

Ban Ki-moon's call

Single agency for women is a good idea

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's ideas of a fresh new approach to women's issues make rather good sense. He has suggested that a single UN agency be created to empower women and girls and thereby give them fresh impetus toward asserting their rights. Such suggestions, given the circumstances in which women across diverse regions of the globe happen to conduct their lives, or strive to do so, sound rather compelling. For all the inroads made by women since the mid-1980s or, more precisely, since the Beijing conference on women's issues, there are the many hurdles which have stood in the way of a full-scale progress of women around the world.

There are instances that can be cited to underscore the problems we speak of. Across large tracts of Africa, women are still prisoners to the traditional tribal norms of societies. Issues dating back to a hoary past and the like continue to be gross forms of an abuse of the female personality. While there are all the arguments to the effect that a growing sense of awareness of their rights has lately defined women's understanding of their position, there are yet the silent ways in which discrimination against them works. Away from Africa, there are other places where women continue to be subjected to plain humiliation, in forms that may range from predicament of the kind Pakistan's Mukhtaran Mai has suffered from to deprivation in the workforce. It may sound strange, but it is nevertheless true that there are still organizations which clearly and unabashedly state, as they invite applications for jobs, that women need not apply. Add to that the absolutely criminal act of some families in upholding honour killings as a way of removing what they think is the social stigma brought on them by a daughter or sister's decision to marry the man of her choice. Such realities have troubled minds in recent times. More disturbingly, as the UN chief has noted, the toleration of violence against women under the cover of an upholding of cultural norms threatens to set at naught all efforts to improve the quality of life for women.

It is against such a background that Ban Ki-moon's call for a single agency to deal with women's issues must be studied. Indeed, the November 2006 recommendation that three existing UN bodies geared to handling women's issues be transformed into a single agency is an idea that could be worked on. A constant monitoring and review of women's conditions, by such a body, will have a salutary effect all around.

CNG filling station

There could be hundreds more by now

THE long queues near the CNG refuelling stations which have also constricted traffic flow in the surrounding places, as if there wasn't already an insufferable congestion to negotiate, are not just because there is a surge in the number of CNG converted vehicles. The real truth is coming to light with layers of impropriety being unfolded now through a scooping investigation into massive corruption centring around land allotment for setting up refuelling stations.

The caretaker government is digging into tales of land allotment began in 2002 in pursuit of a programme for setting up of fuelling stations. Lands were allotted at throwaway prices to party favourites and relatives of high and mighty, where in many cases CNG filling stations were destined not to be set up in the end. Allotted plots were sold off at higher prices and some were just kept in possession without making installment payments with no questions asked about default. In all this they bypassed the selection committee constituted for the purpose. It was highly improper that the selection committee comprising representatives from the communications ministry, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), Dhaka Wasa, Dhaka Metropolitan Police and the office of the deputy commissioner of Dhaka hardly sat for a meeting. Distribution of plots became a matter to be decided by the ministry of communications, perhaps with a role played by Hawa Bhaban.

But one thing is for sure that the high number of refuelling stations we would have otherwise seen in keeping with the growing number of CNG converted vehicles if all the allotted lands were properly used didn't come up. That's where public interest was spurned. It thus remains one of the major causes for the long-drawn out fuel crisis for the CNG-run vehicles we face today.

Political left and Islamic fundamentalism



WITH the end of the cold war and the demise of the Soviet Union the appeal for communist ideology has diminished the world over. Even China practicing capitalism in its economy would be called revisionist if the "purists" among the practitioners of communism had their way. It would, however, be a hasty conclusion that the wave of left philosophy, defined as "that current of thought, politics and policy that stresses social improvements over macroeconomic orthodox, egalitarian distribution of wealth over its creation, sovereignty over international cooperation, democracy over governmental effectiveness" has lost its appeal completely in the world.

Former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda discerns two types of left in Latin America today: the first being modern, open-minded, reformist and internationalist, while the other is nationalist, strident and close-minded. In his view the

GOING DEEPER

The reasons are not difficult to find. While India after partition in 1947 chose to be non-aligned, Pakistan in search of security against a powerful India chose to bind itself to US-led military pacts (Seato, Cento, etc) and consequently blindly followed American cold war dictates including ban on left political parties and persecution of left party leaders. In addition, the rightists were able to convince the people that the left, particularly the communists, were Godless people and should be abjured.

disappearance of the USSR has led to a surge of leftism in Latin America because its supporters could no longer be accused by the United States as being lackeys of the Soviet Union.

