

EC's dialogue plan

Simultaneous talks with civil society and political parties desirable

THE move by the Election Commission (EC) to initiate a dialogue with civil society on the issue of election-related reforms is welcome. It is especially so because over the last few years civil society has played a major role in sensitizing the general masses to an awareness of the gaps in the existing system and what must be done to correct the situation. However, we cannot agree with the notion on the part of the EC that consultations with the political parties on the issue will have to wait until the ban on indoor politics is lifted. It is our belief that a dialogue with civil society and the political parties on the reforms issue can be carried on simultaneously, given that the state of emergency does not in any way prevent the EC from getting in touch with individuals and organizations over what are clearly matters of national significance.

As far as we are aware, there is hardly any link between a ban on indoor politics and a dialogue between the EC and the parties. The emergency provisions now in force certainly do not allow an open pursuit of politics in any form. But since politics is not what the Election Commission does, it can without any complication get in touch with a specific number of political parties, invite their senior leaders to meetings at its offices or have its leading figures visit the offices of the parties to talk over the reforms issues. Of course, beginning a dialogue with civil society is a good sign of things to be. But equally true is the fact that political parties, despite the exasperating shortcomings they have demonstrated in recent times, happen to be major stakeholders in the nation's future. That is why the EC's interaction with them at the earliest makes good sense.

Even as we welcome the initiative by the EC, we feel that the dialogue process should not be open-ended and therefore a time-consuming one. The chief election commissioner and his colleagues ought to draw up a time-bound strategy limited to no more than three months within which period they will complete the deliberations process. Once that is done, the EC should formally go for an announcement of the agreed reforms, a hint of which it has already sent out to the country. Meanwhile, the EC must also keep the country posted on its plans of preparing the voter list. In simple terms, everything the EC plans on doing must be based on the principle that time is of the essence.

ACC chairman's initiative

Corruption must be contained collectively

THE Anti-Corruption Commission chairman's observation that rooting out corruption will not be possible without social resistance against the menace is, we believe, based on a correct assessment of the ground reality. Corruption has spread its tentacles in every direction and nothing short of mass awareness leading to social resistance will be effective in containing the malady.

The strategy to wage an all-out war against corruption must have two essential components: a) Dealing with the proven cases of corruption through punishing the offenders and b) eliminating the factors contributing to proliferation of corruption on the basis of long term preventive measures.

The present caretaker government has initiated legal proceedings against a number of former ministers, MPs and politically influential people who are facing charges of graft and many other types of corruption. The move has been welcomed by all and sundry as the magnitude of corruption during the immediate past BNP regime was so great that it had a crippling effect on the country's economy. It also undermined our position to a great extent to the international community. Obviously, the bureaucracy also had its share of the booty. Hence, the ACC should now concentrate on the public servants who were, and still are, part of the corrupt systems introduced in the government departments and agencies.

There is no doubt that corruption is widespread in the urban areas, with the capital city being its epicentre. So the social resistance against corruption must begin here with holding of seminars and meetings highlighting the need for building a corruption-free society. In the rural areas, centres of general and religious education can be used to inspire people to lead an honest life. People from all walks of life must be involved in the process of eliminating corrupt practices. Resurrection of age-old values will help to motivate them in the fight against corruption.

Finally, it has to be ensured that the corrupt in society do not go unpunished – a goal which can be attained only when the legal process is not manipulated in any manner. The issue has a direct bearing on all that we are aiming to achieve – fair polls, good governance and a just social order.

Things are getting curiouser and curiouser



Brig Gen
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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The fault is not with our democracy but with those that run the system. Not a new system, but a cleansed one with a good lot of people is what Bangladesh needs. The caretaker government has made this its priority task. All of us, and that includes the armed forces, must do everything to see that it is fulfilled.

a sack-full of money left in the premises of a place of worship, a large quantity too, that was reportedly handed over to the authority. There was no claimant of the money, when there are so many eager and ready to lessen your burden of carrying a purse at the slightest opportunity.

There are some curious things happening in our politico-diplomatic front, too. For instance, we have the unique distinction, of being represented by an ambassador accredited to Bangladesh, when the ambassador in question demanded a definitive time-frame for election claiming that it was what the people of Bangladesh wanted to know.

