

Re-constituted Election Commission: Crucial role ahead

ZAHID HOSSAIN

THE Acting Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners have finally yielded to the public pressure and submitted their resignation letters to the President to enable him to re-constitute the Election Commission with appropriate persons having requisite background and adequate experiences for delivering the goods upto the satisfaction of at least the major players of the election game.

This critical juncture of our national life, it is expected that the newly appointed chief election commissioner and other election commissioners will have sufficient administrative and financial powers to make the organisation they will work for really effective, autonomous and powerful to fulfil the national commitment. They need this power and authority for holding successfully the next parliament election in a free, fair and credible manner as the nation expects from them.

For a developing country like Bangladesh where democratic institutions have not been firmly rooted and people are yet to be made fully prepared for democratic norms and practices, free, fair and credible elections are essential for continuance of democratic system of gover-

nance. Elections are the only means available to the people to express their will and opinions through ballot. Credible elections are a must for ensuring the trust and confidence of all in order to earn the right and authority to govern.

Thus the role to be played by the newly constituted election commission will be, as many people are of the view, more important than the traditional role of the caretaker government in assisting the election commission in conducting the election-related matter. Possibly for the first time the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners will join the commission at the same time and also in a historic moment of our national life with a well-defined mission and goal. The commission will have to play a major role in shaping the future politics of the country. It will pave the way to show the nation that it is possible to update the voters list correctly and appropriately as per the guidelines given by the Supreme Court. It can create new examples of participatory elections in a level-playing field where the influence and control by money and muscle power will not be any factor.

But what the Commission will really need for performing the assigned as well as the much expected job of conducting an

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acceptable and credible election is the power and authority both administrative and financial for functioning independently of any government ministry or division. The commission may like to frame some new operational guidelines and policy planning after consultations with relevant government ministries/divisions as well as with representatives of different political parties civil society organisations and other professional bodies.

Among others, the two fundamental jobs of the Election Commission are to fully prepare the ground and to conduct the real show that is the election. While preparing the ground the election commission must ensure that proper voter registration, voter awareness activities and other preparations are equally acceptable to all the participating players. The primary duty of the election commission is to ensure the transparency of the polling in order to achieve the confidence of all the

elections and adoption of all sorts of foul electoral practices only to get the stamp of authority and the right to rule the country were set in with the commencement of martial law or military rule in the country. General Ziaur Rahman who fully involved himself in the national politics even remaining in uniform arranged a sham referendum shattering all the norms and practices of politics. Even hundred percent voters turn out was shown in some areas. General H.M. Ershad followed almost the same practice in the name of referendum to justify his assumption of power.

The practices of large scale vote riggings and other manipulations like use of money and muscle power nakedly and publicly got intensified in the second and third parliamentary elections of 1979 and 1986. The election riggings and other abuses witnessed in the fourth parliamentary election in 1988 under military dictator General Ershad were termed unprecedented in

the history of electoral fraud and use of money and muscle power and by that time people had already lost their confidence in the electoral system of the country. The opposition as well as the media both local and foreign ridiculed the voters turn out of around fifty four percent as claimed by the election commission and there was a general thinking amongst the people of the country and the diplomatic community that the actual turn out was very very low.

Anyway, as for the political reform agenda as some of the civil society have been advocating for the last several months, the present non-party caretaker government under the leadership of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed may take the initiative to form a well-represented committee headed by one of his Advisers and with members of major political parties, civil society organisations, journalists, academicians and legal experts to work out the recommendations both short term and long-term which should normally be implemented by political government. One or two former chief election commissioners may also be included in the committee for political reform. One or two urgently needed reform measures may be undertaken by the caretaker government if they consider them really needed for

holding the next election in a credible and acceptable manner. Basically things like long-term electoral reform or political reform having far reaching consequences and impacts will require constitutional amendment and must be handled by political government having mandate from the people and not by a caretaker government having a limited assignment.

Generally speaking, politics should always be politicians job, although the recommendations and suggestions of the civil society organisations, academicians and professionals for reform in the existing electoral system as well as in political pattern warrant attention of the politicians with due importance and emphasis. In fact, the politicians are in a better position to identify the political problems including electoral issues and are able to find out their suitable solutions than others. Discussing about martial law or rule by any other authority without people's mandate, late Professor Razzak of Political Science Department and Professor Emiratus, Dhaka University very often used to tell his students like me that politics should be the game of the politicians. However, the positions need to be genuine, of course.

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A tribute to Waheedul Haq:

S NAZRUL ISLAM

WHILE Waheedul Haq's passing away cannot be said to be premature, given his age, it is premature in many other senses. His death is premature because of the immense energy he had, scouting all over Bangladesh for search of talent and for promoting various socio-cultural-political causes even a few weeks before his death. He was getting old, but his energy level never diminished. His indomitable energy would certainly have persisted had he continued to live.

