

EC's role under focus

Where do we stand on reform agenda?

EIGHT weeks have passed since the reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC). How far it has moved along the electoral reforms path, is a very legitimate question to ask. Everybody knows our future hinges on a good election and that such election in turn is critically dependent on carrying out a plateful of reform agenda that is on the EC's hands.

Meanwhile, the High Court while declaring the electoral roll invalid has laid down a set of parameters for 'holding free, fair and credible election'. These are identity card for voters, transparent ballot boxes, mandatory submission of wealth statement by candidates and separation of the EC secretariat from the chief executive's office with administrative, financial and logistical independence vested in it.

The civil society has been vociferously demanding fulfillment of such preconditions for holding free, fair and credible election that the High Court has so laudably upheld. To our understanding, the EC so far has been rather fragmentary and piecemeal in its approach rather than being holistic. In specific terms, what has the EC done on the questions of election financing, reducing cost of the election expenses, political party reform, setting up of special election tribunal and transparent ballot boxes? In fact, there is a whole range of reform issues, let alone preparation of an authentic voter list that need to be addressed in a time-bound fashion. We are in a race with time. Knowing full well that transparent ballot boxes will take a year to be delivered should we have not placed an order for it right away. Also, there is an ambiguity in the public mind as to whether we are going to have national identity card or just a voter list with photographs attached.

The EC is considering a ban on use of portraits of national leaders in the local election campaign. This is a step in the right direction. We suggest it be extended to national election campaign also, because our leaders should not be a subject matter of contest, controversy or divisiveness in the country.

All we are urging the EC to do however is to communicate with the people, give them a clear and full picture about what they have done on the reform agenda and what they plan to do in the near future and how.

27th BCS affair

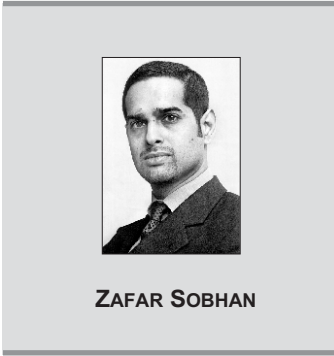
PSC needs thorough recasting

THE demand made by a platform of students and civil society members for an immediate cancellation of the 27th BCS examinations raises once more the question of what needs to be done about the Public Service Commission itself. Quite a good deal has been reported on and commented about on the present state of affairs at the body, owing specifically to the many allegations of corruption against those at its helm of affairs. Transparency International Bangladesh has particularly been vocal in its assertion that the PSC is in need of thorough recasting. In response to the TIB reports, the PSC itself sought to explain its position before a group of civil society members a few days ago. Unfortunately, the meeting ended in pandemonium, part of the reason being that a selected group of successful 27th BCS candidates for government service interfered with the proceedings in defence of the PSC and, of course, in defence of what they saw as their own right to be allowed to be part of the civil service.

The clear issue before the country today is the extent to which reforms need to be carried out as part of an overall restructuring of organizations geared to promoting public good. With such organizations as the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission having already undergone significant changes, it is but natural for the PSC to be now brought under the microscope. For starters, the charges of wrongdoing that have been laid at the door of the chairperson and other members of the body must be investigated in the greater public interest. It makes sense to argue here that with so many academics and other individuals airing their grievances against the PSC, there is a paramount need for a swift and meaningful acknowledgement of such concerns by the authorities. One will have no reason to deny that at present the PSC is under a very dark cloud. Its credibility has become frayed through politicization seeping into its corridors, thanks to the partisan nature of administration in the period before October last year. And where the 27th BCS examinations are concerned, it is only logical to suppose that the clamour for a cancellation of the examinations could not have been there had a transparent testing process for candidates been in place.

It becomes an imperative for all of us to reconsider the state of the Public Service Commission in earnest. Let us be clear about the situation: if those who manned other statutory bodies earlier could be influenced into quitting and making way for new people to take charge, there is no good reason why a similar move cannot be undertaken about the PSC. For their part, the individuals who run, or otherwise, the PSC today can do the country a favour by going away on their own.

'Tis new to thee



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONE of the oversimplifications the commentariat (myself included) is often guilty of is to look at all political questions in the country from an AL versus BNP point of view: political discourse in Bangladesh seems to revolve around this binary understanding of the world.

This understanding of Bangladeshi politics was never 100 per cent accurate. After all, Bangladesh is replete with those of dubious morality from all walks of life who have prospered regardless of who was in power. These self-serving chameleons, surely, are the people we really need to watch out for.

