

## Voter ID card

*The sooner the better*

IT is good news that the Bangladesh Army has offered its expertise to the caretaker government for preparing the much-discussed Voter ID Card. The proposal came in the form of a presentation before the chief adviser, chief of the army, council of advisers, chief election commissioner and other commissioners. The national committee on Voter ID Card and voter list has also submitted its preliminary working plan to the advisers' council. We have to basically mobilise all resources to get the Voter ID Card ready in good time for the general election.

The army being an organised force with motivation, mobility and equipment base can do a good job of the assignment. The army alluded to having field level personnel and referred to VGF card distribution in the country with success. It has been revealed that the ID Card would take about ten months to complete the work at a cost of around Tk. 300 crore.

The subject has been discussed elaborately at various discussion meetings and talk shows and there seem to exist a common consensus with regard to the issuance of the ID Card. Such a tool of identification that cannot be tampered with would help the election commission and civil administration in holding a free and fair election.

But what remains to be ensured about the project is to bolster people's confidence in the procedures and steps followed such as going door to door, verification of the given identity, verification of the declared age, etc. We feel that local level organisations, both public and private, could be used for better coordination at the field level. Some non-government organisations have already done some praiseworthy work at the field level in checking data given in the existing voter list. Their experience would come in handy for the army.

What we feel would be ideal before launching the work is to make a similar presentation before the national media and hold briefing sessions with the political parties for obtaining valuable feedback on the issue. There is also the opportunity of seeking the service of the IT experts in the country in making the work as foolproof as possible. If the army can come up with the voter ID cards then that would be doing a noble service to the nation.

## Prioritise wetland conservation

*An energetic civic movement awaited*

WETLAND encroachment is now such a widespread phenomenon in and around the metropolis that any ad-hoc step of reclaiming the lost acreage followed by legal action against some grabbers can have only limited effect. While potentially the drive against the land grabbers must be brought to a successfully conclusion what can start giving long-term dividends is a civic resistance movement against illegal real estate companies from destroying wetlands and flood plains of Dhaka.

The environmental disaster that the wetland filling poses is multi-faceted: one, it chokes the capital city with perennial water-logging and disrupts the sewer system with attendant health hazards of all kinds. The overflowing sewage develops into deadly feces density. Constricted water flow in moribund water bodies force the geo-morphology to wilt.

There is no well equipped structural set up in the environmental department to fight off violation of wetland laws which are launched by local influential groups. We need environmental policing by some designated authority.

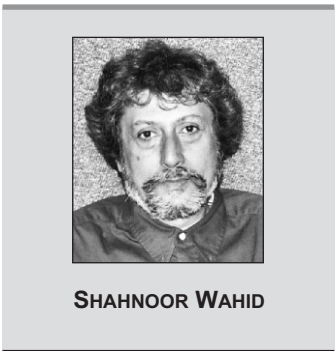
We agree with the Bapa president MA Muhith that the caretaker administration must now extricate Rajuk from its role as a real estate developer; instead enable it to play the role of 'a monitoring body enforcing city planning and design policies'.

Research statistics portray a horrific situation. Given the rate of 5.67 percent at which wetlands are disappearing in a year since 1999, there will be none left by the year 2037.

Housing projects are springing up without approval and this is where something can surely be done.

In the discussion on conservation of wetlands at the Brac Centre an idea that forces an introspection in the media cropped up. The speakers unanimously demanded that the newspapers and other media refrain from carrying advertisements of illegal real estate projects. It is the media that has played a pro-active role in bringing the environmental concerns at the centre stage of national discourse. Public have been sensitised about environmental issues. We must keep the good work going in all possible ways so that a powerful civic movement makes itself felt at the community level to stop the predators of environment on their tracks.

# Of Dr Yunus in politics and raised eyebrows



SHAHNOOR WAHID

A good number of bushy eyebrows are permanently arched upward at the moment. Those are the eyebrows of some learned people who are totally at a loss since Dr. Yunus let the world know about his intentions about joining politics. These crestfallen eminent citizens after finding their wits and voice have begun to send well-meaning words of extreme caution to Nobel Laureate Dr. Yunus. They put forward their conjecture that he would simply get soiled in the filth of politics and thereby tarnish his good image.

