

## Election schedule and our feudal politics



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

WHILE feudalism definitely was the unfortunate experience of the not-too-distant past, one is not very sure if the Bangladeshi polity has been able to extricate itself of the trappings and tentacles of a feudalistic society.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that a long and bitter quarrel between two political groups, which was a typical characteristic of the attitudes and structure of a feudal system, brought the entire nation to a dangerous edge from where the road to safety was ensured by quarters that do not lay an exclusive claim on the guardianship of the people.

It was only a fortnight ago when we witnessed scores of very responsible people being so concerned about the inviolability of the sacred constitution. Those people apparently held the constitution so dear to their hearts that it appeared to be an article of faith with them.

The innocent, the uninformed and the uninitiated thought that the skies would fall and all hell would break loose if elections were not held on January 22nd. To their relief, the hapless Bangladeshis found that life did not end when elections were cancelled following the proclamation of a state of emergency.

The disturbingly manifest feudal proclivities of our political classes are all-pervasive. The major political parties do not practice democracy in their internal working because, year after year, we see the same coterie of unimaginative leadership at the apex.

There is no voting by the councilors at the annual meeting, and the supreme leader's

## STRAIGHT LINE

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desire is the final word in the selection of party functionaries. There is a mad rush for showering unabashed praise on the top leader's real and imaginary qualities. Sycophancy and cronyism reign supreme, so typical of the medieval Court.

When it comes to allocation of governmental funds, favours have been dished out in the most indiscriminate manner, violating the rudimentary dictates of public finance. In this regard, the block allocation of funds for development work by the last political government, on the eve of general election, was a blatant example of impropriety of public spending.

Such unjustifiable spending by the supposedly public representatives speaks volumes about the immorality and obstinacy of our politicians. It was as if our political leaders were spending their own money.

In Bangladesh, one cannot fail to be struck by the grim irony of the situation where the one job for which one needs no training or qualification is the job of legislating for, and governing, a sizable democracy. One needs years of training to mind a machine or to supervise a shop floor, not to speak of other specialized jobs, but to steer the lives and destinies of 150 million people the politician of Bangladesh is not required to have any education or experience at all.

It is indeed anomalous that we insist upon high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it, except that they be elected. Does not our lawmaker require the capacity to take a balanced view of things, to act independently and, above all, to be true to the

fundamental values in life?

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has paid heavily for its folly in leaving the governance of the country entirely to professional politicians, for many of whom politics is merely bread and butter, a means of livelihood, or worse, a means of personal enrichment. No wonder, therefore, that our bureaucracy, without purposeful leadership at the ministerial level, operates only as a guarantee of societal inertia.

It was only recently that our politicians were seen aggressively ensuring that arbitrary power use the garb of constitutionalism. The grabbing of power by subverting all the institutions of the state was the goal, and the outdated values of feudalism -- birth, wealth, position and power -- were in full play. One can only hope that history will apportion the blame and the responsibility over a wide spectrum of the elected representatives who have betrayed their trust.

Some are of the view that our lawyer politicians have treated the constitution of Bangladesh as their private property, and Bangladeshi law as their personal backyard. A reasoned view is that it is not the constitution which has failed the people, but it is our politicians who have failed the constitution.

Nobody expects politics to be synonymous with ethics. However, one cannot possibly countenance a scenario wherein our average politician should be the sordid amalgam of lack of intellect with lack of character and lack of knowledge.

In this connection it would not be improper to say that our constitution was framed on the basis that our citizens, includ-

ing the best, would be willing to take a continuous and considered part in public life. The question is, why are the thoughtful and the selfless failing the country at the present juncture? It would be better for our interim caretaker government to try to do something and fail, rather than try to do nothing and succeed.

For enabling the many young people who are now saying that they could run the country much better than the old politicians who have matured with age, it would be necessary to punish those who have done palpable wrongs while occupying positions of national responsibility.

Mere abdication of responsibilities will not suffice, as that would send the wrong signal to all the delinquents, including the potential ones. The hands of the law have to be long and strong enough to bring the mighty to their knees.

Ill-gotten wealth, both in the country and outside, must find its way back to the national treasury. If such measures require time and overhauling of some vital state institutions, the nation has to put up with the extended time, because election by itself will not ensure good governance which is so vital for the working of a democracy.

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## ACC needs total reform



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE chief adviser (CA) to the caretaker government (CTG) Fakhruddin Ahmed, in an address to the nation on January 21, laid down an ambitious agenda of sweeping reforms of the state's institutions.