Waheedul Haq's death is premature also because the causes he fought still remain to be won. Of the various causes he espoused, nothing as more prominent than secular humanism. He was deeply committed to the Bangalee identity that transcends the religious divide. He wanted that secular Bangalee identity to take hold, flourish, and spread its influence to other spheres of life, including politics. That is why Waheedul Haq was so hurt by the regress that Bangladesh witnessed with regard to secularism over the last decades, by the lost promise of the 1971 victory, by the revival and semi-dominance of communal politics.

To most Waheedul Haq is known as a columnist and organiser of Chayanat and Rabindra-shangeet related activities. Few however know that he was once the district organiser of the left leaning National Awami Party, got elected as a Basic Democracy member (during Ayub regime), and contested for the parliament on NAP ticket. Similarly, few know that he also was the music director (jointly with Ustad Bahadur Khan) of Rititik Ghatak's famous movie, 'Titas

Ekti Nodir Nam.' He was a part time teacher at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. He was even a good football player. Waheedul Haq was therefore a journalist, politician, singer, writer, cultural organiser, social activist, sportsman, etc. all in one, and excelling in many. He was a multi-dimensional personality.

Waheedul Haq was therefore a Renaissance man, whose knowledge, expertise, and interests extended over a wide range, including art, languages, literature, mythology, history, anthropology, ethnology, sculpture, architecture, music, and more. Knowledge for him was a passion and a way to enlightenment, rather than a means to make the buck.

Waheedul Haq was also a Renaissance man, because he saw the main vocation of his life in responding to the greater calls of the society, in public service. He did not allow personal and family concerns to derail him from his pursuit of the greater causes he espoused. He did not compromise with undemocratic Pakistani rulers. He did not compromise with undemocratic Bangladeshi rulers. None of them could buy him off with material gains or position. None of them could cow him down for doing things that the rulers did not approve or were not quite happy about.

Nor did he do it for name or fame. He did not run after recognition. A self-effacing worker, he did it, because he thought it was his duty. Himself a good singer, Waheedul Haq was reluctant to produce any album containing his own rendition of songs. He wanted to serve the society even in his death, asking to donate his body for medical research. True to his self-

effacing nature, he did not want even a grave for himself!

Waheedul Haq, together with a few like-minded colleagues, founded Chayanat in 1961 (alongside organising the centennial of Rabindranath's birth), at the height of Ayub's power, when the regime was making conscious efforts at cleansing the then East Pakistan's culture from Rabindranath's influence. It was a courageous step. Since then Chayanat has been able to impart the love of music, and of Rabindra shangeet in particular, to thousands of young of this country. To this day, Chayanat remains the beacon of secular humanism, the standard bearer of Bangalee culture that refuses to be contaminated by communalism. No wonder Chayanat musical rally celebrating the secular event of Pohela Baishak became one of the targets of recent fundamentalist attack.

In 1980, to revive interest in Rabindra shangeet and to spread its practice to all corners of the country, Waheedul Haq launched the National Rabindra Sangeet Conference, which now has about fifty branches across the country. He founded "Konthoshilon," an organisation to promote recitation; "Anondodhani," an organisation for teaching music; and "Shishu-Tirtha," a children's organisation for recitation. He was pained by the loss of national identity in post-independent Bangladesh, as manifested by the bifurcation of the education system into "Madrasahs" on the one hand, and English medium schools, on the other. He wanted to raise the flag representing the Bangalee identity, and established Nalanda, an innovative school for children. He was the Vice-President of the

organization, "Brotochari." He also founded "Chalachitra Sanshad," an organization devoted to promotion of quality and art films.

Even any one of the above could be a lifetime's achievement for many. But, for Waheedul Haq, all came very naturally, all resulting from his fundamental desire to be useful to the society, to promote the secular Bangalee identity, to uphold humanism.

Though known more for his cultural activism, professionally Waheedul Haq was associated mainly with journalism. During his journalism career lasting more than fifty years, Waheedul Haq worked for various newspapers, including The Bangladesh Observer, The Morning News, The People, The New Nation. He served as joint editor of The Daily Star. However, he wrote substantive essays too, and some of these are collected in several books that he published, including "Ganer Vitor Diye Esho" and "Shangkriti Jagoroner Prothom Surja." In recent years, Waheedul Haq was more known for his columns in Janakantha and Vorer Kagoj. His Janakantha column, "Avoy Baje Hridoy Mazhe" was a treat to read every Tuesday, even if one did not agree with all the viewpoints that he expressed in it. In his columns, Waheedul Haq displayed exemplary erudition, a remarkable ease at bringing in necessary information and arguments from all different subjects and disciplines.

