

Voting right for overseas Bangladeshis

A welcome decision

THAT the expatriate Bangladesh community of as many as 70 lakh remains out of the voter list, let alone participate in the national election, is indicative of an exclusionary nature of our elective democracy. In light of this, it's heartening to note that the Election Commission has decided to fill the void by including the overseas Bangladeshis in the national electoral roll thereby giving them their long-denied right to vote. We thank the CEC and the Commissioners for their initiative.

With the decision for a database to be created for voters with their photographs, extending the facility to the overseas Bangladeshis cannot be a difficult exercise. All that the government needs ensuring is to have the expatriates registered with Bangladesh embassies or missions abroad. They can either vote through the missions, or preferably via the internet where the counting can be done instantaneously.

It is worth recalling that the Bangladeshis living abroad had launched a movement demanding right to franchise in 2001 election. Even though the then chief election commission MA Sayed took up the matter, he had to abandon the project citing complications. So how we get around the 'complications' and the pitfalls that occurred at that time are the jobs cut out for the interim government.

The pressing nature of the issue can be appreciated from three angles; first and foremost, remittances from overseas Bangladeshis being the topmost foreign exchange earner, and their contribution to the economy a dire necessity, their inaccessibility to voting right is simply unfair and unjust. Let's not forget, we are vociferously keen on attracting investment from non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs).

Overarching imperative is that no citizen of Bangladesh, whether he or she is living at home or abroad, can be denied his or her constitutional right to vote; and it is as ludicrous as it is untenable that for some technical or administrative inadequacies he or she should be denied participation in the election. Last but not least, could we not just follow the procedures of other countries in settling the matter?

Modernising brick kilns

DoE is on the right track

THE brick kilns around the city, which have long been identified as a major source of air pollution, are still using outdated technology which causes pollution well beyond the permissible limits. Unfortunately, little was done in the past to eliminate or reduce the extent of pollution caused by brick kilns.

It is good news that the Department of Environment (DoE) is planning to modernise the brick kilns through making use of less environment-hostile technologies mandatory for the brick kiln owners by the year 2010. The department has decided not to renew the environmental clearance certificates to the brick kilns using the old, conventional methods of production after 2010.

The presence of 4,500 brickfields around a densely populated city like Dhaka is certainly an environmental concern of great magnitude. It is also a health hazard as reports show that people living around the kilns suffer from certain diseases caused by the polluted air. Apart from polluting the air, brick kilns cause loss of soil fertility and damage to crops.

So, there can be no question about the need for introducing technologies and methods that will lessen the kilns' negative impact on the environment. The Environment Department's plan to introduce compressed bricks which need no burning deserves serious consideration as it will be environment friendly.

However, there are certain things which the decision-makers have to take into account. First, the ground reality is that production of bricks has not been recognised as a fully-fledged industry and no attempt had been made in the past to modernise it keeping in view our environmental needs. So the decision-makers have to proceed carefully to ensure a smooth transition to modern technologies. Secondly, the producers need time and financial support like bank loans to switch over to modern technology. Thirdly, the cost effectiveness of changing the production methods should be high on the planners' agenda. The point will be made clear by the fact that the prices of building materials have already gone up sharply.

So need-based planning along with adoption of measures aimed at modernising brick production is required to address the environmental problems arising out of the conventional methods of production.

Taking pride to air

By writing this piece I have tried to use my little knowledge to try and provide an unbiased, best-fit plan for Biman's survival today and into the future. I may not have been entirely correct, but I believe that I have not been entirely wrong either. I firmly believe that Biman can very well be an enviable successful airline if it gets the support of the government, and more importantly the support of the people of the nation. There has never been a better time to take our pride back to the air.

IMRAN ASIF

MANY newspapers, both local and international, printed on March 13 a photo of an Airbus A310 belonging to Biman Bangladesh Airlines. The plane was sitting on its nose at the end of the runway, having suffered from a nose-gear failure while attempting a takeoff. The photo, while substantiating the news of the accident, also symbolized the very sad, but the very true state of the airline itself.

In my last article, I tried to indicate how continued corruption of over more than two decades had had a fatally cancerous effect on Biman. With this piece, I will try to identify some of the other problems at Biman, and then try harder to figure out what can be done about them. I wish I had kept parrots to pick the cards for me!

In the past few weeks, I have read reports in newspapers regarding efforts and plans by the current government to restructure Biman. Reportedly, the options being evaluated were turning Biman into a public limited company, finding strategic partners, and turning over Biman completely to the private sector. The three areas I will hereby focus on, keeping the options being evaluated in consideration, are: management, market positioning, manpower, and fleet.

Management
Biman has been run (literally speaking) into the gutters by its very flawed foundation -- the

Ordinance No. XIX of 1977. Since its inception, this ordinance has paved the way for a completely incompetent, and often extremely harmful, board of directors to rule the airline.

Many of the members of Biman's board actually took their first flights on an airplane when they were "gifted" with the job of running Biman. Many never went past high school but were members of the parliament, and were relied upon to guide the airline.

