

EC's 18-month plan

Time period is not well justified

THE Election Commission has announced a tentative plan regarding the next general election. The details of the plan appear to be quite substantive. However, there are some glaring or major gaps which we think raise some very important questions about the plan. One of these is the matter of the expenses involved in campaigning. The EC has said nothing about it despite the fact that it is a major issue before the country. Recent experience shows that the influence of money illegally acquired and unscrupulously used at elections has undermined the democratic experiment, so much so that honest, dedicated candidates have been sidelined in the electoral process. We would, therefore, like to know what thinking the EC has on the matter as it goes about reforming the electoral process. Much of what elective democracy will achieve, or otherwise, in future depends on how the Election Commission means to drive out black money from the elections. Another major gap the EC must fill is the matter of how soon and how effectively it can de-link itself from the Prime Minister's Office. Unless such a step is taken, doubts will remain about the practicality of the reforms it undertakes. These worries must be allayed.

The Chief Election Commissioner has stated that it is not possible for elections to be held before eighteen months have elapsed. One wonders what possible logic there could be for the EC to have taken such a position. Significantly, the CEC's remarks have failed to tell the nation what it wants to know, which is: when will the elections actually be held? In other words, a rationale must be there to accompany the EC's plan as it stands. It may be that, for the EC, a period even longer than eighteen months may be needed for election-related preparations to be completed, but what is important is that a good, credible explanation must come with the time frame announced by the EC. The time frame as we have it now unfortunately cannot be justified. That said, the EC's plans regarding an ID-based voter list must also be clearly outlined. Only weeks ago, it was suggested that the army was in a position to help the EC produce voter IDs cards in the space of ten months or so. The question now is why such an offer of assistance has not yet been taken up. We strongly advocate that the EC go without delay into giving practical shape to the suggestion.

All said and done, the Election Commission must come up with some more tangible plan of action than it has thus far. Time is of the essence and it is on that basis that it must move, fast. Procrastination, in these present conditions, can only make matters murkier than they already are.

Global warming - a looming apocalypse

Set up a national council to address the issue

A most dismal picture of what has happened to the earth and what is to become of it in the future because of global warming, has been painted in the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change sponsored by the UN. The 1400-page report predicts that as the earth's temperature continues to rise the situation is likely to worsen. The consequent damage on our agriculture, its flora and fauna and its fresh water resources, is too depressing to contemplate.

That the drafting of the report was marked by disagreements only highlights the difference in how the issue of global warming is viewed by different countries and regions.

Differences notwithstanding, there is no running away from the reality that we are faced with a situation where global warming is no longer a possibility, it is a reality and the consequences are being felt already by different countries in the world, particularly the poorer ones, albeit in not the same degree of intensity.

Regrettably, the poorer countries have always been and will continue to be at the receiving end of what the richer nations produce by way of emission of green house gases (GHG). And unfortunately, it is the developing countries like Bangladesh and that too the poorer people, who neither have the capacity nor the resilience to face the damage, that are likely to suffer the worst from global warming.

The horrendous impact of the phenomenon must be grasped by all countries, rich or poor, since the consequences will not be restricted to the national boundaries only. Moreover, the relatively poor in richer countries risk being affected by it as much as those in the other developing countries. And it will require a collective effort at the global level to stem what many view as the next apocalypse.

We would like to join in the call to the rich countries to adopt measures to control GHG emissions. For the countries of South Asia, being a part of the tropical region of the globe which experts predict likely to be the worst hit area, there is need for greater integration of efforts in addressing global warming. As for Bangladesh we suggest that a high powered national committee be set up to go into the gamut of the issue and suggest actions to face its consequences.

Agony and ecstasy in Bangladesh



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

But if the leading corruptors and godfathers are again allowed to go free without punishment, then the ordinary people would consider the whole episode as a charade and those behind the bars at the moment would come back with a vengeance for their pound of flesh. One hopes that such a cruel joke would not be played on the people and their faith in the rule of law would again be restored.

century Saudi Arabia.

