

Police reform agenda

A total rethinking necessary

THAT the Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed takes reform of the police force as a priority task of the government strikes a responsive chord in the public mind. People are simply impatient with the degeneracy the force has undergone over time.

At the very outset, we suggest that one of the major components of the reform project ought to be revision of the pay-scales, particularly at the lowest tiers. A constable's take-home salary being as low as Tk 3000/- per month, he is not only a sure candidate for corruption, his self-esteem in society plummets terribly low too for him to be rightly motivated for his 'noble' profession. When we have one lakh nineteen thousand police, ansar and village defence personnel to a population of 140 million plus, the back-breaking regour of police work is easily imaginable. They deserve better.

That said, the use of the police force by any ruling political party as an instrument for political aggrandisement and their nexus with the underworld criminals have tarnished the police image to an abominable level. They have either been seen as a tool for oppressing the opposition, muzzling all forms of dissent in the service of the government, or extortionist living off others' money. This stigma of the police force has to go.

The prime need is to have institutional safeguards whereby the police force remains depoliticised in an in-built way. Political agitation for weeks or months per force rivets the police attention away from crime control. We strongly recommend a structural separation of the riot police work from the normal police activity in society. This delink between the two functions would do a world of good for overall police efficiency.

Motivational training is high on the missing list. They need to be especially sensitised to human rights, women's rights, child rights and civil liberties in general. Some police savvy is the need of the time.

Poor investigative capacity is a major weakness of the police force. On the information gathering side, they either rely on paid spies or application of third degree methods. They are starkly devoid of detective and forensic skills.

Police reform would be incomplete without some law reform protecting ordinary citizens from the coercive powers of law enforcers.

An overhaul of the police machinery is necessary. One of the genuine things that the caretaker government can do is to revitalise the police force through some basic reforms.

CNG filling stations

Fall far short of demand

WITH the recent hike in gasoline prices the bee lines of vehicles at the city's CNG filling as well as conversion stations continue to grow even longer by the day. There is another reason for the crunch: in the last couple of weeks 18 filling stations of a total of 68 in and around the city have been closed down by Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Limited (RPGCL), the regulatory body entrusted with the twin task of popularising and monitoring CNG operations in the country. The gas stations in question were closed on the ground that they were operating either on illegal connections or had outstanding gas bills.

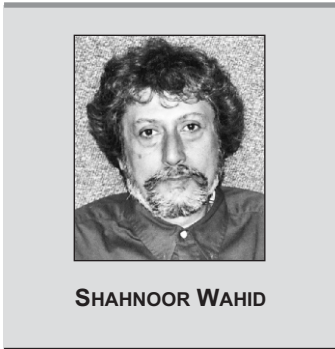
Clearly, what's happening now is utter inconvenience for the existing and aspiring CNG users because of a disjoint between the infrastructure available and the rising demands for filling and conversion.

We will also do well to remember that CNG operated vehicles are environment-friendly and hence the government must do everything to encourage people to go for conversion of their vehicles to CNG. In fact, the government ought to consider converting its own fleet of vehicles to CNG as has been done in our neighbouring country, through a court fiat, and make private transport operators do the same. All this, of course, subject to the resource being finite.

We therefore urge the government to set up CNG filling stations in greater numbers. Let each of the existing petrol pump stations also be fitted with CNG service units.

Indeed, this matter should be dealt with utmost seriousness and urgency in order to mitigate the suffering of commuters.

The slithery schemer is netted, finally



SHAHNOOR WAHID

ARRRESTS are making headlines these days. Roly-poly MPs and ministers are looking noticeably befuddled at finding themselves in a reverse role. All these years they had gotten used to arresting young people from the streets, and sending them to jails without any specific charges.

They used to call this "mass arrest," and it used to be mostly done to defuse some program of the opposition. Many such arrests used to pain the hearts of the citizens, and raise questions in their minds concerning the legality of the whole affair. But they had no power to act or react. All they could do was watch with impotent fury and feel remorse.

If not all, some of the recent arrests might have also raised questions in the minds of the citizens, and time will let us know whether these were right steps

or wrong. But, perhaps, one arrest that not a single soul will ever regret is that of the person who has created records by his unrivaled skill in being slow, sly and slithery in pushing forward the agenda of the party he serves, no matter how it hurt the nation.

Keep in mind; he serves the party and its leader as long as the going goes great for him. He dumps the party and its leader like he dumps used tissue paper, as soon as his purpose is served (In a paragraph below we shall discuss the rise and penultimate fall of this man who could change colour like that rare lizard named chameleon).