Extreme inequality, poverty, dispossession of power gave the majority of the poor people their voting right as the only instrument left to register protest and also to regain some role in the process of decision making. Brazil's Lula, Chile's Michelle Bachelet, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega are examples of growing leftist power in America's backyard.

It would be erroneous to lump them together as cohabitants of Castro-Chavez trail of the left strand in the region, but nonetheless they all represent a no-confidence vote against the unrestrained capitalism raging in the globalized world ruled by the West whose power lies, according to political analyst Ziauddin Sardar, not "in its economic muscle and technological might (but) in its power to define what is, for example, freedom, progress, civil behavior ... The non-Western civilization has simply to accept these definitions or be defined out of existence."

The silent revolution taking place in many countries of the East, once described by the late Edward Said as the colonies of the West yet its cultural contestant, can be compared with those taking place in Latin America. The reason for this opposition to the Western model of economic development while embracing its open and pluralistic political system is because the benefits from economic progress have eluded the great majority of the people, barring some vertical movement of fortunate few from destitution to opulence giving rise to debate on the immorality of their acquisition of wealth, remain mired in ultra-poverty with little light at the end of the tunnel.

Low growth rates, writes Castaneda, have meant the

are being brought to account.

Democracy without the rule of law and more importantly without food on the table is meaningless. One has to decide whether the privilege of casting one's vote once every five years while remaining ill-fed and ill-clad for the entire period carries the full meaning of democracy. But then again the fourth surge of democratization in former Eastern Europe following the disappearance of the Soviet empire strengthens anew the premise that deep down people, however poor they may be, is averse to be governed by an authority not of their own choosing.

Consequently we, in Bangladesh, are in a quandary. We do not know whether to press for an early election and risk electing a group of politicians, some of whom are likely to be corrupt, or to wait for a longer period for the Augean stable to be cleared up and then go for an election through which we can elect people who we can deliver the goods.

In this race, whenever it may take place, the political left has aligned itself with the progressive and secular elements in the country. If neighbouring West Bengal is any example to be held aloft then one can safely say that unlike the Islamists, the political left is unlikely to abandon pluralism. But the stark reality is that the political left could not gain enough votes in elections to become a credible voice in the country's politics.

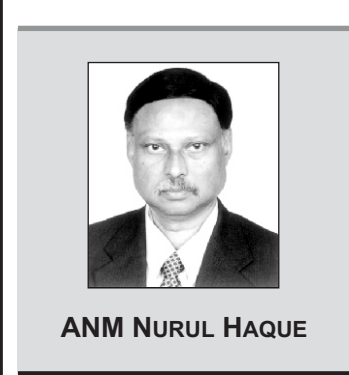
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It was only after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 that the left political parties were allowed free participation in the political process. Jamaat-e-Islami, the standard bearer of the fundamentalists, on the other hand, except for a brief period of ban due to their collaboration with the occupying Pakistani army, had a free hand in politics, and, through religious schools, continued to profess political Islam aimed at establishing an Islamist nation.

Under the present global context, Bangladeshis would have to be careful while casting votes that they do not mix the professed benefits of the post-death world with the assuredly disadvantages that go with an Islamist rule in the present day world.

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Execution of JMB kingpins



THE president has rejected the mercy petition of six key militant leaders of the banned Islamist outfit Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), including its chief Shaikh Abdur Rahman and his deputy Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai.

All of them were convicted and sentenced to death for killing two judges in Jhalakathi in a suicide bomb attack on November 14, 2005. The seventh convict, Asadul Islam Arif, was tried in absentia as he is on the run.

Though the JMB kingpins earlier said they would not seek justice in a man made court, they all appealed to the Supreme Court against the death sentences. A full bench of the Appellate Division headed by the chief justice, rejected their appeals on November 28 and upheld the death sentences.

Finally all the six militants filed petitions for president's clemency and the home ministry on January 28 sent those with a note to the president, who rejected the mercy

BY THE NUMBERS

There was a widespread demand for allowing the JMB kingpins to speak to the media. But the law adviser said that the government would not allow them to speak to media since, apparently, there is "no precedent." Since the motivations of the murders committed by the JMB militants are very much different from ordinary murders, they should be allowed to speak to the media for removing public misgivings. The militants will obviously speak the truth before embracing death. The caretaker government surely need not worry about the truth.

petitions on February 4.