First, there was a unique instance of our roads "delivering" costly cars. How else could one explain the phenomenon of not one or two, but four, very expensive cars being found abandoned on the road, with no one to claim ownership even after their photographs appeared in the media? This in a country where even an unattended jalopy would not be spared the unholly attention of the poachers, while cars worth scores of takas have to suffer the ignominy of being forsaken on the streets. And these were never seen gracing the streets of Dhaka before their unceremonious appearance in public.

And then there was the case of

Many would perhaps validate the position of the ambassador on the ground that such an act helps to preserve the national security of the ambassador's country, and surely that is what the primary job of an ambassador is!

But no less important in evincing public curiosity were the recent comments of the CAS. By far the most important talk of the town has been his views on democracy in general and on our democracy in particular.

While many have queried the aptness of a serving soldier, not to speak of a CAS, ventilating his views on our polity in public, it would be worthwhile to dwell on the substance of the speech of the army chief.

Gen Moeen was offered a platform, and he gave his own insight on the current state of our politics. What, however, has raised our curiosity is the fact he had not only expressed his disappointment on the state of our polity (a disappointment shared by most of us) but also suggested that we create our own hybrid variety of democracy that would

be suitable to the genre and psyche of the people of Bangladesh.

What was left undefined was the model that he would like to see evolve in our country, which we might employ for the benefit of the people. And it was perhaps because he is one among the many of us who are as disillusioned with the way democracy has functioned in Bangladesh, and who would like to see the people being the focus of democracy and not, as one retired army chief called democracy "bye" the people, "far" the people, and "off" the people. But we are not certain whether democracy itself should be blamed for all our ills.

The CAS has focused on two very important points. He called for a new and "own brand of democracy," and spoke against dynastic rule in Bangladesh.

Democracy, at least the way we have seen it applied, has bred

It has also given us a unique system that is hogged by dynastic control (not a new phenomenon in South Asia, but we have been very much the worse for it). Not many

will contest the main thrust of his arguments. But let us critique his views objectively.

There are no two opinions as to the universality of the essence of democracy. However, it is not necessary that the Westminster brand has to be applied universally. But if democracy has not delivered for us, I submit it is not the fault, per se, of democracy but of those who had been entrusted to run the system for us.

Therefore, even if we have a new variety, unless we have a new brand of people to run it we will still have an ineffective system. It is not a new system, but new faces, that we need. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but certainly need to determine its circumference and the number of spokes that would allow it to run smoothly.

I submit that what was relevant in ancient Greek city states is still relevant today in nation states; it's we who have discarded the essential criteria that make direct democracy, the only bad system amongst all the worst ones, prevalent in all countries but a few.

Interestingly, it was democracy that was blamed by the Athenians for their defeat at the hands of the Spartans (which was not a democracy) when, in fact, it was Athens's strategy against the Spartans that was to blame for their military disaster.

But they neither considered going for a new form of government nor changing the existing

one. If merit and competence have not been recognised in Bangladesh as the main criteria for public service, the fault does not lie with the politicians alone.

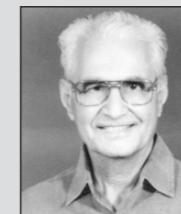
Dynastic politics in Bangladesh has a dynamics of its own. Lack of transparency and accountability, and endemic corruption, are closely linked with it. If dynastic politics has become an existing norm in our political system, part of the blame must also be taken by the institutions that have pandered to the political leaders' whims without remonstrating.

All the institutions have been so crudely politicised that one would not be wrong in suggesting that these have been made to look like extensions of the family businesses of those who controlled the government of the day. And it is just not one but all the parties that were democratically elected that indulged in the politicisation of the institutions in lesser or greater degree.

The fault is not with our democracy but with those that run the system. Not a new system, but a cleansed one with a good lot of people is what Bangladesh needs. The caretaker government has made this its priority task. All of us, and that includes the armed forces, must do everything to see that it is fulfilled.

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The Palestine question



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

The issue now is: can the rest of the world and the UN together contain US and Israel. The need is that these two countries need to be forced into defining the permanent eastern border of Israel. The settlements that have been set up, with obvious bad intentions, on designated Arab land need to be dismantled, and at least Resolution 242's plain meaning -- withdrawal of Israeli military from the designated Arab lands and the setting up of Palestinian entity on this -- should be made sure by the rest of the world.

freedom fight. Things changed later, and it was Hamas which won the election hands down, leaving the PLO way behind.

