

Big task before the new EC They must prove equal to it

THE acting chief of the Election Commission with his four commissioners quitting the Election Commission after the resignation of CEC Justice MA Aziz on leave, the deck has been cleared at last for a reconstituted EC to take charge. The controversial manning of the EC and the way they acquitted of themselves left a legacy of incompetence, wasteful expenditure and defiance of court ruling about preparation of voters' list.

The new set in the EC has their jobs cut out. Their first task is to restore public confidence in the institution of the Election Commission by the way they go about preparing an authentic and credible voter list including ID card for voters, if possible, and carrying out necessary changes to the electoral laws. Simultaneous with these onerous responsibilities they discharge they will announce the election schedule which the nation eagerly awaits.

The wholesale change in the EC goes to meet the 14-party alliances' demand, so that the political parties and the EC will be interacting positively now in carrying forward the electoral process. It is worthwhile to note that on voter list and electoral reform agenda there have been substantive brainstorming sessions and discourses courtesy various civil society groups and think-tanks. There is a lot of wisdom out there for the EC and the government to tap in on.

A cleansing process has come to an end but only after exposing how much eroded a vital institution can get through politicisation and attempts at election engineering. This is the lesson all concerned should learn from the experience. It was Justice Aziz who could have spared the nation the turmoil it was subjected to -- thanks to his overly delayed resignation. Then Justice Mahfuzur Rahman made himself the self-proclaimed acting CEC without any presidential reference. Politicisation of the EC and the lack of sense of propriety on the part of the commissioners brought down the image of the statutory body to an abyss. They sat out their time idly by as the EC plunged into a dysfunctional comatose. Huge sums of money were spent on a voter list that came of no use. Somebody must be made to account for this.

It is an election centered controversy that got the nation caught in a constitutional maelstrom. The emergence of a new interim government and a reconstituted EC has made possible a fresh beginning in the conduct of general election. The new EC is right under the spotlight with the people keeping faith in it to deliver a credible election to the nation. Let it live up to the expectation.

Slum-dwellers' eviction Rehabilitation is obligatory

AS many as 5.4 million people live in the slums spread over six metropolitan cities of the country, namely, Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet and Barisal in as many as 9048 slums. As much as 37 percent of the capital's population lives in slums. These staggering details were revealed in research findings jointly undertaken by the National Institute of Population Research (NIPORT) and University of North Carolina.

While the eviction drives continue we should also have a compassionate view of the plight caused to these slum-dwellers. For all we know, these slums did not come up in a day; the rise and steady growth of slums over the years is attributed to the patronage and protection by political musclemen alongside willful negligence on the part of successive administrations.

It should be remembered that these very slum-dwellers serve as cheap service providers of all kinds to the city's comparatively lower and middle income groups. A large section of these city-dwellers is also engaged in keeping our cities clean despite the fact that they themselves live in slums. A good number of them are also engaged in all kinds of odd jobs earning their livelihood.

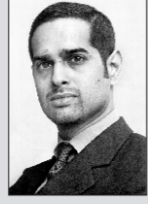
On the other hand, many of the slums are said to be breeding grounds for all kinds of criminal acts in the cities serving as haven for drug addicts and drug traffickers including those dealing in small firearms. At the same time, however, we should bear in mind that this has also come about due to the explicit support of local musclemen under cover and influence of godfathers claiming links to political parties.

In any event we strongly feel that a proper and lasting program should be undertaken for rehabilitating the slum-dwellers including those evicted from city's market places and footpaths allowing them to continue with their livelihood and living in places exclusively earmarked for them. Surely today's caretaker government is best suited to undertake this task.

By their deeds shall ye know them

STRAIGHT TALK

The sole legitimacy for the current administration lies in its deeds. Its sole legitimacy lies in the manner in which it exercises the power that currently is in its hands. And it is for this reason that it is imperative that the administration act in a manner that is consonant with public opinion and expectation and that its actions and policies be above question or controversy.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONCE upon a time, the conventional wisdom went, the Bangladeshi polity and society were divided largely along bi-polar BNP-AL lines. Today, however, perhaps unsurprisingly, given that we are now in more or less uncharted political waters, the fault-lines that divide the polity and society are very different.

Such is the singularity of the current dispensation that the nation finds itself governed under that it has taken some time for coherent and complete points of view on the matter to form. However, now that roughly three weeks have passed, the differing responses to the events of January 11 are beginning to take shape and can be boiled down to a handful of principal positions.