Of late, this misguided missionary has earned the infamy of being the behind-the-scene chief engineer in drawing all sorts of incredible plots and ploys to

control the entire election process so that the hungry marauders could come back for a second round to plunder the wealth of the nation.

A couple of years back, he came up with the blatantly brilliant idea of increasing the retirement age of the judges so that they could be given the position of the chief adviser of the caretaker government.

Once seated on the chair, these judges would juggle around the laws to pave the way for the hoodlums to govern (!) the country once again. He had installed Aziz and company in the Election Commission to help in the election engineering process. He was known to be behind making the Anti-Corruption Commission a lame horse.

The tale of the never-ending notoriety of this man became

more pronounced with the dilly-dally tactics he adopted to delay the separation of the judiciary from the executive. The entire nation looked up to him for the good news, but it never came. When confronted, he always had cool but insignificant answers to offer, going in circles, mincing his words, shifting his gaze elsewhere.

At last, only months before the expiry of the term of the government, he lamented, he cried his heart out, he grieved, he bemoaned, he choked and sighed heavily before saying that he could not finish his "dream project" because of shortage of time! It sounded as if he has been carrying the child for nine months but could not deliver it! Aren't we touched by this heart-rending account of the man who has selflessly(!) served the

nation since the creation of Bangladesh?

Well, now is the time to look at what this clever conjurer has been doing since the sixties. He was a member of the student body loyal to the military dictator Gen. Ayub Khan. But, through his clever maneuvering, he somehow could draw the attention of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (most possibly as a young lawyer on his side during the Agartala case in the sixties).

Subsequently, he was made the personal secretary of Bangabandhu, as a reward, after Bangabandhu's release. This proximity allowed him to observe Bangabandhu from up close and, thereby, learn about his strong and weak points.

It is widely discussed that he played a mysterious role during the Liberation War, which included keeping in contact with Khandaker Mushtaq. For a number of reasons, Bangabandhu gave the order to arrest him and put him in prison.

After the assassination of Bangabandhu, this bird of fair weather changed his facemask and managed to come closer to the camp of Ziaur Rahman. He lost no time in proving his loyalty to the general, and then helped him in forming a new political

party--the BNP.

Life was easy for him for the next five to six years. But the chameleon did not take seconds to change colour and show his allegiance to General Ershad after the assassination of General Ziaur Rahman.

Lady Luck kept smiling on him, and he held many coveted positions in the cabinet of Ershad. But, once again, it did not take long for him to leave Jatiya Party after the fall of Ershad, and join BNP.

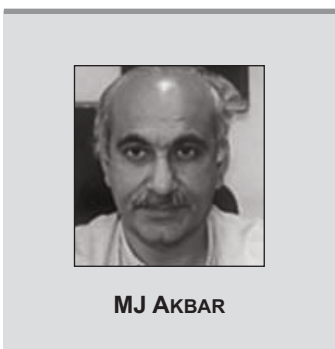
Dear readers, what he was capable of doing and undoing in the last five years will make a huge volume if compiled with all the details. This man, a loner who trusts no one, was not a popular man even in his own constituency.

He, himself, once taunted the people of his constituency, while delivering a speech at a Rotary Club function, in the following words: "My people always complain, 'Heti anglo lai kichu koreno,' (meaning, that man has done nothing for us)." This writer was present in that function.

Well, if his own people have to say this about him, what can we say, really?

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

World strikes back



MJ AKBAR

IS peace patriotic? That is the nub of the debate consuming America, as it debates the meaning of victory and the implications of defeat in Iraq. War, of course, has always been patriotic. Any leader with a gun in one hand and a bugle in the other takes care to wrap himself in a flag. As long as you have acquired sole selling-rights to the motherland, you can always send young men and women to their graves.

Militant patriotism is such a powerful mantle that it cloaks even the most irresponsible clutter of inefficient sins. Protecting the halo of the "commander in chief" becomes a patriotic duty, if not a compulsion.

Politicians in search of votes prefer the war ticket to the peace flag. Peace is fuzzy while war is muscular. While common sense suggests that any voter should prefer peace, common experience tells us that he can be milked more easily with the promise of war, when war is justified, as the answer to that most evocative of emotions, fear. This is the powerful combination

of sentiment and logic that has sustained the Bush momentum for five years.

Bush did not inject fear into the American consciousness. That was done by 9/11. But he has been masterful at exploiting this fear for a Bush agenda rather than an American agenda.

