

Reversing the infernal politics



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

because the spirit of social justice has been left no chance of coming to life.

It is time to decide whether adventure in politics should be made a little difficult by insisting upon some qualifications for members of the parliament. Certainly a lawmaker requires intellectual equipment, the capacity to take a balanced view of things, to act independently and to have character. The present requirements of citizenship and age are matters of accident of birth and the result of the inexorable passage of time. The need is to advocate some positive qualifications for aspirants to a parliamentary career.

It is time to think whether some percentage of parliament members should be elected on the basis of proportional representation, which is the system in force in several countries, including Germany. The benefit of proportional representation may be made available to parties securing at least five percent of the votes cast. The advantage of proportional representation is that it would enable the voices of minorities and other significant segments of the public to be heard in parliament.

Politics in Bangladesh has meant the coming and going of governments, and scandals connected with politicians. Therefore, it is time to get rid of the perilous obsession with politics, which has practically been restricted to forma-

tion of governments, their departure, press briefings, and statements of political leaders.

The issues pertaining to living conditions in low-income areas, over-densification and congestion caused by rapid urbanization, the resultant massive unemployment and higher incidence of crime do not merit serious discussion by politicians and citizens of varying backgrounds.

It is time to remind ourselves that politics is taking one's agenda in one's own hands. It is about the process of change; how society is organised; what its power structure is; who are the actors; how they interact with each other and with the outside world. It is also about social responsibility, about participation and inclusion. Above all, it is about ideas and new concepts and their implementation.

We have to decide about the inclusion of social organization and planning processes in the purview

of politics. A good number of citizens' groups should know how physical development takes place, from designing to implementation. We have to know about the management of civic amenities and the emergence of "mafias" in urban centres, the institutional weaknesses of the government, the quality of education and its relevance to our social and economic needs etc.

Politics cannot be restricted to politicians and their indiscretions and intermittent interventions from outside, because that will mean reducing it to a mere spectator sport. It is time to ensure people's role in selecting the players, and a part in the game, so that the existing patron-client relationship can be done away with. This will hopefully guarantee the asking of amenities and services as a matter of right, in return for tax payment.

Our professionals and middle-classes have mostly sought spe-

cial favours, and have felt gratified when the corrupt and inept rulers bestowed those. We have preferred individual profits to collective gains. Even upright and honourable persons have praised dishonest and callous politicians when they benefitted at a personal level. Ideas and concrete action were hardly in high demand.

In our parlance, the best politician is one who has never said "no" to his voter or friends. Since the distinction between public property and private gains, and the accountability mechanism, is on the wane, our politicians have been ever ready to dole out favours to their cronies and, sometimes, to the general public. This generosity at public expense has resulted in the certification of the large-heartedness of the wily politicians and slippery bureaucrats.

It is time to effect a transition from autocratic whims to representative governance, institutional

development, revival of learning, scientific enquiry, and thoughts about organized municipal services. The focal points of our politics in metropolitan Dhaka may be on law and order, shortage of electricity and water, deficiencies of public transportation, and unemployment. It should also cover all developmental activities of the government, small acts of social organization, and attempts to find solutions by NGOs and community based organizations. Let us remember that all issues which concern people's lives are political issues.

In mature democracies, people are more concerned with their neighbourhood, their borough, and their city -- in that order. The central government has hardly any direct significance in their lives. The local government boss, the mayor, gives a programme and an action plan to convince the voters of his ability to implement it and justify the expen-

ditions of voters, because there is nothing more dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy. A bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate.

In the recent past, our political scene did present an incredible army of pudding-headed mercenaries.

But it is time to replace them with men and women of honour and knowledge. Freedom cannot be inherited. Each generation will have to defend it and fight for it, and only then will it pass to the next.

The crippling injustices and indiscretions of the previous decade are proof enough that a free democracy can turn into an authoritarian state when people fail in their duty as the keepers of the constitution. Our politics is in need of redefining.