The first position is that the elections scheduled for January

22 should not have been derailed. This is the position of hard-core four-party alliance supporters and, perhaps, those who consider themselves hard-core democrats. Whether there exist any who fall into the latter category without falling into the former, I don't know, as I have yet to speak to one, but for argument's sake, let's assume that they exist.

The argument that democracy must be left to run its course, however, is largely specious, and pre-supposes that we are speaking about elections that are free and fair. There is no merit to elections that are neither free nor fair, especially if they would put in power leaders whose non-democratic predilections are beyond doubt.

Given the fact that the election of January 22 would have been a travesty and would have installed an authoritarian leadership with no respect for democracy or demo-

cratic principles, the argument that the nation would have been better served had the election gone ahead is a non-starter.

The second position is that what happened on January 11 was a good thing but that we should have thereafter moved swiftly towards free and fair elections. This argument operates from the point of view that the main ingredient to building a workable democracy is good elections, and that if people are empowered to vote their consciences, then, incrementally, at least, things will eventually improve.

Adherents to this point of view might also be skeptical of the notion either that sweeping and thorough-going (and constitutionally questionable) reform is the best way to bring about meaningful and lasting change, or of the notion that an unelected government is the appropriate entity to institute such reform, or both.

Then there are those who believe that the nation today faces a grand opportunity to correct the dysfunctions in our democracy and that we should take this chance to institute the fixes necessary to make our democracy more functional.

The differences between the second and third positions outlined above are largely ideological, but also have to do with practical calculations as to what the current interim government is capable of delivering and what the dangers are of an extended non-democratic interregnum.

I do not propose to get into the competing ideologies at stake in the argument, and indeed, would like to put forth the proposition that we look at the question in terms of practicality and pragmatism, rather than ideology, per se.

That is, I believe that this debate should be conducted on the plane of the concrete rather than the

abstract. I recognize that this is, in itself, an ideological position, nevertheless, I believe that a hard-headed look at the reality on the ground is a far more useful way of determining the acceptability of the political situation at any given time.

In other words, I believe that the most useful yard-stick by which to judge the current administration is not by what it might do or what it has been empowered to do, and whether this is acceptable or unacceptable in abstract terms, but on what it actually does in concrete terms.

I do not doubt that there is a grave risk that comes with any non-elected administration, and I am sympathetic to the argument that it is almost always a mistake to grant any non-elected entity virtually unlimited power. But the more pertinent inquiry, to my mind, is not what the administration might do in the future with its sweeping powers so much as what it is doing with them in the present.

It is thus that I look at some of the actions that have been taken by the current administration over the past three weeks with a concerned eye.

To my mind, the now much-publicized drives to evict slum-dwellers and to clear the pavements of unlicensed hawkers are not encouraging signs. Nor am I

impressed by blanket arrests and round-ups that ensnare all kinds of low-level operatives but leave the big fish untouched. Nor is the current administration's lack of transparency with respect to how decisions are formulated and where the balance of power truly lies something that can quietly be accepted given the questionable nature of some of the policies that have been implemented.

The current administration cannot locate its legitimacy in a mandate from the people. It cannot locate its legitimacy in ideological coherence. The constitutionality of its legitimacy, is, frankly, open to question (it would be not be a bad idea if this issue were addressed directly by the government at some point as its constitutional underpinnings could, perhaps, be established: they just haven't been yet).

The sole legitimacy for the current administration lies in its deeds. Its sole legitimacy lies in the manner in which it exercises the power that currently is in its hands. And it is for this reason that it is imperative that the administration act in a manner that is consonant with public opinion and expectation and that its actions and policies be above question or controversy.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Fumes of remorse

CROSS TALK

The stranger reminded her of that person. The man didn't look like him and it never crossed her mind that he should, but there was something about the man which gave her hope. He had come from nowhere, no name, address, identity, lineage as if a victim of some selfish fairy had dropped from the sky after she had exploited him.



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE portly woman of middle age, who was the mother of two grownup daughters, started to walk in the morning after the doctor told her that she needed to watch her weight.

She teamed up with other wives in the neighbourhood, bought herself a pair of walking shoes, chalked out the route and then set out on the mission one day after the morning prayer.

When the morning breeze swept her in the face, she whispered to one of her companions that ever since she was married she had almost forgotten the taste of fresh air.

Soon she would find that she and the other wives talked more than they walked, that if words were steps then their tongues roamed the world by the time their feet covered a distance of few blocks.

