

## Servants of the republic

Reforms needed to protect the efficient and the honest

THE Chief Advisor's (CA) call to the field level public servants to be completely free from the influence of any person, vested group or politics, to salvage the trust and respect of the people, must be welcomed by everyone who would like to see depoliticised and influence-free public servants run the administration of the state.

In his address to the DCs and SPs the CA has brought out three essential aspects of the civil bureaucracy that are self-evident and obvious, but which the past governments had hardly made any effort to ensure.

While we welcome the CA's call we feel that at the same time the government must examine why the public servants, as officials of the republic, cannot, and in some cases do not, perform their duties without fear or favour when there is a political government in power? Why is that rules and regulations are respected only in their violation at the command of their political masters. Why is it that the police treat some as being above the law while others are deprived of its benefits? In fact the signs of relief in the faces of some of the district commissioners describing to the media the positively changed working environment at the present moment was very palpable.

While there is no doubt that it is the politicians who will dictate the affairs of the state, the public servants should help implement policies. And while doing so they must not compromise their principles, and should have the moral strength to resist illegal and undue pressure, from whichever quarter. However, we also agree that to resist political pressure on the part of the bureaucrats becomes difficult at times. And very few emerge unscathed from the encounter. But then there are many bureaucrats who are only too willing to oblige. These are the ones that are the beneficiaries of political favour and the positions they hold are not due to their competence but their ability to please their political masters by doing their biddings in violation of rules and regulations.

While it is the incompetent and immoral public servants that should take note of the CA's call very seriously, we would like to think that the great majority of our public servants are efficient and are committed to the interest of the state and not the party in power. Thus we feel that there is the need for appropriate administrative reforms to protect the interest of the efficient and honest servants of the republic.

## Bank loan defaulters

Tighten the noose

THE ongoing drive against all sorts of irregularities committed in the last decade or so has been successful so far in unveiling evidence of crimes of amazing proportion. Alongside corruption in all the other sectors, the country has also seen unbridled corruption in the banking sector, where either the directors of commercial banks have themselves taken hundreds of crores of taka as loan or have given such loans to corrupt businessmen. In the process the system has created a good number of big time bank defaulters.

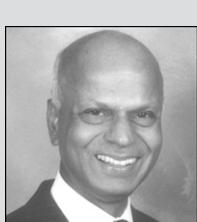
We are aware of the latest drive given by the intelligence agencies to collect information regarding financial misappropriation and violation of the Money Laundering Act by about 50 businessmen of the country. As part of the drive, the detectives have also collected documents of suspicious bank transactions by the businessmen in question from the central bank. It appears from the media reports that the central bank has been sitting on the information for many years.

While we think the present drive against the big time bank defaulters deserves a pat on the back, we express our bewilderment as to why the valuable information did not surface before the change of government? And every time there is a change we see a flurry of activities on the part of the central bank and anti-corruption authorities. But at the end of the day the real problem remains unresolved.

It is a common understanding that the case against bank loan defaulters should proceed on as per the laws of the central bank, Bangladesh Bank in this case, and the culprits should be given exemplary punishment to drive home the point that bank money has to be returned. The loan defaulters must be told in clear language that they cannot hide long behind political or any other power, and that they are not above the laws of the land.

The caretaker government has to finish what it has started. The culture of bank loan default has to be uprooted now.

## Arms race in space



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM  
writes from Madrid

ON January 11, 2006 China fired a medium range ballistic missile from the ground to destroy one of its old weather satellites which was orbiting approximately 860 kilometres above the Earth. The news of this successful anti-satellite weapon test was received in the United

States with concern and consternation. But why should a country which happens to be the world's only super power react to an anti-satellite test in such a manner?

There is no doubt that the US is the world's most advanced country in military hardware and software, which also includes space technology. It is probably the only country in the world which is capable of launching sophisticated satellites with medium and long-range ballistic missiles at relatively short notice. It has already got dozens of them in space, both for peaceful purposes like weather forecasting and crop monitoring and for military purposes like conducting reconnaissance, spotting nuclear tests, spying and guiding missiles. The US military also depends heavily on satellites for navigation and communications. The obvious

objective is to maintain first-strike capability against China, or any other enemy, by neutralising its nuclear deterrent and other military assets.

China has been deeply worried about this vulnerable situation for a long time. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty banned weapons of mass destruction in space. For years China, with Russia's backing, has tried to negotiate a new international treaty banning all sorts of weapons in space, but the US has

## Reforming the electoral process



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

Election Commission to complete the expected homework.