In its 30 years of operation, Biman has had 24 managing directors. Whatever way Biman is to be restructured, certain fundamentals should change. The board of directors should not have more than two representatives (from 2 ministries -- finance, and civil aviation & tourism) from the government.

All others on the board should be from different areas of commercial aviation (airlines, finance organizations, travel agencies, etc.). This will ensure knowledgeable guidance, with overseeing from different areas of commercial aviation.

Some reports mentioned hiring of expatriate CEO's to run the show, and be accountable to the board. I am not quite sure if we really do need expatriate CEO's for Biman at this point, if ever.

Before looking at that option, I think the government should rather check out the choices of gentlemen available locally. Many Bangladeshis have successfully served/are serving in different professional capacities

in leading international airlines operating in Bangladesh. There have been number of employees from Biman itself who retired with impeccable service records. If no such person can be found to help Biman, only then will it make sense to look out the window.

Market positioning

For many years, Biman has been operating on routes, which consistently provided poor load factors. In some cases, the reason has been fierce competition from other carriers. In some cases, it has been the structuring and scheduling of the routes by Biman.

Flights to destinations such as Paris, Rome or Frankfurt never guaranteed sustainable load factors for Biman. The flight to New York was poorly marketed, and the flight to Hong Kong was horribly scheduled.

There is a guaranteed market in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East, thanks to the large and growing Bangladeshi workforce in the region, which Biman fails to exploit fully due to capacity shortage.

A similar market is now being developed in Malaysia, but busy regional business and tourism destinations like Singapore, Bangkok, Mumbai, Delhi, are still under-served by Biman. It would be wise of Biman to concentrate only on such guaranteed routes, and suspend all European routes except London, until it has a fleet large enough to resume operations to those destinations. On a priority basis, Biman should now

strive to serve our hard-working labour workforce across the world, and the tourists and business travellers should come next.

Manpower

When I last checked Biman's official website, it showed that Biman had 13 aircraft in service (including the one that crashed at Dubai on March 12, and 5 more aircraft which have remained grounded over the past few months). And the airline still has 5,000-strong manpower, which gives a manpower-to-aircraft ratio of about 380 employees per aircraft.

It is theoretically and practically impossible for any airline to operate with such a high manpower-to-aircraft ratio. Biman should immediately cut the manpower number down to 2,000, while scaling up the fleet size to at least 20 aircraft, which would then give it a manpower-to-aircraft ratio of 100 employees for each aircraft.

Biman should also get rid of unnecessary subsidiaries (poultry farms, fisheries and press, for example) and outsource to competitive suppliers. Perhaps only then can efficient and competent management of operations make the airline sustainable.

Fleet

Planning a fleet for Biman is a tricky task. It would essentially depend on how much money it can have (from its own revenues, the government, donors, etc), and over what timeframe, to go shopping for airplanes.

Biman is already on the lookout for Airbus A300s and A310s (sharing the same type of rating for crews) to keep its mid-haul operations going, and for high-density configured Boeing 747s to dedicatedly operate to the Middle East. I think this is a fairly good plan for operations for the next 4-5 years.

Biman should also consider selling off two of its four McDonnell Douglas DC-10-30 aircraft, and use the money to convert the other two into freighters. The volume of cargo traffic into and out of Dhaka has more than doubled in the last 5 years, most of which is carried by international scheduled carriers and charters. Biman can deploy two DC-10-30s for the cargo market to and from the Middle East and Europe, and earn lucrative cargo revenues while having to spend less on maintenance for freighter operations.

In a maximum of 5 years from now, Biman should have 3rd generation aircraft for its passenger fleet, for which the planning and ordering should be done now. Its long-haul aircraft choice should be between the Boeing 777-200ER and the Airbus A330-200; mid-haul aircraft between Boeing 737-800 and the Airbus A320; and for domestic operations the Bombardier Q400 and the ATR 72-500. While both types seat approximately 70 passengers, the direct operating cost (DOC) of the ATR 72-500 is significantly lower than that of the Bombardier Q400.

Between the Bombardier Q400 and the ATR 72-500, there is a clear difference in favour of the ATR 72-500 for Biman's needs. While both types seat approximately 70 passengers, the direct operating cost (DOC) of the ATR 72-500 is significantly lower than that of the Bombardier Q400.

While the Q400 is a better performer in tough weather conditions and high-altitude airports, the ATR 72-500 performs perfectly up to the mark in the weather conditions of this region.

The fact that hundreds of ATR 72-500s are in operation with numerous carriers in Southeast Asia alone is a testament of the superiority of the aircraft itself.

By writing this piece I have tried to use my little knowledge to try and provide an unbiased, best-fit plan for Biman's survival today and into the future. I may not have been entirely correct, but I believe that I have not been entirely wrong either.

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Biman should also get rid of unnecessary subsidiaries (poultry farms, fisheries and press, for example) and outsource to competitive suppliers. Perhaps only then can efficient and competent management of operations make the airline sustainable.

