

## Separate EC from PMO

Restructure it for an expanded role

We fail to comprehend the logic why the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat is still under the control of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Isn't PMO a major obstacle here that was required to be removed by the caretaker government in the very beginning to ensure independent functioning of the EC? We understand from the comments of the chief election commissioner (CEC) that the caretaker government did not take steps to free the EC from the PMO on the ground that it would require amendment of the constitution. But commenting on this aspect two former CECs and some experts from the civil society have pointed out that there was no such constraint, meaning thereby it can be done without having to go through the process of amendment. What becomes apparent from these two streams of thoughts is that the caretaker government has not dwelt sufficiently on this vital subject with due seriousness. As for our comments, we strongly feel that holding of a credible election largely hinges on the EC being given total independence to take and implement decisions on reform issues.

We not only want a clearly de-linked EC secretariat from the PMO but one that is expanded and functions throughout its tenure to hold other elections, and is able to carry out improvements within the election process, especially update voter list, modernise it on a continuous basis so that we are not faced with the usual controversies before every general elections.

There is no denying that independent functioning of the EC is the prerequisite for bringing about the pertinent reforms in the electoral laws, which ultimately would pave the way for holding a credible election. Hence, we reiterate our position on freeing the EC from the PMO without further delay. With the public sentiment for reforms now prevailing in the country, we feel any constructive step taken by the caretaker government would be ratified by the political government of the future.

## BSMMU in distress

Immediate intervention needed to save it

ONE is pained to learn about the dismal state of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and its hospital. It is a very conspicuous example of how a good establishment can be spoiled by inept handling and blatant politicisation. As with many of our institutes, the BSMMU has suffered from actions of the administration that were motivated entirely by narrow partisan consideration, alternating between the two regimes under the two major party governments, but more so of the last five years.

It would seem that this particular establishment is autonomous nay totally independent of government control in the way that it chose to conduct its affairs over the last five years. Had that not been so, staffing of the university that had exceeded its limit by more than hundred percent would certainly have caught the attention of those entrusted with overseeing the function of these institutions. The government has apparently not sanctioned the positions of 2000 extra staff of all descriptions of BSMMU. Thus one wonders how the relevant authority could have allowed a situation like this to continue with impunity without acquiescence of sorts.

Not only is the BSMMU overstaffed, the brazen nepotism indulged in by the then vice-chancellor of the university against whom there are serious allegations of doling out undue favours or jobs allegedly in exchange of money, party loyalty and not competence or experience were the sole criteria for promotion of the doctors. That being the case, it is not surprising that accusation of poor service quality and drop in the quality of education have been leveled against the BSMMU.

We understand that the UGC has been made aware of the plight of the university. We suggest that immediate action is taken to halt the slide by putting right, to start with, all the anomalies in appointments and promotions. Appointments made solely on political grounds must be cancelled forthwith and doctors with the requisite qualifications be posted in appropriate posts in the university. Those responsible for violation of the rules and flouting of the system should be severely dealt with.

We would urge upon all concerned, particularly the political parties, not to spoil the national institutes by shortsighted and narrow partisan consideration. It hurts the institute, but in the long run will severely hurt the nation too.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

CONSUMERS in Bangladesh have realised over the last year that they have very few options. The only constant factors in their lives have been high prices of essentials, total volatility in the processed food market (e.g. milk, powder, baked products, edible oil etc.) and uncertainty about the quality of the item being sold.

Cost of living has really become quite impossible for not only the disadvantaged sections of the community (with family monthly incomes not exceeding Taka 5000/-) but also lower and middle class groups (with family monthly incomes up to Taka 10,000/-) and those surviving on pensions and minor savings after retirement. Incidentally, the family income figures mentioned here for the above groups are below the per capita poverty rate of US dollar one a day, with a family constituting of four members. The situation has become particularly worse for those who have to rent residences and have school going children or have elderly relatives requiring constant medical attention.

With informal inflation climbing every day in real terms, populations throughout Bangladesh are also suffering from other diverse reasons -- high rents, impure drinking water (if WASA deigns to provide it at all), insufficient pressure in domestic gas supply, load-shedding, adulteration of food stuff (formalin treated fish and chemically treated vegetables and fruits). To this one may also add poor transportation facilities (nonexistence of a mass transit network), permanent water-logging due to poor sewerage systems, absence of reliable and inexpensive health

care facilities, inadequate security, traffic jams and polluted air in urban areas.

