

The new CEC

He begins on a positive note

WE are encouraged by the sentiments expressed by ATM Shamsul Huda moments after he took charge as the country's new Chief Election Commissioner.

His belief that he can turn the Election Commission around and, in his own words, make the body an institution every citizen can be proud of is appreciable. Given the sordid manner in which the EC was treated till recently by those who manned it and those patronising them, the new CEC's clear perception of the issues is understandable. He appears to be seized of the problems which have so far stymied the EC, which is not what we could say about the band of men who were there before he and his team came in. Overall, the stated goal of CEC Shamsul Huda is clearly a restoration of public confidence in the body. He is surely in a position to do that now that he has a clean deck to work on.

The new CEC's emphasis on reforms of the electoral system in consultation with political parties, clearly the major stakeholders in the present situation, and with civil society cannot but be considered significant. If he can accomplish what he has set out to do, through tapping on the wisdom of individuals and groups in turning the EC into a credible, properly functional organization, it will be the political future of the country that will stand to benefit from his efforts. Mr. Huda has demonstrated probity and efficiency in his earlier phases of service to the country. That record now should make it possible for him to do the substantive work which needs to be done. His view, which we share, that the EC has in the recent past rendered itself controversial is certainly a good way to begin a cleansing process in the body. He will not likely make the mistakes that his predecessors did. A pointer to that comes through his clear intention to identify all the obstacles to holding a free and fair election through an examination of the proposals and opinions so far advanced about reforms of the electoral process.

For all the good intentions of the new CEC and despite all the support he will have from the nation, ATM Shamsul Huda knows the difficulties involved in undertaking a major enterprise from scratch. Every move he makes will come under intense media and public scrutiny. There are the pitfalls before him; and how adroitly he skirts around them remains to be seen. He may not be between a rock and a hard place, but he does tread some very sensitive ground. Our hope is that he can, based on his wisdom and people's expectations, guide us to the desired goal of a free and fair general election. The sooner he can do it, the more benefited the country will be.

Signing UN convention against corruption

A step in the right direction

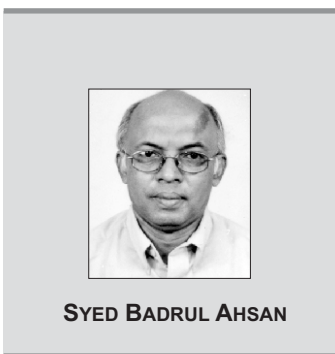
CARETAKER government's decision to ratify the UN convention against corruption is a commendable one. This will help make the country's anti-corruption measures compatible with international standards. We are happy to see that the ministry of foreign affairs has already been directed to initiate necessary steps in this respect.

The convention is aimed at encouraging the signatories to set up autonomous anti-corruption watchdogs to deal with all kinds of corrupt practices both in the private and public sectors. Ratification of the convention is of significance since our National Anti-corruption Commission is already in the process of being restructured, revamped and rejuvenated.

Significantly, the convention will allow Bangladesh to have access to international co-operation and subsequently help her set up auditing standards and systems of international level. It is important to note that as many as 148 countries have already signed the convention.

If anything, we should have taken this action much earlier. Volumes have been said and written about corrupt practices persisting in the country of all dimensions for years that are now public knowledge. The decision to sign up to the convention coincides with two developments. First, it is going to materialise at a time when Bangladesh is 'perceived' to rank as the second most corrupt nation in the world after topping the list for some few years. Second, for all practical purposes, we are already in the middle of a campaign against corruption initiated by the caretaker government.

Signing of the convention will devolve upon us a greater responsibility to make an all out bid in weeding out corruption and abuse of power from society. Just as we can add two percent more to our GDP growth by containing corruption, our image to that extent will also have improved substantially.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

POLITICAL leaders and workers have regularly trekked to prison in the Indian subcontinent. You could go back to British colonial times, when the practice of sending good men off to jail was inaugurated and, indeed, became fashionable. You could then draw the conclusion that much of the good that later was done by the likes of Gandhi and Nehru had rather a lot to do with their experience of loneliness in solitary cells. Every term of imprisonment Gandhi went through seemed to rejuvenate the spirit in him. Jawaharlal Nehru did the unthinkable: he wrote his Discovery of India in prison. A spell in jail, you see, can often be an enlightening experience.