Indeed Bangladesh, like many other countries, would have to construct its own brand of democracy, keeping in view its social, historical and cultural traditions. One, however, becomes apprehensive when religion is advocated to be one of the pillars of our socio-political construct.

Undeniably Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country and most of the people are devout Muslims. But the absence of the teaching of giving unto God what is God's and unto Caesar what is Caesar's by practicing Muslims (as opposed to Christianity) due to historical reasons open up the possibility of strengthening the presence of what journalist Christopher Hitchens would call "Islamofascist" and historian Niall Ferguson would label "Islamobolsheviks" committed to revolution and reordering the world in a way that would undo modernism and take countries like ours to 6th

Madrasas continue to flourish and the degrees awarded by these institutions continue to be recognized as equivalent to the degrees given by colleges and universities, making religious education equal to secular education.

Brussels based International Crisis Group in a recent report on "

Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism" has observed that Karachi's Madrasas which have trained and dispatched Jihadi fighters to Afghanistan and Indian-administered Kashmir is a living proof of governmental failure causing internal instability and having repercussions on regional and international security.

Albeit Bangladeshi government is not beholden to Islamist political groups like President Musharraf's dependence on Muttahida Majlis-e-Aam, but given anti-West phobia and even pro-Taliban sentiment pervading in Baluchistan and NWFP, it is not surprising that the ICG has advised both the Pakistani government and the international community to establish a single Madrasa Regulatory Authority under parliamentary oversight with powers to bring the Madrasas in line with mainstream education; and not to treat Madrasa certificates as equivalent to degrees issued by recognized boards of education and

universities. One has to recognize the reality that in the present day unipolar world where the Clash of Civilizations thesis has attracted large following, religion in politics, particularly Islam, is on the defensive.

As the developed regions of the world are not populated by Muslims and the people of these regions have very little time and interest to delve into the intrinsic values of Islam, and given the dependence of the developing world on the developed ones, the World Bank fact sheet and Goldman Sachs' placing Bangladesh among the next tier of emerging economies would be contingent on international connectivity where the economic advantages and not religious appeal would be crucial.

Undeniably Athenian democracy cannot be practiced nor the Periclean doctrine that all-important state issues be discussed in public. This does not

mean that oligarchic and plutocratic system of governance of which Bangladesh had been victim for the last five years has to be followed.

Since in the ultimate analysis the politicians have to be entrusted with the responsibility of running the country, one hopes that after the lessons of the past few months the new breed of politicians would have the wisdom to elevate their character to the level of serving the people instead of serving themselves. Democracy is a dynamic process, it is evolving and has not yet reached Francis Fukuyama's "end point of mankind's ideological evolution."

It means that the Westminster or the American system of government may not necessarily be the only solution for all time but that each situation may adjust itself to produce a system best suited to the people of that country at a given time. Had it not been so then constitutions throughout the world would not have had the provision for amendment as well as provision for the declaration of emergency to meet difficult challenges.

One must, however, be on guard that saviors do not take advantage of momentary disenchantment of the people with the politicians to impose upon the unsuspecting populace Pakistani Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy or some other dictator's "guided democracy" or "real democracy." Essential ingredients of any

modern system must contain the fundamental human rights of the people and freedom from fear and freedom from want. Indubitably national security has to be ensured. But it cannot be done unless economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security also embody human security.

To achieve the above it is necessary to have a cohesive societal structure where initially the basic needs of the people are met and different segments of the society are not on a confrontational course.

The present generation of Bangladeshi who were looking at the abyss and inevitable conflagration would remain ever grateful to political and other forces, both internal and external, for bringing the country back from the brink.

But if the leading corruptors and godfathers are again allowed to go free without punishment, then the ordinary people would consider the whole episode as a charade and those behind the bars at the moment would come back with a vengeance for their pound of flesh. One hopes that such a cruel joke would not be played on the people and their faith in the rule of law would again be restored.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

New democratic political order



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

The Constitution of 1972 did not work simply because the political, social and cultural environment has been alien to an ideal Constitution. Holding of periodic elections is not enough for democracy. Democracy implies rule of law (not rule by law), equality of all people, free media, viable opposition parties, and a minimum acceptable standard of living for all.