These unfortunate elements dog our footsteps from the moment we get out of bed till the time we fall asleep, half-dead and frustrated, from having had to fight the whole day for meeting our daily basic needs of living. It might have been better, but then we all have to share the results of poor governance, lack of planning, insensitivity reflected through irresponsible

reference to items like fish, poultry or eggs -- important sources of protein. The report indicated that the conscious population had reduced their intake of these products because of the possibility of fish having been tainted with formalin and poultry and eggs being affected because of the avian flu.

It is fortunate for all of us that the current interim government has taken several measures to try to redress the situation. At least, 'Operation Dal Bhat' and 'Open

supply, transportation, storage, marketing and distribution. I agreed with him that what we needed were practical, result-oriented solutions rather than just palliative measures.

In January and early February of this year we watched the drive against hoarders. This set off panic buttons among the trading community. Imports of consumer items were slashed. Amount of LCs opened on a monthly basis dropped by hundreds of millions of

can be revitalised so that it emerges as a corrective mechanism instead of being subservient to political pressures. This is required for the long haul. This has to be treated with seriousness as the failure to do so might have disastrous consequences. We are exposing the armed forces and the BDR to great temptation generated by corrupt elements. They should not be exposed to such factors. We must also remember that temperatures can be treated with aspirin but it is

market is volatile and a hostage to monopolistic syndicates and dishonest entrepreneurs and smugglers. Market intervention through such a format will indirectly influence prices, restore discipline and remove distortions. Duty cuts by the government and special lower interest rates (for the import of essentials) by commercial banks will not be enough, if certain points in the supply chain continue to create abnormalities.

A free economy based on free trade is good as an idea, but it can only function in an optimum manner if it is accompanied by proper rules and regulations.

The next point that has to be addressed in the generic sense is the question of consumer rights and responsibilities of the government in this regard. It would be most useful to set up a relevant Commission to consider and eventually draft a suitable and satisfactory Consumer Protection Act with potential for the creation of a Consumer Protection Fund. There should be scope for the consumer seeking redress from relevant bodies if the consumer's rights are violated.

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## POST BREAKFAST

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statements (particularly the one made by Khaleda Zia accusing the press of unnecessarily blowing things out of proportion), politicisation and corruption of many years.

I had hoped that the negative factors associated with poor governance would reduce with the formation of the Caretaker Government last year. Unfortunately it was not to be. The spill over effect of greed continued for the next few weeks. Prices continued to move upwards unabated. A report published in this regard in a local newspaper noted that, since the beginning of November last year, prices have risen steadily, depending on items, from 4 to up to 71 percent. The figures were all based on government sources, namely the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh and the Department of Agricultural Marketing. The essential commodities referred to include rice, coarse flour, onion, red lentil, red chilli, milk powder, beef and mutton. The price of coarse rice has apparently risen by 14 percent and coarse flour by 26 percent. Onion has also gone up by nearly 39 percent and beef by 13 percent.

I did not deliberately include any Market Sale' are proving to be popular options for the common man with limited family budgets.

I went the other day to two centers being run by the Bangladesh Rifles and asked customers about their opinion. The consensus was that the products were formalin free (based on the simple belief that otherwise it would not have been sold in the presence of the BDR), of reasonable quality and that items were being sold on the basis of correct weights. Here was governance at work.

I then went to my regular grocer in New Market and asked his opinion. I have known him for nearly thirty years. He was forthright. He agreed that such measures of the BDR had created an impact on prices of dry rations. He however expressed doubts as to whether the government could continue to do what it was presently doing. In this context he reminded me of post-Martial Law effects on the market in early 1976 and also in the first half of 1982. He then went on to assert that all these steps were temporary in nature and would prove to be futile in the long run in the absence of suitable statutory and institutional arrangements pertaining to control over demand,

US dollars. Consequently, the prices of essential items rose.

The government has in the meantime tried to restore some confidence within the marketing system. They have had discussions with representatives from the trading community and have tried to reassure them. This has been a constructive engagement. However, this can and should be seen only as the first step.

It is important that the government also addresses itself to the creation of necessary statutory and regulatory infrastructures. It might be helpful in this regard to establish and constitute most immediately a Consumer Protection Commission.

The composition of this body could include in addition to government representatives from appropriate government departments (Ministries of Commerce, Home, Police and the BDR, Law, Finance, Communications, Agriculture, Industry and the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh) and from the civil society.

They should be asked to identify within the next three months not only least common denominators in the structuring of a system that is accountable (e.g. a public distribution system) but also how the TCB

better that the disease causing the temperature is first identified and then cured through antibiotics.