In its simplest manifestation, this might be called the difference between his war in Afghanistan and his war in Iraq. There was an explicit legitimacy to his attack on the Taliban state after it refused to hand over Osama bin Laden. But the war against Saddam Hussein had absolutely nothing to do with the "war on terror."

It has been proved over and over again that Bush and his vice-president, Dick Cheney, who has turned a sneer into an art form, used a deliberate maze of distortion, exaggeration and lies to turn Saddam into an ally of bin Laden.

The phrase, "war on terror," is a curious one. How do you fight a war against an abstract noun? But it did not emerge by accident. It is consciously elastic, to enable the White House to drag

who it will into the target area. The mistake made by the Bush White House was to believe that the target would always remain a static fact, willing to take any punishment. The unexpected insurgency in Iraq has proved that a target can hit back with devastating results.

The daily count in casualties, an overstretched army, a soaring bill, and an angry public opinion should suggest that Bush has exhausted the political lode, which proved so lucrative for him and the Republicans.

It says something about the tenacity of the "war-appeal" that it can be mined even after it has clearly outlived its utility. The debate for Bush and the Democrats now is whether there should be a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

Democrats want the boys back home within 18 months, or just before America elects its next president. Bush accuses them of "losing the war" by setting a deadline.

There is something bogus about Bush's argument. His current strategy, known as the

"surge," which means an increase in American troop levels in order to bring "peace" to Iraq, has received the support of unconvinced Republicans only because there is an implicit timeline.

If the "surge" does not work by October or November, Bush will have to change track, and the only change can now be a form of disengagement. In other words, the Republicans are, in reality, giving Bush less time to succeed than the Democrats.

But, of course, the Bush rhetoric is different, despite every sign of military and public exhaustion. The Pentagon admits that the armed forces are hugely overstretched. This week, the rules were changed to extend a normal tour of duty in Iraq to 15 months.

Even at the height of Vietnam, a soldier on active duty knew that his nightmare would end in 12 months. The army claims that it has maintained its level at 1.4 million, but this is because it recruited (at very high cost) 80,000 men within the last year. The number is not indicative of normal retirement; it also sug-

gests the high attrition rate in Iraq.

Most of the soldiers at war have joined because the armed forces offer much-needed money or incentives that can help them in the future. They come from the poorer families of America. Some Democrat politicians are even urging the return of the draft, which would force rich kids to go into battle. They add that the war would end very quickly if the elite had to send its children to die for George Bush's policies.

No one knows either which generation will pay for them. The bill for Iraq has crossed \$500 billion. The first casualty in war is clearly the accountant. Blood on the battlefield is paid for by red ink on the balance sheet.

In September, a new generation of flying machines will replace the helicopters in use in Iraq. This is the V-22 Osprey, a chopper with less manoeuvrability but more speed than the helicopter. There is uncertainty about its value against an insurgency, but there is great certainty about its cost: \$80 million a piece. Someone in the offense industry is becoming very rich.

The American people have begun to realise that money, or rhetoric, cannot purchase victory in a war without horizons. The trick that sustains the Bush rhetoric is a simple one: there is no definition of victory, and hence no talk of objectives achieved. If you think about it, both the declared objectives of the Iraq war have been achieved.

It is now definite that there

were no weapons of mass destruction with Saddam Hussein, and Iraq is not capable of producing them for a hundred years. And Saddam is now dead, his regime destroyed. So why are American and British troops still there? To become the policemen of Baghdad?

If that is their mission then it is mission impossible. Any day's newspapers will tell you that every claim of "success" by the White House or the Pentagon is answered by an attack on the heart of the American and British presence. The insurgency will not end as long as foreign troops remain on Iraqi soil.

When an administration begins to crumble, it does not fall on only one pillar. The erosion of credibility affects the whole base. All the high-flyers of this government are on the front pages for the wrong reasons.

Karl Rove, mastermind of victory, is trying to explain why millions -- yes, millions -- of emails have been erased from the White House archives. Paul Wolfowitz, mastermind of Iraq and now head of the World Bank, is trying to explain why he used his influence to get his girlfriend a much bigger salary.

Some of Wolfowitz's accusers believe that he does not care about the World Bank. That is not true. Paul Wolfowitz, Karl Rove, Dick Cheney and George Bush care very deeply about the World Bank. They just don't care about the world. The world is now striking back.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Dialogue on reform of electoral laws



ANM NURUL HAQUE

IT is really encouraging that the election commission (EC) is moving forward with a dialogue plan with civil society bodies at the end of this month for their opinion on the proposed reform of electoral laws. But the EC cannot proceed with its plan as the government is yet to withdraw the embargo on indoor politics.