But enlightenment is not exactly you should be expecting with all these Bengali politicians, along with a dash of businessmen, being sent off to prison in these past few days. There is a very good reason why such men, as also quite a few others in the last few years, may not be able to draw on their inner reserves of moral strength and emerge free to tell us that they have words of wisdom on offer for us. These men, we understand and we know, are now behind bars on

Politics, you know deep within yourself, is in bad need of some spring-cleaning. As the cleansing goes on, as corrupt ministers and venal lawmakers go into hiding, you wait and watch. This happens to be one of those times when people across the country wait for politics, streaked with integrity and idealism, to be restored in Bangladesh. And politics, by the way, is not what we have observed in these parts over the five years gone by. We wait, in the gathering twilight. Beyond the night, we imagine there will come upon us a purposeful dawn.

allegations of corruption. That makes a whole lot of difference. Where, in earlier times, politicians were packed off to prison cells as a way of ensuring their silence, or keeping them away from stirring up the passions of their people, today a good number of them are being hunted down because of the betrayal of trust they have so clearly demonstrated in their exercise of power.

Now that these men are in prison, it will be our expectation that due process of law will be applied in dealing with them, that there must not be the slightest hint or suspicion that the rights they are privy to as prisoners are being trifled with. That is what justice is all about. And justice has something more about it. The corruption that these men have indulged in is an infraction of the law that must be swiftly and substantively dealt with. While we expect their rights as prisoners to be upheld, we also think it proper that there will be no loopholes in the law that might allow anyone truly and actually guilty of corruption to walk free.

Sit back, and note sadly how the state of politics has declined in Bangladesh in these past three decades and a

half. You remember the honest man that was Tajuddin Ahmed; and you see all those good people recalling the probity in Shah AMS Kibria. As you do that, you are jerked into the unhappy realization that the son of another finance minister, Saifur Rahman, has now landed in jail because of the wrongs he is alleged to have committed. As men and women with faith in the social values upon which we have all nurtured ourselves, with deep roots in tradition, it will be proper to ask: when the sons appeared to be sinning, where were the fathers to hold them back? Ah, here you could run into some uncomfortable moral trouble.

There is a slew of fathers in this country who have in more ways than one taught their children that taking what comes in life is all right, that it would be futile to ask too many questions about the origin of all the wealth one can come by. Do you note how morality has been taking a battering? All these structures of concrete being struck down, all these reports of how powerful men have taken money from the nationalized banks and thought nothing of returning it, all these sordid

tales of commandeering urban lakes and rural rivers are part of some of the saddest experiences some of our politicians have pushed us into.

You do not expect a politician to make money on the sale of public transport vehicles. In remembrance of the teachings of your fathers, you know that it is wrong to parcel out prime public land to organizations that people in your family might be providing leadership to. And you ought to be outraged at the spectacle of ministers doling out promotions and transfers to policemen in return for pecuniary benefits. These are scandals that do not happen in a democratic society. And yet they have happened in the state of democracy we have tried to build all these years.

Good politicians, committed politicians do not sin. It is always the pretenders to politics who barge into the system and make a mess of it. That is one way of looking at it. Even so, when you consider all the wrong that has gone on in the past five years, perhaps more, you know that the wrong has been perpetrated by all the dishonest men and women in our politics. It stands to reason to ask how men who five years

ago were like you and me and the rest of us became, in a mere five years, powerful voices of the media, enough to draw into their organizations journalists reputed for their dedication to the profession.

Walk back to the past, in this country, and you will come across the tales of political leaders whose sense of idealism constantly gave us reasons to uphold patriotism as a benchmark of morality. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's story need not be related again. There were men like Ataur Rahman Khan and Abu Hossain Sarkar for whom respect has always flowed from us. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy may not exactly be your idea of a great democrat (there are all the reasons upon which you base your opinion), but you will not deny him the honour he deserves as a defender of popular rights.