On April 2, at a conference on security and democracy in Dhaka, organised by the Bangladesh Political Science Association, the army chief Lt.Gen. Moeen U.Ahmed presented a paper, the contents of which have been food for thought for many political observers. The Daily Star published his keynote speech in the op-ed page on April 4.

Gen Moeen reportedly said: "We do not want to go back to an 'elective democracy' where corruption in society becomes all pervasive, governance suffers in terms of insecurity and violation of rights, and where political criminalisation threatens the very survival and integrity of the state."

The army chief sent a clear message that Bangladesh "will have to construct its own brand of democracy" suited to its people.

What steps do we follow for a new political order?

The question is, how do we begin to reinvent our own democracy? What steps do we follow? This, in turn, brings in another question, is the Constitution of 1972 working? The answer seems to be in the negative.

Many say that the Constitution of 1972 is too ideal for politicians in Bangladesh. The Constitution

of a country is something that must be suited to the historical, political, social and cultural ethos of that country. It is not a "one size fits all" phenomenon.

The Constitution is often compared to a sapling, which may not grow in congenial soil or environment. A banana plant cannot be grown in a cold climate, and grapes cannot be produced in too warm a climate.

The Constitution of 1972 did not work simply because the political, social and cultural environment has been alien to an ideal Constitution.

Holding of periodic elections is not enough for democracy. Democracy implies rule of law (not rule by law), equality of all people, free media, viable opposition parties, and a minimum acceptable standard of living for all.

Between 1972 and 1975 four amendments were made, and the 4th amendment in 1975 almost destroyed the character and features of the original Constitution of 1972. Two prolonged periods of martial law were promulgated in the 70s and 80s, when provisions of the Constitution were suspended. All these undue interferences, and abuse of the Constitutional provisions, lead to one conclusion, that the Constitution of 1972 did not suit politicians of the country.

Accordingly, there has been a call for introducing democracy suited to this country, given the culture and values embedded in politicians. This means that the powers and actions must be made explicitly clear in the Constitution.

The current form of parliamentary democracy has turned into "prime ministerial" authoritarian democracy. No more is the prime minister the first among equals in the cabinet. The untrammelled powers of the prime minister need to be checked because they lead to gross abuses or inaction.

Besides, the people witnessed

a regime of "tyranny of the elected majority and recalcitrant minority" imposed on them during the last

16 years. Furthermore, the Constitution has been amended 14 times in the last 36 years. Did the governments ask the people whether the amendments were necessary or not?

lately," as Lord Acton famously said. What Lord Acton meant was that a person's sense of morality lessens as his/her power increases. The people of Bangladesh have been helpless victims to this practice and culture.

Many suggest that a new Constitution needs to be considered to set in motion a new order of democracy that is based on accountability, justice and fairplay, with adequate check and balance of power.

Issues that need to be considered in the revised Constitution:

I wish to point out certain issues that need to be considered for a revised Constitution. The following list of issues is not exhaustive, only indicative.

- Should the parliament have two houses?
- Should the duration of the parliament be for three years?
- Should the tenure of the president and the prime minister be limited to two terms?
- Should the number of ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers and advisers, or persons having status of minister/state minister/deputy minister, be limited to only 10% of the members of parliament?
- Should a person have experience in public service to be eligible for appointment as

minister/state minister/deputy minister or adviser?

- Should there be women's constituencies for electing women in parliament?
- Should the functions of MPs be clearly spelt-out, including the do's and don'ts?
- Should there be any time-frame within which local self-governments have to be constituted through elections?
- Should any amendment to the Constitution, or any important national issue, be put on referendum?
- Should all nominees for constitutional and other important posts be recommended/nominated for appointment by a committee comprised of two politicians each from all major parties, and the civil society including professionals and experts in their fields?
- Should the powers of the president and the prime minister be equally balanced and clearly spelt out?
- Should all state institutions, including the election commission, anti-corruption commission, ombudsman, auditor general and public service commission, be separated, strengthened and made independent of the government?
- Should there be a constitutional forum representing government, civil society, human rights organisations and private business sector for better communication and decision on national issues?
- Should representatives of civil society and the business sector be allowed to participate as non-voting members in parliamentary committees?
- Should parliamentary committees be chaired by repre-

sentatives of opposition parties?