The Israeli's policies and actions vis-à-vis Palestinians are so horribly oppressive, racist and cruel -- blindly approved by the America -- that few freedom-loving people can help but oppose them.

For democrats and liberals, Israel's raison d'être is unacceptable: because Europeans and Americans had oppressed the Jews, they should be allowed to colonise Palestine and drive out as many Palestinian Arabs as possible. If the Jews deserved recompense, let that be at the expense of Europe and America.

Some Palestinian territories may be sacred to Jews, as they are to all Christians and all Muslims, but that does not entitle the world's Jews to massively intrude into what was a purely Arab land for much of recorded history, no matter who ruled it. That basic injustice, a historic one, needs correction, and mankind needs to recognize this injustice to the Arabs and do what can be done to enable the Palestinian Arabs to come into their own.

Hamas's sin was that it refused to give up the original Arab stance of demanding the state of Palestine as it was before 1948. Hamas has arisen as a counter-force to what used to be the Palestinians mainstream organization, the PLO led by Yasser Arafat, that had led the

The question today is, how

would the EU, Russia, China, Iran and the rest of the world treat these Palestinians? Israel and the US doggedly refuse to deal with this new PLO-Hamas government.

They would not touch it with a barge pole, though the US seems a tad less rigid than Israel. It is now up to the rest of the UN members, minus America and Israel, to ensure the physical survival of the Palestinians, and to get them even a truncated state on Palestinian territory that Israel has in theory conceded.

Israel practice makes it abundantly clear that sufficient grounds exist to suspect that its intentions are not honourable on this score. It has, from stage to stage, forced Palestinians to accept a whittled down state-to-be, though Palestinian Arabs entertain doubts about the genuineness of their readiness to concede any real estate to them.

The Israelis have continued to encroach on more and more land by setting up Jewish settlements, to be kept in security by Israeli forces -- on what was earlier recognized as a would-be Arab state. They have, in fact, divided up the designated Palestinian state's area into cantons through these settlements,

The roads that connect settlements would be under the control of the Israeli military. Now, the theory is that at some stage in future, when an Arab-Israeli settlement fructifies, Israel would end its 40 years long military occupation of the Palestinian territories.

In theory, there has always existed a framework for an agreement between the two sides:

Resolution 242 that the UN passed soon after the 1967 war defined the parameters of what a solution should be. Both sides have accepted it.

It shows the way for a two-state solution under which Arabs will recognize the right of Israel to survive on Palestinian territories as Jewish state. But will Israel concede the other part of the resolution: will it vacate the areas it occupied during that June 1967 war and let a Palestinian state arise on that?

Forty years have gone by. No Palestinian state could be formed, despite the Palestinians' (PLO's, that is) recognition of the right of Israel to survive. Israel has shown ample bad faith by continuously building settlements on so designated Arab land.

The mischievous Resolution 242 has done, by prolonging the dispute, is considerable: while providing an apparently reasonable resolution of the Arab-Israeli problem, its draft by the British, like the language of 1917 Balfour declaration, is open to various interpretations.

Both sides interpret it differently.

It has left a loophole for the Israelis to go on encroaching on the land by refusing to lift their military occupation. The basic fact, of course, is that the Arabs are no match for the Israelis, or so they believe themselves (Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon or Iran or even Syria are exceptions).

All the Arabs began by championing the Palestinian cause as their own, but have gradually abandoned it: the recent near success of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to rig up an anti-Hamas, anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah alignment is the current reality.

The OIC lies in tatters; it is no more than a paper tiger. Arab League at least has the weight of some governments that are beholden to the US. Some slight influence does come from being the loyal friends of the Americans. For the rest, OIC is a noisy nobody. No Palestinian looks up to it.

The issue now is: can the rest of the world and the UN together contain US and Israel. The need is that these two countries need to be forced into defining the permanent eastern border of Israel.

The settlements that have been set up, with obvious bad intentions, on designated Arab land need to be dismantled, and at least Resolution 242's plain meaning -- withdrawal of Israeli military from the designated Arab lands and the setting up of Palestinian entity on this -- should be made sure by the rest of the world.