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STRAIGHT LINE

It is time to stop voting ignorant professional politicians to power. There is now a greater need for an intelligent and adequate organization of voters, because there is nothing more dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy. A bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. In the recent past, our political scene did present an incredible army of pudding-headed mercenaries, but it is time to replace them with men and women of honour and knowledge.

THE recent anti-corruption campaign has clearly demonstrated that the life style of too many politicians and businessmen bears eloquent testimony to the truth of the dictum that single-minded pursuit of money impoverishes the mind, shrivels the imagination and desiccates the heart. Therefore, if we forget the horrendous misdeeds of the past, we will be condemned to repeat them. If our basic freedoms are to survive, it is of vital importance that we remember the gross irregularities and malfeasance committed during the democratic dispensation of the past.

We need to develop a sense of public duty, discipline and dedication, as our collective behaviour is characterized by a lack of sense of fairness and moderation. The tragedy is that outraging the sanctity of the constitution, however shamelessly, has not been a punishable crime. Our democracy has not meant any meaningful change,

Education also needs a shake-up

MANZOOR AHMED

HOW the vision of the newly independent Bangladesh could be reflected in its education system was first considered by Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission in 1974. This report went to the archive when democratic progress of Bangladesh as a nation came to an abrupt halt on 15 August, 1975.

In the last three decades, at least half a dozen new education commissions and committees came out with policy prescriptions. Political will and the capacity to keep the larger national interests in view were lacking for giving these recommendations due consideration and acting upon them.

A research report based on government data (BU-IED, Access to Education in Bangladesh, 2007) published recently showed that only about half of the students enrolled in class one can actually complete primary education. This indicates problems regarding both numbers who can participate and the quality of teaching and learning in our primary schools.

There indeed has been progress in primary education in the last decade and half in expanding access and in overcoming gender disparity in enrollment, but huge gaps in services remain. The Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II), with a price tag of 1.8 billion dollars has been on-going with the assistance of a consortium of eleven donors. The midpoint of the five-year programme has been reached and preparation is underway for a mid-term review.

As in most government

programmes, information and transparency are at a premium in PEDP II. There is no website for PEDP II, for instance, where one can find essential facts and status of its progress. From what one can gather, there has been progress in construction of classrooms and appointment of teachers, but not much in improving quality in classrooms, making schools and teachers accountable for performance, and coordinated planning in upazila to ensure that all children will have access to primary education of acceptable quality.

Even allowing for start-up delays and working out strategies, there is a genuine concern among independent researchers and observers that progress on the central objectives regarding quality improvement and performance of schools and children are not on track. There is a real danger that at the end of the programme in three years, there will not be much to show in these vital areas and we will have lost precious years and wasted scarce resources. Same concerns have been expressed privately by some of the development partners.

At the secondary stage, less than ten percent of the eligible age group complete secondary education up to class ten. Under five percent of the labour force in Bangladesh have secondary education. In today's knowledge society and global economy, these numbers must be seen as warning signals.

Outcome from the secondary sector improvement project (SESIP), which has just come to a formal end, is at best mixed. Various well-intentioned initiatives in the sub-sector, such as a common stream of academic secondary

education up to grade ten, and reforms in assessment, became mired in controversy.

The problem appears to be inept planning and management of change, lack of appreciation of the necessary technical preparation and capacity building in key support institutions, highly centralized decision-making in all matters, and again lack of transparency and meaningful participation of stakeholders.

Some steps such as controlling cheating in public examinations and a measure to register secondary teachers based on a test of competence have earned plaudits. Much more need to be done.

Government and donors have stressed the principle of subvention to schools based on agreed performance criteria. Putting this principle into operation is easier said than done. This would require trial and learning by doing in which research institutions with commitment and capacity should be asked to take the lead. Such trials would show how the principle can be used widely and effectively.