Consider all those other men with whom you did not, or would not have, agreed on all the significant political questions of the day. But none of these men strayed from the principles that constitute integrity. Moulvi Farid Ahmed, Mohammad Ali Bogra and Justice Mohammad Ibrahim were individuals you could trust. It was a particular feature of the times now gone that men in positions of public trust were the light you could draw moral strength from.

You do not come by such brilliance any more. When you have a set of conditions where an entire society finds the netting of some politicians a breather, you know how life has dwindled into the bizarre. Back in the old days, popular aspirations were riveted on the need

to have society's political spokesmen freed from prison. Today you ask why some politicians have yet to face the music. That is the shame we go through, but it is shame we, the people, did not bring upon ourselves.

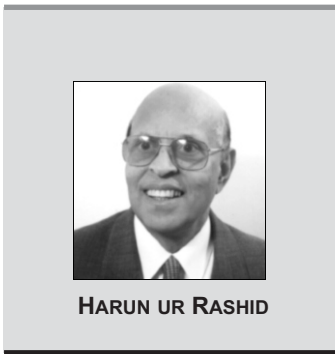
When a minister and a minister of state decide, early on in their days in government, to have fourteen passengers on a flight off-loaded in order for them and their families to travel back home after Umrah, there is that contraction in your heart telling you of the darkness ahead. Your ambassadors earn extensions of their contracts through service to the sibling of a prime minister. Mere assistant secretaries to the government side up to the political hooligans holding office and reap the benefits --- new vehicles every year and apartments purchased in the names of their parents and spouses.

Politics, you know deep within yourself, is in bad need of some spring-cleaning. As the cleansing goes on, as corrupt ministers and venal lawmakers go into hiding, you wait and watch. This happens to be one of those times when people across the country wait for politics, streaked with integrity and idealism, to be restored in Bangladesh. And politics, by the way, is not what we have observed in these parts over the five years gone by.

We wait, in the gathering twilight. Beyond the night, we imagine there will come upon us a purposeful dawn.

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Muslims in India: All around inequality



HARUN UR RASHID

ALTHOUGH India takes deep pride in having secular democracy for its many castes, creeds and faiths, the notion has come under severe scrutiny in the last few decades.

Under the BJP's government, the Hindutva doctrine -- one India, one religion (Hindu) and one nation -- came into prominence, marginalizing the non-Hindu communities in the country.

With the Congress-led government in power, it has realized that something needs to be done to improve the condition of minorities, especially its largest religious minority, the Muslims

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(150 million). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (a non-Hindu) commissioned a study by a panel. Its head was a retired High Court judge Rajinder Sachar, and the secretary was Abu Saleh Shariff.

The report that has recently come out was a candid and damning one. It stated:

"The community (Muslim) is relatively poorer, more illiterate, has lower access to education, lower representation in public and private sector jobs, and lower availability of bank credit for self-employment. In urban areas, the community mostly lives in slums characterized by poor municipal infrastructure."

Among others, the most unflattering statistics show that in many states Muslims

are significantly over-represented in prisons. In the western state of Maharashtra, for instance, Muslims make up about 10.6% of the population, but 32.4% of those convicted are facing trial.

In the top national bureaucracy, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Muslims made up 2% of officers in 2006. Among district judges in 15 states surveyed, 2.7% were Muslim. The gap in employment is likely to be among the most politically sensitive issues in the country. Muslims appear to be over-represented in the informal sector of day laborers and street vendors. Muslims secured about 15% of all government jobs, considerably less than the share filled by "backward"

castes and dalits (untouchables).

Educational disparity was the most striking. Among Muslims, the literacy rate is about 59%, compared with more than 65% among Indians as a whole. On average, less than 2% of the students go to the elite Indian Institutes of Technology, Shariff said. The secretary of the panel reportedly said in an interview that in some states education and poverty indicators showed that Muslims had fallen behind even the low-caste Hindus. Shariff said that the panel recommended, among other things, free and compulsory education up to age 14, as well as financial support to promote industries in which Muslims constitute majority of the work-

ers, like textiles.