Can it do that? Curiously, despite the overwhelming military power of America, it is now being challenged by apparently quite weak entities like Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran.

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Charity, corporate governance and corporate social responsibility

The method the companies adopt to discharge CSR must reflect their specific circumstances. The approaches, challenges and opportunities would be very different among companies, be they local or multinational. CSR has continued to develop well beyond its philanthropic and community roots, with a growing focus on the business case, i.e. making the business a socially responsible one

MAMUN RASHID

LAST year, the sponsors of a musical night presenting the "Indian Idol" winners at a social club said that it was part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR). A few days ago, the CEO of a financial institution said that "compliance to central bank regulations" was the core of his institution's CSR.

In today's corporate world, CSR is a big buzzword. We often confuse charity with CSR, and indulge in numerous activities in the name of CSR. Lately there has been a tendency towards mixing up CSR with corporate governance as well. The concept of CSR is more than just corporate philanthropy and/or charity.

Today, corporate social responsibility goes far beyond charity. It is

not just making a contribution to good causes or a charitable organization but a year-round responsibility that companies should discharge to serve the community and each other.

It must integrate corporate values, culture, and strategy and, at the same time, contribute to sustainable social progress. So goes the saying: "If you want to feed a man once, catch him a fish. If you want to feed him for life, teach him how to fish." That's how sustainable contribution works.

The profit that each institution makes should reflect as much of its core values, and the adherence towards best practices, as its financial savvy. Thus, CSR is about comprehensive engagement of a corporate entity with the local communities. Recognition of brand names depends not only on quality,

is not pure corporate philanthropy that we are referring to here. CSR should be contributing to both, long-term business success as well as to greater society, to move forward and make it to the next trajectory.

CSR is looking for a niche as an ethical organization. Translating this from a business perspective, how can we build competitive advantage through approaches to CSR, or even niche product development? Successful innovation will come from looking into environmental and social trends and planning to create opportunities in that new environment.

To spot a future niche, a business needs to be a constant trend-watcher, alert to its environment and ready to spot the product. CSR will also address the meaning of "survival of the fittest" for a business.

Thinking about how organizations evolve, and how adaptation enables "survival of the fittest," has long been of interest to business strategists. Does survival of the fittest simply mean eliminating all competitors in your path?

It is becoming increasingly important to measure success

through working in partnership with different stakeholders, an integral part of latest thoughts on CSR. We see a reflection of this in the increasing scrutiny of the large companies by regulators, like Microsoft for example.

CSR also involves total dedication, and a shared responsibility to clients, employees and the industry where a corporate entity belongs. A company should do business in a responsible way and should also be perceived as a responsible corporate citizen, not only by its customers but also by the regulators and all the relevant stakeholders. A company should be supporting the country's vision for overall economic and social development. And finally, a company should be addressing the right cause in the name of charity.

Obviously, featuring "Indian Idol" is a far cry from being a part of CSR. Quite often we see that the companies do not have a comprehensive CSR policy. What goes by the name of CSR is an annual budget for donation to charity.

In other words, CSR is a whole new way of thinking about and doing business. This new way of thinking needs to be mainstreamed

across business operations and integrated into corporate strategy. It is not just the task of a public relations department. It needs to permeate through the company, in business development, marketing, human resources, finance and so on.

This is being reflected in the growing consensus that such integration is the only way for CSR to realize its full potential.

In a nutshell, CSR has continued to be a highly debated subject. It has become the focus for exploration of broad philosophical questions regarding the roles and responsibilities of companies, and their relationship with the government and other stakeholders.

But it has also provided the premise for debates around topics on donation to a charity, employee volunteering, poverty eradication, and much more. Does this mean that CSR risks being virtually everything and effectively nothing?

Although debate about CSR has continued to grow, we remain a long way from reaching consensus on what it means and its true value. We often find that it is associated with glossy reports and public relations. Some see it as a business opportunity and improved

competitiveness. Others see it as a distraction or threat. But is there any particular framework for a planned CSR?

Very often, the relationship between CSR and a company's core business seems to depend largely on the views of the CEO and the chairman. There are still companies that conduct CSR by just donating money