The review of donor-assisted projects follows an arcane process that does not allow involvement of the non-official stakeholders. PEDP II is a case in point. Bangladesh NGOs have pioneered innovative

strategies and have implemented large scale programmes for serving children left out from the mainstream primary education, which

have been internationally acclaimed.

Research and academic institutions have been working on meth-

ods and models for addressing quality issues. They have relevant ideas and materials to offer on curricular support, learning aids,



teacher development, and assessment of learning. But they have not been able to contribute to the review or to redesigning and rethinking PEDP II that is necessary.

The caretaker government has begun to look at the mismanagement, corruption and criminal activities in the public universities. A wholesale change in top positions in the public universities appears to be on the card. This has been welcome in the academic community and by citizens concerned about the state of education. They hope that these steps will create the environment for seriously considering reforms and change needed in the higher education system.

The ground needs to be prepared for a shake-up also in primary and secondary education, where the foundation for quality in higher education has to be laid. The government, through the Adviser for Education and senior officials, need to hear the views of the larger community of stakeholders in education. The discussion should not remain confined to government officials and officials of the donor agencies.

Separate roundtables can be organized on major sub-sectors -- such as, primary, secondary, non-formal and adult literacy, vocational-technical, madrasa, and tertiary. To make the roundtables productive, preparation is necessary to identify key issues and to capture the outcome for proper follow-up.

Concerned research and academic organizations can help in setting up these round tables. Such exchange among officials and stakeholders will help identify the main problems and their dimen-

sions, strategies for action and immediate and longer term measures that must be given attention.

Major initiatives and programmes underway or in planning for primary education, secondary education sub-sector development, vocational and technical education and training, non-formal education and literacy will benefit from the dialogue and open exchange with stakeholders. Chances of success for these initiatives will be much greater and progress more sustainable if they take advantage of experiences, lessons and capacities that exist in the country.

MDG, PRSP, EFA, NPA -- the alphabet soup -- represents buzz words in vogue and stands for numerical targets for the magic year of 2015 picked from the calendar by the United Nations in 2000. Bangladesh is not on track for achieving the majority of the targets in education and other areas.

A new set of acronyms and buzzwords may replace the current ones in a few years. Meanwhile, children languish in denial of their right to education and the nation's development is held back. The opportunity is there to alter this scenario, which must not be lost.

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Of pervasive corruption

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

JUST imagine a minister with a foreign degree in law, popularly known as Barrister-at-Law, and having many years of experience as a full-fledged legal practitioner in the highest seat of the judiciary, riding a motor vehicle with a fictitious registration number. Imagine, too, a lawmaker keeping about a dozen in contravention of the legal provisions on wild animals. Another top notcher in the power centre, and incognito lover of birds, was involved in violating the laws on birds. Two beautiful peacocks, in specially built cages, were reported to have been seized from his posh residence at Banani. Since the "gentleman" has gone underground, his aides could not produce any document from the forest department, which might have justified keeping of such pets.

Compared to the vast magnitude of corruption so far reported in the news media, the examples quoted above are mere insignificant adjuncts to demand attention. The process of hauling up of the allegedly most corrupt ones commenced with 50 initially and, by now, the number has

increased. And, though belated, the eventual hauling up of the much publicized elder son of the former prime minister has dispelled much of the doubts among the general public. Literally speaking, the "long arm of the law," kept ruthlessly contracted for the last five years to protect the criminals, has at long last extended itself -- revitalized to re-establish its omnipotence.

As of now, the whole process of making an effective impression on the moral fabric of the nation has set in motion a sort of whirlpool in the political circle in particular. By now, the present caretaker government has shown enough courage and boldness in its interventional programmes, by bringing the corrupt and the terrorists, with their godfathers, to book. Many of the listed and alleged offenders have gone underground, and are apparently biding time to give themselves up.