Now there is no obstacle to the execution of the militants and all of them might be executed in the first week of April.

These JMB leaders are also accused of unleashing terror in which scores of innocent people were indiscriminately killed, besides carrying out the country-wide series of bomb blasts on August 17, 2005.

According to home ministry records, total numbers of 698 people have been arrested so far in connection with 154 cases on the blasts of August 17, 2005 and 87 cases for the blasts that took place later on. The police submitted charge sheet in 189 cases and 52 are still under investigation.

Judgment has so far been delivered on 20 cases and 32 militants including Abdur Rahman, Bangla Bhai, and Sunny have been sentenced to death.

Rab recently busted several militant hideouts in different parts of the country and seized huge quantity of explosives and locally made grenades. Rab also arrested several militants of banned JMB, who possessed the bomb making materials.

The youngsters arrested by the Rab recently from different places are reported to have been enrolled as new members of the JMB. It seems that many of such members have been enrolled and trained by the JMB leaders to carry on its mission.

Media reported that the JMB mastermind Abdur Rahman disclosed to the Task Force Intelligence (TFI), the names of two ministers, a state minister, a deputy minister, a mayor and an MP of the BNP-led alliance government who had so long patronized the militant outfit. Media intelligence sources also trumpeted that connection.

The home ministry on March 16, 2006 formed a three-member probe committee to investigate into source of funds of the JMB. But the BNP-led alliance govern-

tries, India and Pakistan are quite unfortunate to witness the ugliest face of militancy repeatedly. Seven bombs went on July 11 in Mumbai's rush hour trains at seven different spots causing large-scale death and devastation.

Before diminution of shockwave of this attack on innocent commuters, hell broke loose again on February 19, killing as many as 67 people, mostly Pakistani nationals, when two powerful bombs went off in a Pakistan-bound friendship train at Panipath, India.

A suicide bomber killed at least 15 people, including a senior judge, when he blew himself up inside a court in Quetta, Pakistan. The explosion hit when hundreds of people were inside the compound for court cases and police inquiries.

Too soon after this bomb blast a 35-year old Pakistan minister from Punjab was shot dead while in a meeting with party activists in Gujranwala. Zilla Huma Usman, the minister for social welfare and a prominent women's rights activist, was gunned down openly by a fanatic for not wearing the veil. Indeed, this is a show of force at its worst by a fanatic.

Since the terrorism knows no territory, these tragedies with India and Pakistan, is no doubt an alarm for Bangladesh.

The execution of six JMB kingpins will not certainly go all-out to rid the country of militancy menace. Islamist fundamentalism which has made deep penetration, might have developed cross-regional network. The caretaker government must realize the enormity of the danger that is looming large in this region and posing serious threat to peace and security.

Much remains to be done so far, as measures aimed at uprooting the sources aiding the militancy. What now actually needs for containment of militancy is better performance of all the law enforcing agencies and of course, a democratic justice delivery system.

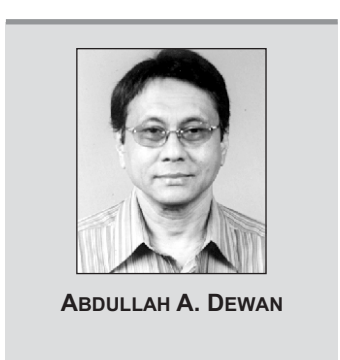
Demolition of the political links of the Islamist fundamentalists should be on the top of the agenda, which can be dealt with severely by the caretaker government, as it has no obligation to the vote bank.

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The corrupt and their accomplices



THE news of the capture of Tarique Rahman, the son of the former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and poster boy for Bangladesh's sleazy political machinations, reinforced the belief that the CTG is openly fearless, politically neutral, and deeply steadfast. For the last five years this kingpin of corruption operated with impunity from BNP's Hawa Bhaban, and lorded over everything from civil administration to political diktat as if he was the de facto leader of the party and of the country.

So, the news headline "Hawa Bhaban man Tinku arrested" published on January 25, that triggered a legal notice from Hawa Bhaban to this daily claiming that it was intended to cause

NO NONSENSE

Khaleda has reasons to put pressure on the CTG to hold early elections -- namely, to retard the hunt for the corrupt in her party and decelerate the on going reforms. BNP is hurting the most by losing more and more of its thieves and thugs every day. Hasina, instead of putting pressure for early election, should take advantage of the situation and support the CTG.

and injure "the BNP chief's image, reputation and social status in Bangladesh and abroad" is now vindicated.