She would return from the daily

walk like someone whose belly is bloated by flatulence, bringing all the gossip from the neighbourhood and disgorging them at the breakfast table.

Most of the gossip revolved around a stranger who had started to live on top of the open sewer in front of the old doctor's house, and whose earthly possessions comprised of nothing more than a bundle of newspapers, a loincloth, one worn-out tin plate to eat his food and a chipped glass to drink his water.

The stranger became a subject of household discussions within a short time, as the stories of his eccentricities traveled from mouth to mouth.

Those who listened often felt amused, but occasionally frowned upon the shocking details, which included how he walked stark naked in the middle of the road, ate his own excrement, made obscene gestures at passing women and uttered filthy words like a gun spitting bullets.

It was agreed amongst all that

the man was a mental wreck.

The band of walking wives changed their route which now included a detour around the old doctor's house, so that they could catch a glimpse of the man who would dominate their conversations for the rest of the day.

But they would never find him in the shack, although his personal belongings rested on a wooden plank covering the drain between the road and the house, stacked against the wall.

The old doctor's daughter-in-law vouched that at night the weird man was never seen in front of the house.

The eccentric stranger would be sighted on streets and alleys, in different locations at the same time and in the same location at different times.

Neighbours would hear him sing at night, and the textile merchant's wife claimed that one night she and her husband heard him singing under their window.

When they opened the window and looked down, they saw him

half-naked man, who lived on the street without earthly possessions, who ate what others gave to him, who sang to them and walked around their houses night after night, had descended on earth to teach how to live without hankering after worldly things.

His shack turned into a shrine and people came to drop food and clothes, often spending long hours waiting for his audience.

Until one day the walking wives discovered during their morning round that the man was not coming to his shack any more. This is how it happened while the ladies would argue who amongst them should get the credit for noticing it before others did.

The watchman in the old doctor's house was removing goods from the cardboard shack, and the manner he was doing so made the ladies suspicious of him. They caught the thief when he was loading the goods on a rickshaw, and getting ready to leave the scene.

That is when the entire neighbourhood learnt for the first time that the elusive man, who was the talk of every house, had vanished in the thin air.

The middle-aged woman decided to give up walking and told her daughters that the burden of remorse had become too heavy to bear.

There was someone she had lost, someone who disappeared after she had got married, and the people in the village said that a fairy, who must have been smitten by his good looks, had taken him away.

The stranger reminded her of that person. The man didn't look like him and it never crossed her mind that he should, but there was something about the man which gave her hope.

He had come from nowhere, no name, address, identity, lineage as if a victim of some selfish fairy had dropped from the sky after she had exploited him.

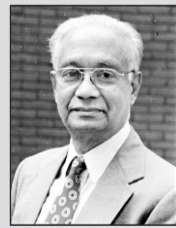
For as long as that lunatic was around, she was convinced that there was a mysterious world out there which occasionally returned what it took, that one day the man, who relinquished his familiar world because a young girl had betrayed him, was going to return.

She told her daughters that they should learn to keep what is precious, because life is too short to look for what is lost.

When she died three months later, the doctors couldn't diagnose the cause of death. The neighbours blamed it on the evil wind. The daughters said that the fumes of remorse had choked her to death.

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Democratic dictators



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

Many members of the major political parties are so fearful that they dare not go against Madam or Apa, lest they incur the displeasure of the chiefs and are left out of the political booty. The remedy lies in introducing real democracy in the political parties by which new leaders who have new ideas and visions may be elected, and that may lead ultimately to over-all democratic behaviour in the entire political system.

President Bush, with the open support of Prime Minister Blair of the UK, is a glaring example in the international arena.

Both the leaders misled their own people, and those around the world, by giving wrong and manipulated information on the al-Qaeda connection with Saddam relating to 9/11, and a false alarm on the existence of nuclear bombs that could reach Europe and America in "45 minutes," but when they failed to prove these, the latest gimmick was export of democracy.

On the Iraq attack, Colin Powell, the then secretary of state said: "This is lunacy." (ref. The Plan of Attack by Bob Woodward). But one or two "Vulcans" around President Bush continued to push him to finally go for Saddam despite warnings even from his own father, Bush senior, certainly a more intelligent and wiser per-

son. On February 28, 1999, at a Gulf War veterans gathering, senior Bush said: "Had we gone into Baghdad -- we could have done it... And then what? Which sergeant, which private, whose life would be at stake in perhaps a fruitless hunt in an urban guerilla war to find the most-secure dictator in the world? Whose life would be on my hands as the commander-in-chief because I, unilaterally, went beyond the international law, went beyond the stated mission, and said we're going to show our macho? We're going into Baghdad. We're going to be an occupier -- America in an Arab land -- with no allies at our side. It would have been disastrous." (ref. State of Denial by Bob Woodward).