The A330-200 is one of the best aircraft ever built by Airbus, but the extra range and capacity of the B777-200ER would allow Biman to operate long-haul flights, with headroom to increase capacity, while benefiting from lower cost-average per statute mile (CASM). For flights across the Atlantic to the US, if they are resumed, Biman would also benefit from the better Extended Twin-Engine Operations (ETOPS) performance of the B777-200ER over the A330-200.

A choice between the B737-800 and the A320 should actually be made depending on the choice made between the B777-200ER and the A330-200, simply because an order for both

requirements from the same manufacturer would yield a better price offering from the manufacturer.

In terms of performance these two aircraft are nearly identical, and since both types are operational in large numbers in the Asia-Pacific region more maintenance facilities are available for them.

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The author, currently an aviation industry consultant, has previously worked on projects with The Boeing Company, Honeywell Aerospace, and FAA's Operational Evolution Plan (OEP) in 2004-2005.

Chaos in Pakistan

The fiasco following Musharraf's attempt to fire the chief justice, and to silence the media, should result in something more than short-term damage control. It should lead to a Grand National bargain that diminishes the role of the army and the intelligence services in the nation's life. Politics -- the striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power among groups within the state -- must be allowed to run its course.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

AFTER a week of violent protests, marking the lowest point in his relations with the judiciary, the media and civil society, General Pervez Musharraf is currently in damage control mode. He may well succeed in riding out the current storm, with the resources of the state at his command, and the ability to coax, cajole, threaten and bribe widely.

The disaster that began with Musharraf's decision to sack Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry has exposed the house of cards over which General Musharraf presides. If Musharraf and his fellow generals do not learn the real lessons of their current predicament, Pakistan will continue

to hurtle forward from crisis to crisis.

After initially insisting that he had done nothing wrong, Musharraf claimed at the end of last week that the protests against his government were the result of a "conspiracy." Musharraf was most likely misguided in his decision to move against the Supreme Court chief justice by a scary report from an intelligence agency. If there was, indeed, a conspiracy against Musharraf, it came from quarters closest to him.

Citibanker Shaukat Aziz, who serves as prime minister with little public support, drew attention to the Musharraf-Aziz regime's principal source of weakness when he said that his government would not allow anyone to "politicize" the public's anger over

judicial manipulation.

Both, the decision to fire the chief justice and the reaction to it, are already political. By denying that they had overstepped their limits, and taken action that led to the expression of simmering discontent, Musharraf and Aziz betrayed their lack of understanding of political processes.

The general and his technocrat deputy, both, look upon governance as a management function devoid of politics, hence their expression of surprise at the political reaction to their judicial coup. But the general and the technocrat fail to recognize that governance is a function of politics, and it is just their good fortune, and the result of the past mistakes of Pakistan's political class, that they have averted political calamity so far.

Now politics is catching up with them and, unless they wake up to the value of politics, their little road show backed by billions of dollars in United States aid money is headed for a rough patch.

The apocryphal story is told of how Pakistan's first military ruler, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, learnt that the nation had turned against him when one of his grandchildren came home chanting "Ayub Kutta hai hai" (Down with the dog Ayub). The child told the grandfather that this was the popular chant in his elementary school, though he was too young to know its meaning.

Ayub Khan initiated talks with opposition politicians after five months of street protests and, in the end, handed power to another general. But he could never understand why the nation, for which he had done so much in terms of military build-up and development, turned against him.

Ayub Khan's attitude was not very different from that of the British vice-regal apparatus that complained against the ingratitude of South Asians. The natives demanded independence under

indigenous leaders who, in British eyes, did not compare favourably with the Raj's track record of laying down railway lines, building irrigation systems, instituting education and developing modern governance.

Both Ayub Khan and the British missed out on the value of politics, which was defined by sociologist Max Weber as "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state."

General Musharraf's mindset is, in many ways, not different from that of Ayub Khan's or the British officers preceding him. This mindset considers politics as a lowly occupation, and legitimacy a minor technicality. Its other beliefs include the view that a government must be judged by its "performance," not its constitutionality. That is why it considers charges of receiving kickbacks (i.e. financial corruption) as worse than violating, or even suspending, the constitution.

Pakistan's generals, and their English-speaking drawing room dwelling supporters, have tried repeatedly to make the nation

walk in a straight line, but their efforts have come to naught.

Politics is simply not the army's job. It is not trained for it, and is as incongruous in the political arena as an engineer in a hospital trying to fill the doctor's shoes on grounds of the doctor's incompetence.

The fiasco following Musharraf's attempt to fire the chief justice, and to silence the media, should result in something more than short-term damage control. It should lead to a Grand National bargain that diminishes the role of the army and the intelligence services in the nation's life. Politics -- the striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power among groups within the state -- must be allowed to run its course.

Husain Haqqani is Director of Boston University's Center for International Relations, and Co-Chair of the Islam and Democracy Project at Hudson Institute Washington D.C. He is author of the book *Pakistan between Mosque and Military*.

What's up with Moqtada al Sadr?