A second quality of his writing was the disarming directness, which was so enjoyable. He wrote with no qualifications, no subterfuge, no hedging, just plain directness, often times aggressive. How could he be so direct, writing not from abroad, but being in the country and

very much within the reach of authorities? He could do so, because he was honest and not beholden to any vested interests. He did not make compromises, and so he did not have bones to hide in his closet. It is this honesty that gave him the courage to be so direct.

Waheedul Haq also developed a unique writing style, a style that had a certain Joycean quality to it. The language would freely follow his stream of thoughts; sentences would remain half-sentences, or they would run on and on, as necessary to conform and put down those thoughts into writing. Words would also fall in as necessary, be they taken directly from Sangskrit or straight from contemporary American lexicon, and of course from Bangla in between. Allusions would reach as easily extend to Mahabharat as to Magna Carta. There would be no artificiality, no contrived choice regarding word or sentence construction. Yet there would be depth, there would be breadth, and there would be, what we call in Bangla, "rosho-uttimota."

Only a few months ago, the nation lost poet Shamsur Rahman, another great icon of secular Bangalee identity and humanism. Now we have lost Waheedul Haq. Yet the causes they stood for remain very much in jeopardy. During the communal riots of 1950, Waheedul Haq rushed to Savar with his friends to stand by the Hindu families under attack. He participated actively in the Liberation War, helping in the organisation of the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro. He thought that with the independence of Bangladesh, the specter of communalism will be finally buried, and a healthy Bangalee identity based on humanism will flourish. Yet, after half a century since 1950 communal riots, Waheedul Haq had



to rush again in 2001 to Shirajganj to save Purnima and bring her back with him to provide refuge. The country still faces the danger of religious fundamentalism trying to take over. The struggle remains, yet the titans are passing away one by one. Who will be replacing them?

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Remove the scourge of corruption

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ONLY 1 percent of the people are holding 40 percent of the country's resources. How is that! Yes, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) also revealed that each national of the land has to pay Taka 485 as bribe per year, and the nation as a whole thus pays Taka 7000 crore in the same period. Even then, the Bangladesh government has not yet signed, not to speak of ratification, the United Nation's Convention Against Corruption, although 83 countries out of 148 signatories have already ratified the convention that was adopted on October 31, 2003 and opened for signature on December 9, 2003.

Such nonchalance very squarely indicates how unwilling our previous political government was in reining in corruption, though the top-most complaint against it was one of endless corruption. This is, however, not to imply that the governments prior to the previous 4-party alliance government had taken genuine steps to combat the menace of corruption. Among the previous government's steps relating to combating corruption was, however, to replace the Bureau of Anti-corruption (BAC) with the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC).

The independent Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), (a misnomer indeed!), even once took up an ambitious mission named "Trap Case

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Drive." The objective was to trap the corrupt officials re-handled with the help of prospective bribe givers. We, however, did not see any significant achievement in this regard. Admittedly, this old wine in new bottle (ACC) failed to win the acceptance of the people and the foreign dignitaries, and they (foreign dignitaries) didn't mince words and derided it as a sheer joke, and very rightly so.

A barrage of complaints runs against our ministers and official incumbents in every corner of the country. The country is still faced with severe power shortage -- essentially a dirty legacy of the previous government's utter negligence and ruthless corruption in the power sector -- resulting in many other inadequacies. How unfortunate the nation is! Yes, it was more than an open secret that many power projects were alleged to have been ditched by the real power-house -- many refer to it as Howa Bhaban -- rather than the secretariat, owing to non-availability of commission.

Over and above, the prices of

essentials constantly increased, and underdevelopment plagued many essential sectors of the country and its economy. And, criminal syndicates -- another offshoot of reckless corruption by the state machinery -- snatched away taka around 3 lac crore from the countrymen in five years. Interestingly, however, all the failures were largely attributed to the corruption of the people -- political and administrative-- entrusted with the state machinery. The people seek real efforts from the interim government to unearth the dirty scams that have crippled the nation to a degree.

The recently launched Human Development in South Asia Report 2005 identified weak governance -- an ancillary of widespread corruption -- as one of the major reasons causing human insecurity in South Asia, not least in Bangladesh. Back in June 2006, Richard Boucher, while giving a statement before the House Committee in International Relations, commented that corruption and poor governance were the main obstacles facing Bangladesh. He also added that

these vices were indeed a drag on Bangladesh's economy, resulting in non-realisation of expected levels of growth and hindering reduction of poverty.

