents) in a democratic process, electors (principals) want qualified and competent candidates who would work for public interest.

If the inducements are large it will inveigle a large number of candidates, some with inadequate qualification and aptitude for the job, thus bringing into play the dilemma of adverse selection.

This year, 4146 nomination papers, the highest ever, were submitted for 300 seats for the now defunct January 22 election. What really induced so many people to try to become lawmakers if politics is not the sure road to riches, as was evident from the 2001-2005 periods?

The notion of adverse selection as a political quandary has been observed at least since Plato, who once observed: "The city where those who rule are least eager to do so will be the best governed."

Politicians in every society are considered dubious, because the individuals most attracted to politics might not be the most desirable rulers. Indeed, one might infer that it is perhaps those most likely to abuse any authority given to them who are most likely to be drawn to the political realm.

Moral hazard arises when the principals cannot influence the agent's actions that may affect the outcome. A political analogue is that once elected, and elevated to a powerful position, politicians face a myriad of lures and enticements.

The most innocuous may be to use their authority to advance their own personal agenda, rather than the platform on which they were elected. A more baleful possibility is that politicians use their office and influence covertly for personal gain, or to benefit their families, friends, and business associates, as in Bangladesh.

To the extent that corruption fostered by moral hazard looms as a political problem, it is likely to be systematically related to two important parameters of the delegation relationship.

First, the greater the discretionary power the politicians are granted, the more reckless they become in misusing their power for personal gain.

This may explain why, as Susan Rose-Ackerman argues: "Political corruption is such a depressingly inopportune feature of the world's poorest countries, regardless of the promises that may surround new officeholders.

For those who wish to 'better themselves' financially there is simply no alternative to rent-seeking political participation."

Second, the longer incumbents stay in office, the more serious the moral hazard problem may become. That is because becoming corrupt is a bit like losing one's virginity; there is no going back, the inertia of rent seeking continues unabated.

Unfortunately, honest politicians in the system may become corrupt over time, but corrupt ones rarely become honest. This is probably the best argument in favour of term limits for lawmakers, which, otherwise, may have undesirable consequences for electoral accountability.