Every word turned out to be valid. Today, more than two-thirds of

Americans have deserted Bush because of the Iraq invasion and occupation. Practically all the Democrats, and many Republicans, have openly spoken against President Bush and his latest "lunacy" of sending another 21,500 troops to the Iraqi desert to, indeed, sacrifice American lives in greater numbers.

Interestingly, practically all the "Vulcans" who pushed Bush into the Iraq war have left the administration, leaving President Bush all alone in the field -- even Rumsfeld has left. This is what happens to a democratic dictator.

The Iraq war has virtually cost Tony Blair his premiership, because the British people, more democratic by any standard, and particularly the British Labour Party, were very vocal about their opposition to the Iraq war.

President Bush would have faced a similar situation had

America followed parliamentary democracy. Anyway, you never know -- American legislators may be less informed about the world, but no less democratic. Bush has to swim against the strong current in the next 22 months of his presidency; anything may happen, including Iraq Gate.

The Iran storm is gathering momentum. Ahmedinjad would be no less than Saddam when it comes to Iran's national interest. The world has certainly been made more dangerous by Bush-Blair "lunacy."

Bangladesh context
Bangladesh's democratic dictatorship since the fall of the undemocratic dictator in 1991 also figures prominently in world political affairs.

Having faced unprecedented political turmoil in 1996, the caretaker government (CTG) system, something unheard of in the democratic world, was introduced in Bangladesh. This system reflected the political parties' total no-confidence in each other. This system has, indeed, destroyed the entire administrative, business, professional and finally the judicial system of the country. In other words, today, all the basic democratic institutions of the country stand destroyed.

The devastation of the country's systems has been carried out by the successive governments, indeed on competitive basis, as the real intention of the respective political parties was to grab state power, or remain in power.

The unfortunate part of this power play is that the political parties are dominated by a small, well-knit, group of greedy people - it would be wrong to call them leaders -- who concentrate on making money and owing property, in the process destroying the very system of democracy. The result is serious chaos and disruption of peoples' lives, which needs urgent treatment by some special constitutional arrangement.

Democratic dictators
The entire responsibility of such a situation lies with the political leadership; in Bangladesh this leadership has largely failed. The reason is clear -- no democracy in the political parties -- all revolves round Madam or Apa. They are, indeed, democratic dictators -- as there are often so-called elections in the political parties, but the result is obvious - Madam and Apa emerge as sure winners in the respective party elections, if and when such elections take place.

Many members of the major

political parties are so fearful that they dare not go against Madam or Apa, lest they incur the displeasure of the chiefs and are left out of the political booty.

The remedy lies in introducing real democracy in the political parties by which new leaders who have new ideas and visions may be elected, and that may lead ultimately to over-all democratic behaviour in the entire political system.

Two poles
The other most disturbing thing that has seriously disturbed our political system is that Madam and Apa are poles apart mentally and, unfortunately, politically. They do not even exchange salam (greetings), let alone talk to each other even if they ever happen to sit side by side.

This personal animus has led to sharp political rivalry, where it is practically impossible to find common political ground on which these two major political parties could take the country forward.

This is why Bangladesh, which has so much economic potential, including strong commitments from our young professionals, businessmen and several forward-looking politicians, to become a mid-level developed country within a few years, stands

practically stagnated.

National shame
Is it not a great shame that some political leaders, businessmen, professionals etc go into hiding to avoid arrest by law enforcing agencies, or are off-loaded from planes before they could undertake their foreign trips? What does money make, or give, if the very prestige of a person is lost? What do they then live for -- tons of money, luxury cars, big houses in Dhaka and abroad? Disgraceful indeed!

These individuals must ponder over these issues very seriously for their own sakes, and also for the sake of the country. The politicians have special responsibilities as, while in power, they deal with the policies and administration that directly touch the common people. The most important thing for them is not only their electoral commitments to the people, but their honest implementation as well, leaving aside all personal interest and greed for power. The greed for power and money is the source of all evil, and ultimately leads to social disgrace and political downfall.

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