The intents are good and upfront. But by saying so the learned citizens are unwittingly admitting the fact that what has been happening in the country in the name of politics is slinging of lot of filth around. They believe that politics is but a realm where corrupt people grab power and loot the public coffers without

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Dr. Yunus is no magician, neither he has a magic bullet to right the wrongs overnight. He is aware of his ability as well as limitations. But one has to acknowledge that first and foremost he is a visionary and a doer. He dares to dream and then dares to take steps to implement his dreams. Grameen Bank was not built in a day. He had to work hard for over twenty years.

shame or quail. And that is why they do not want Dr. Yunus to fall into that garbage pit.

What does that mean? Does that mean the political stable should remain uncleaned so that parasites can keep multiplying? Does that mean no one should try to come forward, clean the filth and open the vents so that fresh air can come in? Does that mean, telling Yunus, you have made it so why bother to dirty your hands? No, someone has to stand up and say point blank, enough is enough, it's time to bring about changes, it's time to set certain things in their correct perspective, it's time to rescue democracy from the unholy grip of thugs and looters. It's time to crush the parasites once and for all.

And who else is there at the moment but Dr. Yunus to show the courage and stand up tall?

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How many of us have that tenacity? Most of us even do not dare to dream! We remain happy with the crumbs offered by the corrupt governments of the day and retreat to our bedrooms to live happily ever after. That's why we are afraid to see any disruption in the system where crumbs are found in abundance. We prefer the status quo situation.

Going back to Grameen Bank it may be said that his critics wanted to see him do miracles with his micro-credit theory. They spend valuable hours and money to tell us how many of the poor people have been benefited and how many have not by borrowing

money from his bank. But the question remains: How old is micro-credit in Bangladesh? And how perennial is poverty in Bangladesh? Can a thousand year old systemic socio-economic ill be cured in twenty plus years? Then how do the learned scholars expect micro-credit to remove poverty in such a short time? By some acts of miracle? But in hard reality there is no room for miracles.

Micro-credit is the modern day cousin of dadon (money lenders) of the olden days that provided working capital for the rural poor. Fishermen, small farmers, fishing net makers, small tools makers, seasonal vegetable growers all benefited from borrowing working capital from the rural moneylenders. They made profit by investing the money and returned the capital along with the accrued interest to the lenders within the stipulated time. This system has been going on since the need for working

capital became a necessity.

Now coming back to Dr. Yunus and his politics. No one expects him and his newly formed party to enjoy a landslide victory in the upcoming election or maybe in the one to be held five years after. What will happen then? Will he be obliterated from the realm of politics? No. His political party having the full support of a large chunk of the saner section in society will act as a very powerful pressure group. This pressure group will keep the government of the day on its toes and take it on a roller coaster ride if it does something unconstitutional or something against the will of the people.

Come to think of it, the new political party, sitting in the opposition bench in parliament and keeping a vigil on the doings of the treasury bench. It would be quite intimidating for the latter because by that time the present caretaker government and the people of the country will have some principles implanted in the political system through bringing about the reforms within the political parties and in the system of governance.

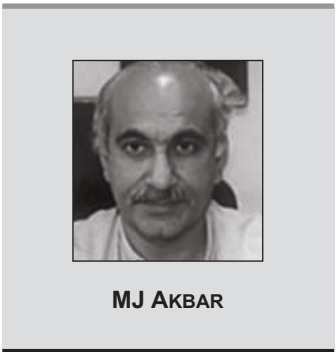
Also, don't forget that the judiciary will not be there anymore at the beck and call of the political parties and their corrupt leaders. No judge will ever stop any hearing of a case that concerns serious political matters or allow bail

to a murderer on political consideration. And no more government officials will go to Uttara at night to wine and dine with some petty politician. Because, by that time they will have their self-respect back. There will be no such thing as a partisan government official in the country. By that time no police official will be used by an MP or ward commissioner or son of an MP to throw opponents in prison.