- Should retired persons of the higher judiciary be involved in any part of the administration? Should a former chief justice be the chief adviser in care-taker governments?
- Should retired public servants or employees of autonomous governmental organisations be barred from joining any political party before 5 years have elapsed since retirement?
- Should there be a national security council for co-ordinating security and other national issues?
- Should any political party not gaining 5% of the popular vote in the parliamentary election be denied representation in the parliament, or not be recognised as a registered lawful political party?

A robust and dispassionate national debate needs to be initiated by all political parties and all sections of society to consider these issues before a constitutional committee or commission is constituted to draft a revised Constitution.

A Constitution is not something that cannot be changed. The Constitution is for the welfare of the people, and not the other way round.

If drastic amendments to the Constitution were made during the last 36 years, why can't we revise it for a new political and economic order that reflects the hopes, wishes, and aspirations of the people? Let there be a new beginning for Bangladesh.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

Ban on campus politics



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

Education is the area which has been kept above all political rivalry in most of the countries in the world. Sadly, the politicians of Bangladesh are conspicuously devoid of such sense. Naked politicization in every field of national life has not spared the education sector and political nepotism in recruiting unfit teachers has also contributed to the decline of quality in higher education.

The UGC recommend such a moratorium on the party politics in the line with the 20-year strategic plan, titled "Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh: 2006-2026," which was prepared in April 2006 with the assistance of the World Bank. The UGC in its annual report 1992 also recommended that the government should make student politics independent of political parties.

The education ministry identified students' and teachers' politics as a major obstacle to congenial academic atmosphere in the public universities and colleges, in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutions of higher education.

The government earlier decided to issue a moratorium on party-based politics by teachers and students of the public universities and colleges, in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutions of higher education.

Barrister Mainul Hosein, the adviser for the law ministry, confirmed issuance of the moratorium on March 23 and said that they were waiting for a proposal from the University Grants Commission (UGC) in this regard.

chairman and comprising of educationists and legal experts are preparing the draft law. The committee is likely to submit it to the education ministry early next month.

The speakers at a national seminar on "Improvement of the standard of public universities: in connection with Dhaka University" observed that the politics in the campus is never going to stop if the vice chancellor is appointed by the prime minister.

Students' participation in the party-based politics and their involvement in various heinous crimes have weighed down of all sorts of people with cares. One Tanjil, a JCD leader of DU was held last year while committing robbery in a business house at Motijheel commercial area.

The student politics of this country has a historical and glorious

heritage. During the movement against the British Rule, the students took an active part in different movements, protesting the rule. The students of this country were the main architects of the language movement of 1952. The students were not then involved in party-based politics.

The student politics, which is presently in, its most belligerent form, is no doubt responsible to a great extent for making the public universities paralyzed. In fact higher education in the public universities are now held hostage to politics.

The students, who have entered the public universities with a genuine intention for higher education, are also prevented from doing so, as they are forced to live in an atmosphere totally hostile to such politics.

Students of the university should learn politics but must not be partisans and the sycophants of political parties. Student politics should focus on promotion of academic pursuits, research and building up of leadership.

The student politics of this country has a historical and glorious

masters in any academic subjects.

The Election Commission is going to reform the electoral laws. It should make a provision that no political party will have a student wing. If any party violates the provision, its registration will be cancelled and will not be allowed to contest any election.

The student politics has become cohesive with party-based politics after independence when political parties made the student organizations as their wing. That was the beginning of the ruination process of innocent and aspiring students coming from different corners of the country.

The student politics of these days is not set on an ideal basis but is based on arms. Many of the student leaders are non-students who have sold their souls to the devil. They have taken recourse to student politics as a short-cut way and means for making money.

Most of the student leaders now possess cars, buses, flats and shops in the capital city. These student leaders and the activists are involved in various heinous crimes as they have mastered the art of criminality instead of doing