The CA deplored the pervasive corruption and plundering of national wealth by a handful of dishonest people, which pushed the national economy, society and politics backward, into a disastrous state.

Now he blames the just-departed alliance government, which had tied ACC's feet since its inception. He, however, did not explain why he did not resign in protest.

When keeping one's job becomes more important than discharging sacred responsibilities, all we get is sophistry. In fact the ACC was caught in internal wrangles, keeping the body dysfunctional for the whole period.

The BNP-led alliance government formed the ACC on November 21, 2004, claiming that it was a landmark step toward fulfilling its election pledge of combating corruption.

As such the CTG has set curbing of corruption on the top of the agenda. In view of the deep frustration of, and strong criticism by, the people and development partners over the Anti-corruption Commission's (ACC) failure to function, the CTG resolved to address the commission's legal, institutional and administrative flaws to make it functional.

A seven-member committee headed by law adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain has already been formed to pinpoint the shortcomings of the ACC to make it fully functional.

Nearly 6,000 complaints of corruption against high-profile people, including former ministers and MPs, are gathering dust, as the ACC remains dysfunctional.

ACC chairman Justice Sultan Hossain Khan said that the commission had scrutinized 2,000 complaints to conduct inquiry.

He also said that, within a week, the commission would send some proposals to the government for amending the ACC Act, 2004.

These proposals include, among others, commissioning the anti-graft body for speedy trial, and for detaining corrupt persons under the Special Power Act.

The ACC submitted draft rules for inquiry, investigation and filing of lawsuits to the government, on January 23, for approval.

On allegations of his failure,

## BY THE NUMBERS

Corruption continues to devastate the society, and to distort our national psyche. Corruption is also an impediment to holding a free and fair election. It is now quite clear that the BNP-led alliance government formed the ACC only to hoodwink the donors as well as the people. If the CTG succeeds in making the ACC a truly functional anti-graft body it will fulfill a long-standing popular demand.

Justice Khan claimed that he had not failed. "I stay from 10 am to 5 pm in my office and sign about 50 files," he said.

But our perception is that he has failed miserably to render useful public service in his role as the anti-graft czar.

Bangladesh is now a global brand name for corruption, with a ranking as the most corruption-affected country in the world according to Transparency International. It is being repeatedly mentioned by the donors that two percent of the country's GDP is being eaten up by corruption alone.

Bangladesh has also been excluded from the list of countries selected for US assistance, to be provided through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) for 2007, because of its endemic corruption.

The World Bank cancelled three projects and demanded refund of Taka 6.8 crore, because of corruption.

The fundamental problem that relates to corruption in Bangladesh is the dominance of the vested interests, irrespective of changes in the power matrix. The remedy was to start a cleaning drive from the top tiers.

But it did not allow this anti-graft body to operate independently and neutrally, with sufficient powers to investigate any sort of corruption by anybody.

The ACC launched its anti-graft blitz, "trap case drive" against the bribe-takers. It urged people through advertisements in the media to lodge complaints against corrupt government officials, and planned to start operations after receiving complaints from the public.

It also planned to use the elite anti-crime force, Rab, for launching "storm operation" in different government offices to nab the bribe takers.

But the DG of Rab did not agree to the deployment of Rab to launch an anti-corruption drive. The ACC then tried to associate the BDR in its storm operation as an alternative to the Rab.

We simply could not help wondering about the ACC's plan for deployment of Rab or BDR to launch the anti-corruption drive.

Both, the "storm operation" and

the "trap case drive," were silly anti-corruption steps, which did not have any positive outcome.

Launching of such drives with so much fanfare only speaks of the poor quality of the top brass.

ACC commissioner Professor Moniruzzaman Miah said that he was not sure whether Matin's comments were his own or the government's.

But it is the people's perception that the top brass of the ACC should do the country a favor by quitting on grounds of principle.

The CTG has set combating corruption as one of its prime pre-poll tasks, and moved to activate the ACC. This is certainly a very commendable development.

To activate the ACC, the first and foremost task should be to replace its top brass with dynamic and devoted persons who can shoulder the sacred and onerous responsibility of curbing corruption without fear or favor.

The next important task should be to equip the ACC with the basic tools (laws and regulations) that it needs.

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If the CTG succeeds in making the ACC a truly functional anti-graft body it will fulfill a long-standing popular demand.