Sounds idealistic? Sounds utopian? Well, just have the courage to change your mindset and you will see it sounds plausible and doable. What we need to have is the right amount of courage to think that it can be made possible. And it will be possible once the entire canvas is wiped clean and new and bright colour is applied on it to paint the picture of a positive Bangladesh. We must have a vision and a larger than life leader to implement it. There is an acute crisis of courageous leaders in the country at the moment. We have one in the personality of Dr. Yunus, so let us give him a chance. Let us dare to dream. Let him dare to implement our dream.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## Barefoot in the dark



MJ AKBAR

I could have fooled you completely by noting that he wears shoes, but let me offer a few less misleading clues.

He drives through Dubai in a Jaguar that purrs like the beautiful cat it is, and is chauffeured by a young man whose temptations at the wheel get the better of him when the master is not in the car.

He has a corporate office in the Emirates Towers, the sleek symbol of a new world planted on yesterday's desert, a complex combination of offices, hotel, pubs, restaurants and boutiques offering the finest brands of Europe. (America is sparse in the upper echelons of Dubai shopping, since while America can send a spaceship to Mars and an army to Iraq, it cannot quite produce a Patek Philippe mechanical movement handcrafted watch.)

He arrives for lunch at the Lebanese Al Nafura restaurant in a personally designed cotton suit, each stitch made to measure, each button crafted for style, each angle of the collar and lapel fashioned to be a personal statement.

He eats a sparse meal, just a nibble of the delicious hammour fish and a touch of the brinjal in the mezza.

The meal over, we drive to his

BYLINE

Why is an authentic Indian genius living outside his own country, when he wants nothing more than to laugh and converse in Delhi and Mumbai and Hyderabad, and the dozens of other cities that are an integral part of his life? His mind and heart are as liberated as his brush; they have to be since they feed one another.

personal museum where he offers tea in a splendid tent in the garden that would not be out of place in the Arabian Nights.

The motif is red, in the cushions that invite you to slump, and the carpet that invites you to sprawl as it stretches across the wide rectangle on which the tent sits.

The romance of the hookah and the metal jar is set off against a cubit of technology: a pale Japanese air-conditioner is good for the afternoon heat.

Some giveaway clues: he carries a long paintbrush, his signature security blanket. His face is lit by a permanent amused and bemused twinkle in the eyes.

His hair has conquered age, waving over the scalp and swaying below the face, proof that white is a dazzling colour.

He is, of course, Maqbool Fida Husain. He is now a non-resident Indian, much against his will, although he does whisper that he does not have to pay tax on the princely figures that his art fetches these days, something he did faithfully when living in India.

He hints, wistfully rather than softly, that he misses his country. Politics keeps him away: He has become a target in the modern political wars of a democratic India.

Husain's feet are famous for their wanderlust, but he knows that the only place where he can

keep his feet on the ground is in his own country.

A friend told me a story, which I recount to him. It seems that they bumped into each other at London's Heathrow airport.

Since everyone talks to the famous, and Husain is too polite to ignore a fan, my friend asked him where he was headed. Geneva. Just then a voice announced that the British Airways flight to Guyana was ready to board.

Husain interrupted the chat to say that he might as well go to Guyana. As my friend watched, astonished, he bought a ticket and left.

There are many ways of escaping the attention of a fan, but this was surely the most unusual. Was the story true? Husain laughed without betraying an answer.

If it could be true, it should be true, his silence suggested. Myth is always a healthy option for a seamless legend.

He is not above tweaking his identity either. Two decades ago, when he was in his Bengal phase, whether working on his exquisite series on Mother Teresa, or the joyous ironies of the Raj, or the vibrant icons of revolutions, he often signed his work in Bengali.

A Husain was above a Husain. His identity lay as much in the classical and unique independence of his line, as in his name: a

name was only one form of a signature.

It has never much mattered to which degree he stretched a nomenclature: there were times when he changed the meaning of "Maqbool," which signifies acclaim, and turned it into an erotic extension with "Mac the Bull."

Husain is over ninety now, and completely engrossed in his new muse, Amrita. A few years ago, he saw a Madhuri Dixit film, whose name I have fortunately forgotten, a hundred times, but she is now a few wisps within an endless album, a chimera that once devoured him but has now disappeared into a canyon of echoes.