If President Ziaur Rahman was an angel of honesty, as some BNP politicians contend, then to me the last alliance rulers were the devils of dishonesty. Can anyone really tarnish the image of the imageless, bring into disrepute the disparaged, defame the infamous, and dishonour the disgraced?

Only someone who couldn't read and understand the print on the pages of the newspapers, or someone rendered senseless by their obsession with power, could remain somnolent while their country was looted to the extent that are unfolding by the hour to the outrage of everyone. Instead of being transparent in governance the rulers and their lackeys have pillaged the country so transparently, so unabashedly, that we can easily decree they are guilty as charged. Res ipsa loquitur.

There are many witty and succinct quotes concerning political corruption. The following four seems to have their deep roots in our political culture:

- "Corrupt politicians make the other ten percent look bad." -- Henry A. Kissinger
- "The accomplice to the crime of corruption is frequently our own indifference."
- -- Bess Myerson
- It is said that power corrupts, but actually it's more true that power attracts the corruptible." -- David Brin
- "Power does not corrupt men. Fools, however, if they get into

a cabinet minister asserts that the public's pay-off of Taka 6,796 crore as bribes to government officials estimated by the TIB survey is based on fiction, not hard facts. The amount is a survey-based estimate but dubbing it as imaginary is self-deprecating and an attempt at protecting the corrupt ones."

Should the ACC question the former ministers MK Anwar, Mannan Bhuiyan, Moudud Ahmed, Saifur Rahman, Principal Secretary Kamal Siddiqui, adviser Mofazzal Karim Chowdhury and the likes, much useful information might be unearthed about their roles in covering up the graft and profiteering which came to define the Khaleda years. What did they know, when did they come to know it, and what did they do or not do?

As reported by this daily many BNP leaders hold the party chairperson responsible for failure to check widespread corruption and power abuse by her son and his close associates. Isn't she an accomplice as well?

Plato once observed: "The city where those who rule are least eager to do so will be the best governed." The truths of Plato's

statement are progressively being realized from the governance of the current CTG. The politicians who are aspiring to rule should assess their competence and honesty relative to the majority of the CTG advisers and address their deficiencies wherever they exist.

One of the great dilemmas faced by nations concerns the fact that the individuals most attracted to politics might not be the most desirable rulers. Indeed, one might infer that it is perhaps those most likely to abuse any authority given to them that are most likely to be drawn to the political realm. This is consistent with David Brin, who said "power attracts the corruptible."

We hear that democratic reforms are being instituted in both AL and BNP. What reforms? The exhausted and old faces will continue as the voices of the party. Already people are saying: "Oh, no, not again." They are the symbol of incompetence and mismanaged leadership. Skeptics are wondering if intra-party reforms are for real or simply window dressing.

For example, BNP has expressed a desire to resuscitate itself with a new vision. But a mere purging of the party's more venal members won't be enough. The party must undergo an overhaul in which the corrupt, incompetent, and failed leaders must be expressly prevented from ever having influence in the party's affairs ever again.

Khaleda has reasons to put pressure on the CTG to hold early elections -- namely, to retard the hunt for the corrupt in her party and decelerate the on going reforms. BNP is hurting the most by losing more and more of its thieves and thugs every day. Hasina, instead of putting pressure for early election, should take advantage of the situation and support the CTG.

Although highly unlikely, some people have an ominous premonition that the two arch-rivals could forge a common front to derail the CTG from the path of successful reform. If that happens, they will win; those in prison will win; those waiting to be booked will win; corruption will win, looting will re-emerge, and politics as usual (hartals, lock-outs and blockades) will return.

Charles De Gaulle once said: "I have come to the conclusion

that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians. Even Nikita Khrushchev believed: "Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even where there is no river."

What we need then is checks and balances. To this end, the formation of central and district-based task forces comprised of members of the army, Rab and intelligence agencies to combat corruption and criminal activities is a good omen.

The CTG's move to reconstitute and rejuvenate the dormant NSC to ensure national security and accountability is another laudable venture. Hopefully, the NSC would be an additional channel through which people's concerns can be communicated to the government and thus dispel French thinker Paul Valéry's observation: "Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them."

Sorry folks, but the prospect of being a politician won't be as alluring any more.

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