The report is expected to be made public soon, but leaks in the media have prompted debate in civil society as to whether affirmative action should be applied to Muslims, just like the low-caste Hindus, to uplift the condition of this group. A number of Muslim religious and political leaders have already demanded "quotas" for Muslims. But the BJP has pointed out that Indian law prohibits faith-based "quotas."

Whatever action the government takes, it will raise a complex web of forces in Indian society. There is no straight and simple solution. The question is whether the government can deliver the outcome of economic progress to many Muslims at the bottom of the ladder.

Commenting on the report, Pratap Chandra Mehta, the president of the Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, reportedly said: "What is at stake is not just uplifting this or that group, but the very idea of India itself, whether it has the capacity for transcending the cant, indifference, and identity

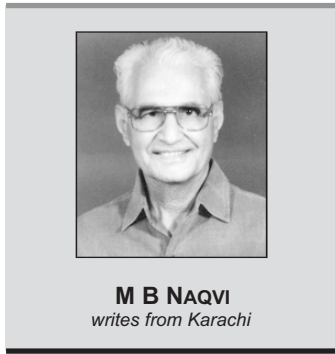
traps that have brought us to this pass."

In this connection, what Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues in his book, that the reduction of individuals to a single identity -- whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian -- is misconceived and emanates from exclusivist forms of thinking of political organizations, is relevant. For example, a human being has multiple personalities and only one of them is religious. Such an individual could be an Indian citizen, a Bengali, an author, a music lover, a strong believer in secularism, and a man or woman.

Finally, it is a soul-searching report. At least the Congress-led government must be given the credit for commissioning such a report to address Muslim concerns.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

New ME wars?



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

AMERICA'S confrontation with Iran promises to be titanic. It is boosting its military strength in the Gulf region; a new aircraft carrier group has reinforced the western naval flotillas in the area; doubtless some more reinforcements from the US and its Nato allies are to be expected. Iran, for its part, has been showing off its new smart ammunition and arms and says it will give a good fight.

As a layman one can only see one side as overpoweringly strong. But Iran, not being a big industrial power, can be no match. But that is not to say it will prove to be an easy morsel to swallow. It has certain advantages: the size of the country; a population of about 40 million youths; a high degree of commitment in

This new Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran has far too many evil potentialities -- for the Arabs. A war fought against Iran under American, Israeli, Saudi, Egyptian, Jordanian and other Gulf Sheikdoms' colours will have totally unforeseeable consequences. Arab politics may see a revival of Nasser-like Arab nationalism against a greater US-Israel domination of Arab lands, which quite possibly will generate more sympathy for Iran among Arab masses. It can also mean the Wahabite Islamist militants retraining their guns on Arab monarchs and dictators for selling the Arabs down the river.

Iranian forces; and the will to defend their country. And there has been some new acquisitions of technology.

Iran has made no secret of what it can do: it will stop exporting oil almost as soon as the war starts; withdrawal of four million barrels of oil a day from the market will send prices sky-high, and world economy will be hurt.

It will feel free to hit not only US military targets but also Israel. It may intervene in the Iraqi civil war, or may try and outflank US military strong points and elect to engage with Israel in non-conventional ways.

But, above all else, it will seek to stop all oil exports from the Gulf ports by blocking the Hormuz Straits, if it can manage to sink a ship or two in it. To

PLAIN WORDS

supplement their own strength and clothe the war of their choice with ME governments, the Americans are drumming up an Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran.

Condoleezza Rice, in her recent swing through the region, was trying to sew it up. Quite in time for this purpose, Israel and the US have now remembered the four-year old Saudi plan for peace between Palestinians and Israelis; Rice has shown reluctance to revive the roadmap (to keep out the Europeans) and plans to solve the major problems by new peace-making actors -- agreement on a boundary between Israel and the Palestinian state in a two-state solution, settle-

ments issue, status of Jerusalem and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.