But this must be done without compromising in any way the independence of the commission.

The people at large are really anxious to see a truly activated ACC. They are also expecting the ACC to take action against the ministers and MPs of the just-departed government, if any specific allegation of corruption can be substantiated.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## Gandhi's message today



Gandhi is more relevant today than ever before. Our South Asian region has been passing through a critical time. Countries across South Asia have been suffering serious setbacks in human rights and most worrying abuses due to civil strife and political instability. We are living in an age of mounting tensions -- tensions between group and group, class and class, race and race, nation and nation. Here, communalism is a great danger.

SYED ABUL MAKSD

T o commemorate Mahatma Gandhi's work in South Africa, retracing the train trip that politicized India's freedom movement icon, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh rode an old stream-powered train for 30 minutes on October 1, 2006.

"It's a soul-stirring experience," said Dr. Singh on the platform of the small railway station in Pietermaritzburg, 70 km from Durban, the town where Gandhi was thrown off a train for riding in a "white-only" compartment.

He immediately discovered that

he was a second-class citizen in any land ruled by the British imperialists. On that day his offence was that being "black" he had entered a "white-only" compartment.

Gandhi was a man of amiable disposition. But he took the vow to protest against this blatant abuse of human rights in a peaceful and non-violent manner.

This method of protest was called satyagraha. Gandhi's experience led to the 1906 launch of his satyagraha movement which advocated passive resistance against the apartheid system in South Africa.

Martin Luther King Jr. was an ardent admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, and followed his method of non-violence in the movement he had launched to establish civil rights in the United States of

recent film on Mahatma Gandhi's struggle, titled *A Force More Powerful*. The film depicted the power and triumph of Gandhi's weapon of non-violence and highlighted his struggles in three different settings under different leaders -- against British colonialism in India, racial segregation in the United States, and in destroying apartheid in South Africa.

He never did sacrifice his principles in the face of any opposition or threat. The life of this great man was an "experiment with truth."

According to Gandhian philosophy, the principle of satyagraha was not a "weapon of the weak." In

America, Nelson Mandela had adopted, at first, the method of non-violence in his struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

But later, he was compelled to use force to realize their fundamental rights, because the white rulers were brutal with the citizens of South Africa.

I had been surprised and shocked to go through a report, in early September 2006, about the result of a survey conducted by The Economic Times in the centenary year of Gandhi's satyagraha in South Africa.

Bill Gates got 37 percent of the votes while Gandhi was second with 30 percent votes. Mother Teresa secured third position. Students of different institutions sponsored by industrial and commercial establishments across India responded to the questionnaire of the survey.

The participants said that they thought that Gandhi was relevant today, but they did not have enough, or no time at all, to give attention to him. 61 percent of the students said that, to them, Gandhi was "a man of the remote past."

We are living in a world politically dominated by Bush and Condi and Blair. Economically, Bill Gates has been the big boss. Here Gandhi will have no place.

But I do not have slightest doubt that in this world of neo-imperialism, nuclear weapon competition and consumerism, the necessity of Gandhi has been felt more than at any other time in the past.

Gandhi was by nature the most adaptable and compromising person. He was ready to compromise not only with his opponents but also with his enemies. But he never compromised with truth.

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According to Gandhian philosophy, the principle of satyagraha was not a "weapon of the weak." In

his autobiography, the Mahatma writes, "I was anxious to observe Brahmacharya in thought, word and deed, and equally anxious to devote the maximum time to the satyagraha struggle, and to make myself fit for it by cultivating purity."

To him Ahimsa and truth are the two sides of the same coin -- one is the means, the other the end. Gandhi's theory of satyagraha is not different from his doctrine of Truth.

In his early life he came to the conclusion that pursuit of truth "does not admit of violence being inflicted upon one's opponent."

His secretary and biographer Pyarelal put it, "...the doctrine of truth or Satya, which Gandhiji described by the word Satyagraha or holding on to truth, means vindication of truth by bearing witness to it through self-suffering: in other words, love. ... Gandhiji's Satyagraha was not an abstract philosophy, but a philosophy in action. Truth to him meant not the uttered word, not the professed belief but something that has to be lived."

There is a distinction between Gandhian Satyagraha and passive resistance. "Passive resistance can be an expression of one's anger; Satyagraha is an expression of the purest Ahimsa or love. It precludes hatred, anger, deception and untruth; it is the opposite of coercion."

The Mahatma had said that the principle of Ah