We are indeed fortunate that Bangladesh has a vibrant civil society, keenly interested in being active participant in not only good governance issues but also in the acceptable performance of electoral objectives. Seminars, workshops and written recommendations have surfaced over the last year in general and since November 2006 in particular.

The interim government has been taking suitable and appropriate steps till now. They have shown

apple cart has been tipped over and dismantled over the past few days. The new CEC and his team can hardly be blamed if they think that they have been caught between a rock and a hard place. However, it is this difficulty that must encourage them towards calling the glass half-full rather than half-empty.

The interim government has

been making efforts to get their act together. Their efforts

pertaining to the obtaining of transparent ballot boxes and the preparation of a corrected voters' list and an acceptable Voters' ID must not be tarred with debate. This will be possible given cooperation and goodwill from the major stakeholders. However, such consensus and agreement can only emerge if there is discussion with all parties.

That must start now with all sincerity and the interim government must facilitate this course of action.

Suggestions have been put forward about how the controversial Voters' List can be corrected, how the Voters' ID Card can be prepared and issued expeditiously at relatively low cost and how essentially such digital information can be eventually collated to create the National ID Card for every Bangladeshi, as has been done in several other countries.

The different political parties and their leaderships have also identified ways and means as to how the remedial measures can be undertaken. They are keen about the implementation of necessary reforms so that a free and fair election can be held in a 'level-playing field'. They have been expressing the need for a proactive and neutral engagement from our Election Commission.

There is consensus that major initiatives have to be taken to ensure the holding, as soon as possible, of a free, widely participated, fair and acceptable election.

Such an election is viewed as being fundamental not only for the democratic process but also for eventual good governance and for future economic development and foreign direct investment.

The new CEC will have to understand that he is not alone. He has many well-wishers who are willing and interested in helping the

staunchness in their approach towards the eradication of politicisation of state institutions that had so carefully been put in place by the immediate past government. They are now trying to clean the web of 'election engineering' that had been laid out carefully within the Election Commission itself. This is laudable. However, changing only those at the top will not be enough. It must also be accompanied by transformation at the lower levels and tiers. There have been appointments of hundreds of politicised officials that need to be undone.

It would be pertinent to note here that, like others, I have also welcomed certain observations that have been reported recently in the media with regard to how the caretaker government intends to introduce additional reforms in the political process. I am referring here to the need to bring about greater transparency and accountability within the matrix and the paradigm of the political dynamics.

One hopes that the following actions are taken as soon as possible.

The Election Commission needs to be cleansed of all the controversies of partisanship that now taints this vital institution. The CEC, I am sure, knows that each action undertaken by the EC will be scrutinised minutely, particularly by those whose carefully organised

needs to be discussed urgently between the new EC team and political party representatives is the question of mandatory registration of political parties. A half-hearted attempt was made by the EC ahead of the 2001 election, but did not succeed due to the opposition of the main political parties. The Adviser on Law in this caretaker administration has mentioned that this administration is determined to bring all political parties under the law and that the government has already started drafting the necessary laws. He has also expressed that this will be completed within the tenure of this administration. Very good, but please sit and discuss this important step with representatives from the major political parties. It is true that thirty-five political parties have so far applied for registration, but most of them are minor, other than the fragmented Jatiya Party. There will be complexities, but then they have to be faced and suitable agreements arrived at. Consensus in this regard will be important.

I will now touch on another significant area that usually has an impact on any electoral process, irrespec-

tive of the level of the election. This relates to the cause and effect relationship of dirty money and the nexus that exists between criminals and politicians in our country. Greed for power, most unfortunately, not only fuels partisanship but also encourages lack of accountability where candidates to elections not only think that they are above the law but also that all codes and rules approved by the Election Commission are meaningless.

Another important step that

be Election Commission at the time of submission of his application form. The candidate, in addition to academic qualifications, should also be expected to provide the EC with records of past criminal cases against him, the sources of his income along with a record of the income paid by him for the last five years and a statement of the movable and immovable assets currently owned by him and his immediate family members. At the same time he should make available details of loans taken and if he is in default with regard to any of them. The candidate should also make public if he has any interest in any particular company or business establishment. These are preventive steps that can only enhance transparency and improve the political process. This will also enable all political parties to select better candidates, less prone to future corruption.

One cannot conclude without reflecting once again certain other factors that involve our EC. It suffers today from lack of true financial and administrative independence. This needs to be corrected by the interim government. This will improve efficiency and do away with potential partisanship and politicisation.

The CEC and his team have

many tasks ahead. They also have

very little time to get their act together. Their efforts pertaining to the

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