Amrita now rules the unfinished canvas on an easel in the hall, her face etched in more detail than a photograph could reveal, despite being featureless within that superb contour of a curving line. Her sinuous form is a triumphant unity of reality reformed by the idealism of a genius.

Beatrice, Dora, Rashda, Amrita: like Dante or Picasso, Husain demands the artist's right to liberty over his muse, and, like them, he is authoritarian about his inspiration although he could never be as philosophical as Dante or as cruel as Picasso.

There is a reality called Amrita, of course, but he is not interested in her birth. He is consumed by

the innumerable ways in which she can be reborn through the creative juices of an erect paintbrush and the endless permutations available to a fertile imagination.

He is both father and mother to his creation.

And yet the wonder of that canvas is shared: if Amrita dominates the left in a languorous riot of well-divided colour, the right belongs to a single-hued figure, bent over in passionate concentration, the artist possessed, his beard and mane setting off unseen eyes that discover and rediscover the compelling nuances of an obsessive beauty.

The artist of course is Husain. How old is this Husain? Not old at all. This Husain is young. The artist has equal rights to rebirth.

Amrita and Maqbool are a work in progress, and likely to remain so, I suspect, for a while.

The walls are resplendent with the first paintings of a new series, the civilisation of the Arab: powerful images in brilliant red, green and desert-sun shades into which Husain has immersed himself -- the date palm, the circle as the sun and the circle as the city, luminous and dark, and the Kaaba, the House of God rising as the centrepiece surrounded by the calligraphic discipline of an euphoric alphabet.

This exhibition will open by November, and the artist intends to invite his friends, particularly from India, for a preview that will surely become yet another celebration of a new summit in a pilgrim's progress.

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Hyderabad, and the dozens of other cities that are an integral part of his life?

His mind and heart are as liberated as his brush; they have to be since they feed one another. From the billboard in Mumbai to an auction at Sotheby's, his own life is as much a chronicle of the economic and cultural history of his country as any statistic.

Is it also an inevitable part of the historical narrative that he should now become a victim of politics as fringe elements search for votes in the name of a simulated anger?

Is this the new metaphor for democracy? Is this the dominant aspect of a new culture in which violence is the new cult?

It is perhaps convenient to ignore such questions, for both the Establishment and the opposition, and pretend that they have much else to worry about, or indeed brag about, from the depression of inflation to the pseudo-triumphalism of an unequal economic boom.

Where does an artist fit into such a national mindset? But exile is not a term that can sit easily on the same page as democracy, and there will come a moment that will demand a decision.

Husain knows what he would choose. A cup of tea in a dhaba in Mumbai is worth more than tents and Jaguars on foreign soil. And he won't need shoes in his motherland.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

# Representation without taxation is tyranny

JENS STANISLAWSKI

TRUE, the current non-democratic interregnum has presented the general public with a glimmer of hope. So grand was the scale of public theft, neglect of law and abuse of power that many now support the current administration for its efforts to tackle corruption.

Foreign observers may find it odd that citizens have given up their constitutional rights with so little fuss. This is because they take such rights for granted, whereas in Bangladesh, they never really existed. Rights such as education, safety or justice had to be purchased time and again from corrupt officials or the private sector. No doubt, it was a very expensive arrangement for most.

Being financially solvent (for the moment) allows the current administration to function outside the political-economic logic that encourages and necessitates corruption in Bangladesh. But this cannot last long. At some point the new reality will dawn; the responsibility for paying a massive civil administration on an inadequate budget

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get. What happens then?

The daunting task before them is to reform the old bureaucracy that is so habituated to theft, through a combination of need and greed. Even if greed can be curbed, what will replace the "need-portion" that both initiates and completes the logical circuit of corruption? Will the caretaker government suddenly increase the salaries of officials in line with international standards? Will they do what no previous administration could: will they raise taxes to create public "good" for the nation or will they lie, cheat, and steal their way through the dilemma of revenue creation?