Bangladesh is filled with people with a knack for making sure they stay on the right side of whatever government is in power. In the post-liberation period this meant currying favour with the AL, in the mid to late seventies it meant throwing one's lot in with BNP, in the eighties, Ershad. You get the

STRAIGHT TALK

I can understand why the previous government would want to keep the lid on the JMB, but what about the current one? Who are behind this decision and what do they want to hide? If the six JMB leaders walk the gallows without being permitted to say a word, it will show that the pre-January 11 agenda is alive and well, and we should understand that our world is not quite as brave and new as we had hoped.

idea.

In a sense, this is why, perhaps, not so much has changed down the years. Certain structures and systems have always remained in place, regardless of whether the government has been socialist or military or whatever, and it is the individuals who have been able to maneuver through these systems and manipulate them for their own benefit who have prospered at the expense of the common good.

So, the apparent impending demise of the AL and BNP should not be the cause for the popping of champagne corks quite yet, even for those who are opposed to both (or either) parties tooth and nail and wish for nothing more than their destruction.

Certainly, many of the top names have been put behind bars. Tarique is in jail -- that means that the BNP is finished, right? Not so fast. Yes, many criminals from his coterie may be out of business, but there are just as many who have evaded capture (or, indeed, charges) and are busy trying to come to terms with whoever the next power brokers will be. The danger we must be alive to is that however much change there is, whatever new dispensation ultimately ends up running the country, that these kinds of opportunists will bribe and bully their way to the top again.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about.

On January 12, two of the first people picked up by the authorities were Md. Aminul Islam and Abul Kashem Polash, president and senior official of Adab (Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh) an umbrella organization of more than 1,000 NGOs.

They were initially arrested under the Special Powers Act, but after their detention was declared illegal by the High Court, a series of preposterous and utterly implausible cases has been filed against them, and they remain behind bars.

Adab had long been on the hit-list of the last BNP-led government, and the organization

had suffered a great deal of harassment and malicious prosecution during the course of the 4-party alliance's tenure in office

At first it was hoped that the two Adab officials were arrested based on a list prepared by the previous government and that once their case was brought to light that they would be released in short order. But now, two and half months down the line, it is clear that someone still has it in for them.

Who could this be? Is it BNP dead-enders who are trying to exact one last piece of revenge or still trying at this late date to turn things around. Actually, that would be the most benign and least worrisome explanation.

But the more alarming possibility is that the truth is more sinister even than that. Even as the BNP is imploding, we find that much of its worst priorities and agenda seem to have been picked up and implemented by some party or parties within the current power structure.

That is to say, just as there

were retrograde and regressive elements in the last administration who considered Adab a threat to their well-being, there are, apparently, still those in positions of power who feel the same way.

Perhaps these are the same people in the administration who thought that it was a good idea to pick up and torture to death anti eco-park activist Choilesh Ritchil in Modhupur last week. According to eyewitness accounts, among other horrific tortures, Choilesh had been castrated, beaten black and blue, had fingernails, toenails, and teeth pulled out, and his eyes plucked out.

So, who is behind this atrocity and in what way is the agenda of such a person or people different from the agenda of torture and tyranny that marked the last five years? This is a pertinent inquiry because those responsible are, presumably, one of the parties calling the shots for the next few months if not the next few years.

One question: what would the point be of all our efforts to ensure that the Tarique Rahman raj not be established if we end up with precisely the kind of abuses that would have occurred had he come to power?

It is critical that wherever we end up, we don't end up in the same old place. I remain cautiously optimistic about the opportunities before the nation

right now, but I remain concerned that power doesn't end up in the wrong hands, as it has a habit of doing in Bangladesh.

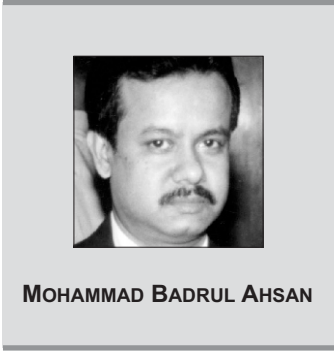
One absolutely crucial issue which will tell us how much things have really changed between January 11 and now is the imminent execution of the six JMB leaders currently scheduled for the middle of April.

The questions as to who have been sponsoring and sheltering the JMB remain unanswered, but the current administration is getting ready to send them to the gallows without permitting them to speak, on the absurd grounds that there is "no precedent." It is unheard of for convicts in a case such as this to be executed without being permitted to open their mouths, thus ensuring that they take their secrets with them to the grave.

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Bangladesh rising



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF I could I would freeze the frame between October 13, 2006 and March 25, 2007, and then replicate it again and again before splicing together a motion picture of dream. If I could I would extricate from the frame October 28, 2006, the single most day in our history when a raving madness had seized this country.

But except that particular incident the patch looks good -- a living thriving nation, which can win a Nobel Prize, beat up on formidable competitors in the World Cup Cricket, pull the country from the brink of disaster, and embark on a new journey.