The EC, on April 5, spelled out a set of electoral reforms, proposals and processes empowering the commission to cancel candidature of any person, and banning any political party from contesting election, for gross violation of electoral laws.

The key points of the pro-

BY THE NUMBERS

The two leaders from the two sides of the political divide, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL general secretary Abdul Jalil, who were the special guests in the function, agreed with the set of recommendations of the civil society for bringing reforms in the polls and politics. They also expressed similar views on curbing the influence of black money, corruption and terrorism in the poll process for strengthening democracy.

posed electoral reforms include mandatory registration of the political parties with provisions designed to ensure financial transparency and democracy with the parties.

It also imposes restriction on retired military or civil servants, loan and utility bill defaulters, NGO officials and independent candidates with regard to participation in the national polls, and a bar on running from more than three constituencies. The proposed reforms of electoral laws would be finalised after a series of dialogues with civil society bodies and political parties, and inter-ministerial meetings.

The Chief Advisor (CA) of the caretaker government,

Fakhruddin Ahmed, said that the ninth parliamentary election would be held before the end of 2008, and steps would be taken for participation of honest and competent candidates in the election. He said this on April 12, in his second address to the nation since being sworn in as the CA three months ago.

Earlier, the EC said that it needed 18 more months to be ready for holding the next parliamentary election in a free, fair and credible manner, with a voter list with photographs.

The EC is now planning simultaneous preparation of voter list with photographs and national identity card. It is, indeed, a gigantic task, when the number

of eligible voters would be more than 8 crore. The EC is now looking for foreign aid to implement this mega project, whose estimated cost is Tk 350 crore.

But the problem of holding a free and fair election within this time-frame is not limited to this factor only. The dialogue on the reform of the electoral laws is more important than a photo-based voter list. The whole reform agenda must be implemented, and the dialogues must be carried on simultaneously with the civil society bodies and the political parties.

Very few people would agree that holding such dialogues with political parties on issues of great national significance

would violate the embargo on indoor politics. Nagorik Committee, a civil society initiative for accountable development, presented a set of recommendations on polls and political reforms at a crowded function held on December 9 at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre.

The final set of recommendations was gleaned from as many as 54 discussions and dialogues held in the capital and at 15 districts towns. Amid-term vision paper for Bangladesh in 2021, and a draft of an ordinance for bringing necessary amendments to the Representative of People Order (RPO) were formally handed over to two key leaders of BNP and AL.

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curbing the influence of black money, corruption and terrorism in the poll process for strengthening democracy.

Nagorik Committee prepared as many as 72 recommendations on poll and political reforms. These recommendations were gleaned from the regional dialogues among the citizens, held between March 20 and December 9, across the country, keeping in view the national election 2007.

Nearly 7,000 people participated in these dialogues, and 1,300 persons who were truly representing people from all strata of the society, openly expressed their views on political issues.

Among the recommendations, mandatory audit of the political parties' accounts, introduction of an electoral college for electing the president, prohibition on contesting from more than two constituencies, restriction on leading a political party for three consecutive terms, no provision for the same person to head the government and a political party, were outstanding, and

demanding serious consideration by the policy makers in political parties and in the government.

Election of prime minister from the majority party, speaker from the second majority and the deputy speaker from the third majority party was also prominent among the recommendations.

The Nagorik Committee has suggested creation of pressure on the major political parties to nominate clean and competent candidates in the parliamentary election, which has generated enormous interest among the conscious citizens.

Politics in Bangladesh is characterized by enormous odds. Politics of gaining power to plunder has destroyed all its intrinsic qualities. It has now turned into a dirty game that cannot be played without money and muscle.

The nexus between crime and politics has given a boost to criminality in all the tiers of society. This particular political culture has engulfed the whole nation, making lives utterly

miserable.

An election brings in a leadership that lacks competence, does not consider itself accountable, and utterly fails to meet people's demands and aspirations. Therefore, reform of electoral laws, which is one of the most important factors to bring about qualitative change in country's poll and politics, must be carried out before the EC actually goes for holding an election.

The Nagorik Committee recommendations on poll and political reforms, which were gleaned from the regional dialogues among the citizens, call for due attention of the EC. They have played a vital role in creating public awareness about honest and competent candidates, and also in resisting the black-money holders, who are otherwise political criminals, from entering parliament, in order to bring a meaningful change in the country's politics.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.