While placing the 12-point election plus agenda for the current caretaker government, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) executive director Debapriya Bhattacharya said that the economy of Bangladesh has already achieved an internal power to grow at a rate of 5-6 percent annually, and that another 2-3 percent growth can be attained by ensuring good governance and smooth functioning of the government. I think that is impossible without settling stumbling blocks in the way of reckless corruption that was let loose during the tenure of the previous regime.

The World Bank has defined poor governance as one characterized by arbitrary policy-making, unaccountable bureaucracies, unenforced or unjust legal systems, the abuse of executive power, a civil society unengaged in public life, and widespread corruption. I believe widespread corrup-

tion works as a catalyst for the other maladies. Sadly, in Bangladesh, corruption has also become a serious social malady. Unfortunately, it has attained a sort of benumbed social acceptance as well.

People with wealth are honoured these days, even if they have attained that wealth through dubious means. Our political leaders and official incumbents have become so greedy and unscrupulous that they are pretty consistent in turning deaf ears to the calls for shunning corruption. However, it is also futile to force the lower ranking people to give up corruption before streamlining the top. Institutional means to curbing corruption is indeed a good initiative.

But, I believe psychological refinement should precede institutional arrangements. And it has to be ensured from the top. To send corruption packing, it is the policy makers at the helm of the country who are supposed to show the way in the first place. Anyway, the current non-party government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed can present a roadmap to the political parties in this regard which, however, should be preceded by a genuine crackdown on the corrupt, irrespective of party affiliation and of social or political status.

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Conserving liquid fuel

S.A. MANSOOR

BANGLADESH imports practically all its liquid fuel. A negligible amount of petroleum and condensate is available around Sylhet, near proven gas fields. Given this reality, we should do all we can to adopt and implement realistic and pragmatic policies and strategies for maximizing liquid fuel conservation. By far the largest consumption of liquid fuel goes towards transport operation and power generation; and these areas need special emphasis.

The transport sector, one of the largest consumers of liquid fuel like octane, petrol and diesel, represents a large area where maximizing conservation is possible and realistic. It does not need any foreign exchange. Only some simple rationalization and local study, which is well within our capability, are all that is needed. These simple possibilities are described in the following paragraphs:

Ideal driving speed: This is an awareness that needs to be widespread among all vehicle owners and drivers. Depending on the vehicle's engine capacity and usual loading profile, its best fuel efficiency is around a narrow band of speed.

For passenger cars upto 1500cc. engine capacity, which are classified as light vehicles, this efficiency range lies between 45 and 55km per hour. For cargo carrying vehicles like vans, light and heavy trucks this ideal speed range can be determined by us. This is a fairly simple experimental study that needs to be done.

Idling fuel loss: This aspect is totally ignored, yet it is a simple and practical area for fuel saving. The variables in this case are also vehicle engine capacity, engine tuning and driver's awareness. It also depends on time and traffic density; and most importantly traffic management by police at intersections. We are familiar with long queues of idling vehicles at Dhaka road-crossings, while the policemen waves a few rickshaws and push-carts to cross over. Maybe even a few cars, leave aside police and flagged cars, are waved across, while the queue of various types of idling motor vehicles may be hundreds of meters long!

The amount of fuel consumed by these idling vehicles is not a factor weighed in the policeman's

decision making! Probably the amount of fuel wasted in Dhaka every day by this means alone may be well over a ton! This aspect of fuel conservation is totally dependent on traffic management, and needs awareness and training of traffic policeman to understand and appreciate the potential fuel saving that they can bring about!

Driving training: The concept of ideal driving speeds, and shutting-off of engines rather than idling, needs to be clarified and understood. Many drivers in their ignorance believe that the higher the speed they drive at the more fuel they save! The mere fact of shutting-off engines, if practiced in Dhaka city, can save well over ten tons of petrol daily! Unfortunately, most drivers, even the educated ones, do not realise that stopping and restarting the engine saves more than half the fuel consumed while idling for half a minute!

These simple lessons, if ingrained in drivers and traffic police personnel, can be a good starting point. The government should give all encouragement to NGOs and other civic organizations to take up this programme in earnest.

Further, the state run audiovisual media and the printed pages should drive home these simple ideas to all vehicle owners and operators, somewhat in line with our AIDS awareness program. The money so spent by the government would be recovered ten times over in hard-earned foreign exchange savings! Traffic police personnel need to be retrained to incorporate these ideas in their day-to-day traffic control operation.

BUET may be advised and provided necessary funds to find out the ideal fuel-efficient speed range for some of the popular types and models of buses and trucks, so that the knowledge can be spread across the road transport sector all over Bangladesh.

To sum up, the real need is widespread publicity and awareness. The return on this social investment, in terms of time and recourses, brooks no further delay. The question is: will the authorities take the time and effort to set the ball rolling?

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