It shows that we have what it takes, the resolve, courage, talent and skills. It shows that we can catch up with the rest of the world if we like, that the potentials are embedded in us if we put our minds to build, not destroy our country. If anything, that realisation never hit us

CROSS TALK

Bangladesh is rising for all practical reasons. It has risen in the Nobel, it has risen in the cricket and it has risen in our renewed resolve to build this nation. It is a frame of renewal and resurgence, a frame of pride and passion, a frame of dream and determination. It is a frame to look forward, go ahead and make progress.

before since we got our independence. We never learned to believe in the future. We never learned to believe in dreams.

As a matter of fact, we never fully recovered from the scars of repression we suffered as a province of an erstwhile state. Somehow we never overcame the provincial mindset and rose to the occasion as a nation state unto ourselves.

We handled government like family, and national politics like domestic squabbles. For thirty-six years we have wallowed in self-pity, blaming it on poverty, population and politics. Except for the window of the last six months, we never learned to believe that there was anything good for us.

For the first time in our history, we seem to be in control. We are talking about reforms in politics, elimination of corruption, separation of judiciary, Bangabandhu murder case, freedom of radio and television, super eight in the World Cup,

national ID, pictorial voter list, special tribunals for corrupt men and women.

For the first time it seems that we are driving the stake into the Dracula's heart. The wrongdoers are throwing their cars, pets, even money on streets, ponds and parking lots. The fear has gone into them.

We have accomplished much more in one single frame than all the frames before it. And that is true both nationally and internationally, which shows that there is a way, where there is a will. It was the lack of will when we became the most corrupt nation for five years in a row and let ourselves sink into that stereotype without doing anything. We were portrayed as a fundamentalist country, yet we made no effort to fend off that notorious image. We earned the sobriquet of a failed state and fed into that maw without any effective attempt to overturn it.

True, we cannot win a Nobel Prize every year. We may not be able to repeat the

same performance in cricket every time. There may not be another drive against corruption in next thirty-six years. But these fortuitous happenings should give us two things. One is the hope to become a happy and proud nation. Another is the strength to believe that we can achieve if we set the goal.

My frame captures these sentiments, a slice of time packed with the boundless energy of a nation, which was oblivious to its own strengths. Doomsayers have been always talking about the bleak future. In contrast, boomsayers have been few, people who reposed their trust in the future of this nation.

For thirty-five years and six months, we have clumsily struggled to break away from the past, our political destiny resembling the fate of Sisyphus who was condemned to repeat the same meaningless task of pushing a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll down again.

It is said that an average civilization lasts for about two hundred years and goes through ten different stages. It starts with bondage and moves to spiritual faith. Then spiritual faith turns into great courage, which attains liberty. Next stage is abundance, which cultivates selfishness. The complacency sets in afterwards, followed by apathy in the seventh stage. Apathy breeds moral decay, which leads to dependence. In the tenth stage the civilization goes back to square one. Dependence takes it back to bondage.

That is how history makes progress through cyclical repetition just like the wheel turns to move a vehicle. Believe it or not, the dynamics is bizarre here. One generation throws off the shackles of bondage only to have a later generation allow itself enslaved through apathy and complacency.

Here comes another contradiction. Malcolm Muggeridge explains that man is capable of conceiving perfection but forever imperfect in his actions. Man live in the no-man's land between his perfect aspiration and imperfect nature. What one generation holds dearly, another gives away without concern.

In that respect, a nation is

like people. It goes through birth, decline and death, which is a cycle that occurs within the larger cycle of civilization. People unfold a nation, and nations unfold a civilization. May be it is also the other way around. A civilization unfolds nations and a nation unfolds its people.

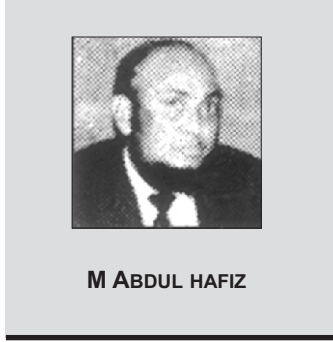
For last six months short of few days, that unfolding has been happening to us. We have been winning recognitions, we have been winning competitions and we have been turning things around for us. In the next TI report, we are going to lose quite a few notches in the ranking of corrupt nations. The descend will start to make the ascend.

Bangladesh is rising for all practical reasons. It has risen in the Nobel, it has risen in the cricket and it has risen in our renewed resolve to build this nation. It is a frame of renewal and resurgence, a frame of pride and passion, a frame of dream and determination. It is a frame to look forward, go ahead and make progress.