The nation will have to wait for some time more to see the ultimate fate of each individual taken into custody. It goes without saying that they will be afforded legal defence to prove their innocence. But, in a good many cases, we may be tempted to offer liberal appreciation of their aesthetic sense, no

matter how costly it had been. Indeed, their hobby of having mini zoos in their affluent homesteads has been a most startling instance of foppish pageantry. The big budget needed for such a costly hobby is obviously beyond the reach of the average people of this poor country.

The investigator, I suppose, will have to be painstakingly meticulous in determining the time since when they had been indulging in such luxury. Such an objective exercise will, hopefully, bring up each one's pecuniary condition at the time and before.

The other important aspect of documentation will thus have a stronger base to determine the degree of crime perpetrated by each.

The success of an organisation depends much on the collective

efforts of the individuals at work, where the dynamic leadership of any single person turns out to be an inseparable factor. In a democratic government, the leader happens to be designated as the prime minister, or the president. In Bangladesh, we are used to hearing quite often exaggerated stories of success of the political party/parties in power. Yet they are very miserly in regretting their failures. Nor do they have the moral strength to make any public statement on the immoral activities of any leader of the party, let alone the workers at the grassroots level.

In the good old days, most of the bosses in corporate organisations, or those in the policy maker's level of the government, used to share their successes with subordinates. And, in the

same breath, they wouldn't hesitate in the least to assume full responsibility of the lapses due to their subordinates. However, they bosses would never have compromised their own efficiency with the inefficiency of their subordinates. On the contrary, they would persistently endeavour to make the lesser ones shake-off their weaknesses to be real partners in the projected success of the organisation. To-day, an inefficient boss is more often flattered by his/her shrewd and cunning subordinates. Consequently, he/she is trapped by his/her own inaction, and remains literally blind to the mischief being perpetrated by some of the subordinates under his/her nose.

The present hauling up of the corrupt ministers, parliament members, youth and student leaders is only an insignificant part of the whole story. The dimension of the criminal offences alleged to have been committed by many other 'compatriots,' who are yet to be intercepted, is far more massive and horrendous. We may recall that till 2005 our country was rated as the most corrupt in the world, topping the list five years in succession. We were about to score a double hattrick in 2006 but, somehow, a small African country, Chad, secured the topmost position, elbowing us down to member two. The finance minister of the time made sarcastic remarks about TI reports, claiming them to be mere "cock and bull" stories having no connection with reality.

He even went to the extent of saying that there was corruption everywhere across the world, and

that the west was used to making inflated stories quite often. To our dismay and consternation, his son is now facing charges of corruption and extortion. The boss of the government, too, is now compelled to swallow the bitter pill, paying heavily for having ignored the dubious role played by a member of the family.

Along with our politicians, we have by now a few bureaucrats, officers of city corporations, labour leaders in the banking sector and public utility services behind the bars awaiting formal prosecution soon. At the latest we had the Chief Engineer of Sylhet City Corporation making a fabulous offer to the government. He made a confessional statement to the law enforcing agencies on his huge wealth and immovable assets built with illegal gratification. He even went to the extent of saying that he was prepared to surrender all his property to the government. He was in a terrible state of lamentation.

He pleaded guilty of taking bribes over the past several years and volunteered to surrender his assets worth 30 crores. But, according to the preliminary investigation conducted by the anti-corruption department as per

information catered to the news media on March 16 his total assets, would be around 100 crores. It appears that there has been suppression of truth in this case as well as in other cases of ex-ministers and MPs now in jail.

Around the same time, a joint commissioner of income tax was caught red-handed by the joint law and order enforcing body while taking bribe. He will also be proceeded against after through investigation into his unearned income and accumulated wealth. The adviser of the ministry of finance informed his listeners in a meeting on March 15 that the government would now release a comprehensive list of other corrupt people, with specific charges against each. Such a list would eventually dispel the fear and state of uncertainty among the innocent. It is expected that the actual culprits will get exemplary punishment, and the innocent set free.

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