It seems necessary to make an example of corrupt politicians and ministers for others to change their bad habits. But this does not necessarily benefit the public good, beyond the establishment of justice, until further

steps are taken. It should be recognized that money stolen by corrupt bureaucrats and politicians is really taxes lost and potential budgets tied to constitutional law, such as the universal right to life, education, personal safety and basic health unrealized. Thus, step one requires the government convert corruption into taxation and step two requires expenditure for the public good.

The bureaucratic engine still runs on money, which will fail when money runs out. The quick and dirty fix is corruption, and acts like adulterated petrol which slowly reduces its power, but with certain failure looming. Human rights, citizen rights, national welfare, poverty reduction, employment creation -- all require monetary budgets, and are only fantasy until a universal policy of taxation is implemented. International propo-

nents of human rights should realize that citizens in industrialized countries are constantly paying for their rights and freedoms through highly sophisticated redistribution systems. Rights don't exist in nature, and, just like money, they are a social creation with a calculable price tag.

If this discussion has tempered the glimmer of hope for reform, we should draw strength and motivation from the potentially huge reward that would follow a universal taxation on income policy:

Universal taxation will justify immediate employment opportunities in much needed sectors of public service provision such as flood protection, road works, provision of safe drinking water, waste collection, recycling, and community policing. This arrangement will provide income and useful skills for the

unemployed while simultaneously delivering constitutional rights (safety, security, right to life) to the general public. The economy will grow to spread wealth and spending power within poor communities, thereby reducing poverty.

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Universal taxation will revitalize democratic culture (obviously at an all-time low), by forcing the citizen to contribute time, effort, labour and funds to the government, thereby creating immediate self-interest and opinion regarding its proper use. Citizen interest and awareness can then be tapped by civil society groups to form public opinion necessary to steer and support the civil administration.

The question whether to tax or not tax income on a universal basis (able working adults) is

never up for debate in industrial countries. The fact the taxation is now debatable in Bangladesh is a result of peculiar circumstances in which a governance tradition of exploitation has remained at the core of public policy. If this seems controversial, consider, that in reality, policy is what policy does, whatever is written on paper.

One may argue that indifference in policy for the many and selective patronage for the few is not the same as thing as exploitation. Exploitation, as a judgment on government policy would have to be validated by some sort of systematic expropriation of surplus at the expense of citizens' well-being.

Consider the link between corruption and poverty. Corruption is best conceptualized as theft of public assets. Stolen tax revenues should be considered stolen not from the individual tax-payer but the general public within which impoverished citizens have been recognized as especially deserving of assistance. Here is the argument for systematic exploitation:

1. Voters in Bangladesh have during successive regimes given legitimacy to respective

governments, by which political leaders earn the right to monopolize power and revenue expropriation for the public good. Power is thus "surrendered" to the winner of the election, in good faith.

2. Successive regimes have managed to centralize power by forbidding tax revenue collection on income at the local level. This has left union and thana level administrations powerless to assist their citizens, and forced into a dependency relationship with the center, securing the culture of patronage politics.

3. Most "would-be" public goods and services have an unofficial price tag high above that which can be afforded by the poor. Not even safety, the most important theme of the social contract, can be guaranteed, and most people find themselves engaged in private or small collective security agreements. Universal education and skills training, perhaps the only viable means for empowerment among the rural poor, has never been made compulsory, never properly budgeted for, leaving individuals struggling to survive in cities where agricultural skills have no

use.

4. Successive regimes have institutionalized public theft with such sophistication that salaries within the bureaucracy need not be funded by tax revenues, but can survive on illegal expropriation of "would-be" taxes and foreign aid.

In short, the policy of exploitation has allowed successive governments to survive without taxation to the detriment of society that now has to pay a much higher premium for constitutional rights. In the process of monopolizing power and creating dependence on the centre, most citizens have been left in a prison with few options for survival. Thus, poverty has been created as a result of public policy, whether official or not.

The real golden opportunity lies in realizing the causes of state failure. Dreaming of honest leaders is pointless, Bangladeshis should legislate and implement their wishes. Perhaps the current situation will encourage the bureaucracy to implement a universal policy of taxation, which, as argued, will return to citizens, who will monitor their investments, in the form of public goods and services.