On March 26, the word independence rang with its true meaning. For the first time the Independence Day felt like the birth of a nation.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

The WEF versus the WSF



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE sustenance of the world capitalist order and its delicate interrelation with colonialism and empire building has been far from easy and required cooperation and understanding within the capitalist fraternity itself. Sensing an imminent victory in the secured world war the allied leaders sensed their only socialist partner rushed to Breton Woods -- even before the war ended -- to prepare the economic blueprint of a post war world.

Taking a cue from the experience of the past when the capitalist world failed to pull together its architects seldom tired of refining it with new innovations and initiative

PERSPECTIVES

In WSF participants one could see a clear interest in developments taking place in Latin America. The anti-US stance of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Nicaragua's Doniel Ortega has captured the imagination of progressive anti-war activists. However, the Millennium Development Goals initiative which is a UN response to the issues of poverty and disparity, illiteracy and lack of opportunity for

as well as bringing in its fold wider varieties of people interacting with each other. This resulted in the creation of World Economic Forum (WEF) by a Swiss Professor Klaus Schwab of Geneva University in 1971. In the last week of January each year the heads of the world's leading companies are joined by politicians, artists, academics, religious leaders, trade unionists, lobbyists and campaigners in the Swiss resort of Davos "to contribute towards solving the problems of our age."

Over the years the WEF has become of the most prestigious events of the business calendar. The official website of WEF claims

that forum was founded on the precept that the business cannot operate in a vacuum and that the great challenges facing the humankind ought to be addressed by all stakeholders of the society.

Yet the WEF is in common perception a rich man's club where membership depends primarily on the worth of the interested company in strictly financial terms. In the developed world a company needs a recorded turnover of one billion dollars and in the developing world it needs an annual turnover of at least \$500 million to qualify for applying for the forum's membership. A member company pays \$25000 annual membership fee

and an additional \$15,000 to attend the annual event. Nevertheless the WEF plays a crucial role for the advancement of the creed i.e. capitalism in one of most organised and formal manner.

Through the ages, obviously the success of the capitalism dazzled people but still there were radicals or people with advanced views or humanitarians who were not happy at its cutthroat competition and the sufferings it caused to the society's underdogs in spite of growing wealth. Consequently the socialist ideals grew as an answer to capitalist exploitation. But in its embryonic form it was little more than seeking higher wages and better

living conditions for the toiling masses.

Even if the socialist world collapsed with the demise of the cold war due to its inept handling by its equally inept leaders the ideals underlying socialism diehard and continues to lure the world's dispossessed. In the face of capitalist tyranny with its tentacles of globalisation, WTO and neo-liberalism the socialism's appeal grows from strength to strength. The World Social Forum (WSF) with its slogan of "another world is possible" instantly catches the imagination of a young, angry generation disillusioned by the capitalism's corporate skulduggery. In its charter of principles the WSF defines itself as a space of groups and movements of the civil society opposed to neo-liberalism and the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.

A year after anti-globalisation activists surprised the world and themselves with the effectiveness of their protests at a WTO meeting in Seattle the WSF started in 2001 at Porto Alegre, Brazil. The country's left leaning government partially supported the event. Ever since WSF has also become

annual alternative summit of the so-called anti-globalisation movements. It is held in the last week of January each year at a predetermined place. It is created more as a counterweight to WEF by those who support the poor. It provides platform for activists and campaigners from across the world to share and refine strategies and networks.

Like the WEF, the WSF also organises regional forums that are expected to adhere to the WSF charter of principles. The charter says: The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experience and interlinking for action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among humankind and between it and the earth.

In 2006 the WSF was polycentric and held in Caracas (Venezuela), Bamako (Mali), and Karachi (Paki-

stan). This year the Nairobi meet of the WSF in the city's Kasarani stadium has been a noisy open assembly of the activists drawn from socio-cultural movements and cause-oriented organisations and their alliances from across the world. This African gathering -- truly international in scope was move of a carnival of old time lefties absorbed by numerous NGOs. Some hard line Marxists continued to agitate for a revocation.

As before, it wouldn't be fair to dismiss the WSF as a mere get together. Over the last six years it has been effectively evaluating. Earlier it used to start and end with criticisms and protests. But now some practical suggestions to solve issues facing the dispossessed and vulnerable people have started coming up for discussion. The overarching theme of the meet is: "Another world is possible." It is no more a surrealism; neither is it a buzzword. The thing that unites people here is the hope that a peaceful, prosperous and equitable world is attainable.

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ments taking place in Latin America. The anti-US stance of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega has captured the imagination of progressive anti-war activists.

However, the Millennium Development Goals initiative which is a UN response to the issues of poverty and disparity, illiteracy and lack of opportunity for the poor and vulnerable did not figure prominently in either of the forums.

Answer to this question by Professor Schwab, the founder and executive director of WEF and the organising committee of the WSF will indeed be enlightening.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.