The proposed new Arab-Israeli alliance, actually led by US, can hope to dictate a new peace. But this new Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran has far too many evil potentialities -- for the Arabs. A war fought against Iran under American, Israeli, Saudi, Egyptian, Jordanian and other Gulf Sheikdoms' colours will have totally unforeseeable consequences.

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Arabs down the river.

Irrespective of its military outcome, a war that looks like an Arab-Iran war will revive an ancient feud, and passions will certainly run high. But the most fearful aspect of Arabs versus "Ajamies" is that it coincides with the oldest schism in Islam. Such a war will deepen that divide, and can cause a gargantuan conflagration. Rivers of blood can flow, and huge ethnic cleansing can result, if this war is not prevented. Here is a million dollar question: would Pakistan, a close friend of Saudis that used to enjoy a certain oil facility, now expired, sign on as an honorary Arab, if there is such a thing.

The recent tour by President Pervez Musharraf of the main Arab members-to-be of this alliance has raised questions about the purpose of his role. During the tour he had visualized recognizing Israel if it agreed to a two-state solution to the Palestine problem, and if the Arabs were satisfied. It is not clear which Arabs' satisfaction is being sought. He seems to be anxious to join this quest for an Arab-Israeli peace, ignoring any number of issues to be solved at home. Pakistan's accession to this alignment, formal or informal,

will get instantaneous reaction from Iran. Iran may pull the rug from under Pakistanis and Indians insofar as the PIP pipeline project is concerned.

Then, there is the domestic situation; it will be at sixes and sevens some more. Don't forget, this Arab-Iran war will be seen as a Shia-Sunni war. Even otherwise, our al-Qaeda-like Lashkars and Jaishes of militant Islamists will start, or restart, a war of their own -- against the Shias that are close at hand.

Also, it is not to be ignored that the flames of such a war will spread quickly over Arab lands and create a new climate of opinion with a sense of urgency: some will say, now is an unexpected chance to settle centuries-old scores. They will find it hard to resist the temptation. Ethnic cleansing on a large scale may follow here. Can this risk be taken? Can such a risk remain confined to Arab lands?

It is obvious that Pakistan is particularly vulnerable on this score. And not only this country, almost all non-Arab Muslim countries in Asia, and even Africa, are at risk because Islam is nowhere a monolith; there is plenty of pluralism in Muslim societies.

Even non-Muslim countries like India and China, and many in Africa, may have to face this hazard because they have sizeable Muslim minorities containing one plurality or another. Countries of South Asia had better look out and start taking preventive steps. Even in those Muslim countries that are blessed with only one sect, militant Islamists can be trusted to make non-Muslim minorities their target of oppression in the inflamed climate of opinion.

Time was, and not so long ago, when millions had marched against a likely Iraq war. The US is more or less trapped in Iraq and Afghanistan and cannot easily extricate itself from there. And yet it may be planning another war of choice in Iran. The full effects of the Afghan and Iraq wars have not worked themselves out yet. The Iraq civil war is raging and, given this new Iran war, it may rapidly spiral. What the final consequences will be is anyone's guess.

Whether the US and its European supporters will get what they may be planning is doubtful. What is certain is that millions will die, much property will be destroyed and many more will become homeless

refugees.

One fondly remembers the vibrant anti-war movement in 2002 and 2003 when millions marched in protest. The movement did not achieve much; wars of choice are taking place; and the governments where protests were loudest have been more or less keen supporters of the US. A disheartening fatigue has overtaken the peace movement. It is certain that there are millions who hate war and love peace and human welfare. Can they not reinvigorate themselves by telling their governments to stop messing things up in ME and the rest of Asia and Africa?

There is far greater need for a peace movement in Pakistan. We need a simple, uncontrolled democracy, and a commitment not to get involved in dangerous troubles elsewhere. Let us live in peace and amity with neighbours. The sad thing is that these things are regarded as platitudes and are disregarded. But they remain urgent needs. Peace within and peace without is what we cannot do without.

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