This Commission will also have to address itself to the significant question of removing the hidden cost of doing business in our country. I am referring here to factors like extortion and corruption that greatly affects price equation between producers, wholesalers and retailers. At the end of the day, it is the consumer that gets hit on the head. This has to stop. This has particular reference to the availability and supply of fresh vegetables and fruits to large urban areas. Better transportation facilities, absence of extortion (by both mastans and rogue police elements) and hassle free distribution will automatically reduce prices and enhance supply.

The newly created Commission with the help of the Bangladesh Bank and other relevant financial institutions (commercial banks) should also enforce the basic rule of importers and wholesalers having to reveal the exact cost of their importing certain essential items like milk powder and edible oil. They can then be asked to add on a certain minimum margin to that cost. What we have today is lack of transparency in this regard. Consequently the

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## Paying for the sins of West

KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

HIS God-forsaken region comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives has found time to discuss everything under the sun, but never the environment, ecology or climate. Yet, this is where global warming affects the most.

The disappointing part is not the lack of knowledge. It is the lack of interest. I am not aware of any effort in the region to fight global warming. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) at Brussels has predicted dire consequences: 30% of species will be wiped out, 3.2 billion people will face water shortage, and large-scale melting of the

Hamalayan glaciers will play havoc in the Gangetic plains.

An increase of a mere one foot of seawater can endanger Mumbai and Kolkata as much as it could Karachi, Chittagong and Colombo. Even if the rise is not that much, the countries in the region cannot afford to wait and watch.

How to tackle the impending disaster coolly and collectively is the question that stares at us. India set up a Department of Environment in 1981. Similar official establish-

ments exist in the other countries as well. Alas, all of them are lost in trivialities. They have never budgeted anything for steps to fight against the challenge hurled at them. Nor have they planned anything as a region.

The famous Sunderbans in West Bengal has lost 10 percent of its area, as well as some rare species, to the rising water. Some experts in the West say that glaciers are melting, raising the surface of seas.

Studies done in India, however,

assert that all these steps were temporary in nature and would prove to be futile in the long run in the absence of suitable statutory and institutional arrangements pertaining to control over demand,

waters. India's Chief Justice K.G. Bal Krishnan has revealed that the largest number of legal disputes pertain to water shortages. Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are in constant litigation over water sharing. One hears shrill voices over the Kala Dam in Pakistan.

Groundwater sources are depleting in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Lucknow and Hyderabad. This is as much true of cities in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri

been taking place cumulatively over the last 150 years, says Dr R.K. Pachuri, the IPCC chairman. "Even today, if you look at the per-capita emission, China and India are nowhere near the developed countries."

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Security Council's first meeting on global warming could take place only a few days ago. As expected, the US was opposed to the very idea of the meeting. Russia's opposition

trade as it does to agricultural products and ecology. Why does an individual from poor countries put his life in danger to travel to the West because the risk is worth reaching the destination, a prosperous world?

America has already spent around \$600 billion on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. If what President Bush has asked from the US Congress is approved, the total may be somewhere around \$750 billion. Were he to spend one-third, \$250 billion, to help the developing and underdeveloped countries adopt a low-carbon economy, he would change the fate of millions of people in poor countries.

It is time the Saarc summit, or countries in the region, unofficially consider a strategy against global warming. An emergency meeting is called for, and India should take the initiative. But New Delhi is hardly active. Its silence is like the moribund attitude towards the population explosion.

The excesses committed during the emergency stalled the birth control program. Policemen reached bedrooms. Since then political parties have been afraid to even mention "birth control" lest they should lose vote, as the Congress did in 1977.

Pakistan and Bangladesh even avoid the phrase "family planning," because the fanatics there have linked it with religion. Global warming is worse than the population explosion waiting to hit the region. Strange, all this does not move the region.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## OPINION

## Voter ID and other thoughts

ANIS CHOWDHURY

HERE is no doubt that the state of emergency has saved the country from chaos and destruction. The caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has been welcomed by all -- from peasants to business leaders, from housewives to workers. The caretaker government is basically mandated to hold a fair and free election for the 9th Parliament. However, there is an overwhelming expectation that this caretaker government will rid the country of limitless corruption, and reform the highly politicised civil administration. These expectations are reflected in the statements of the Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus, and Dr. Ahmed has reassured the country of his government's deter-

mination in fulfilling them. We sincerely hope that Dr. Ahmed's caretaker government will use this opportunity to lay the foundation for rapid and sustained prosperity of Bangladesh.

It seems there is almost unanimous belief that voter ID is crucial for holding fair and free elections. The caretaker government has formed a high level commission to examine its feasibility and related issues. One issue that has not come out in the debate about voter ID is the information content and its privacy. We need to ask a number of vital questions. For example, what kind of information will be recorded; who will have access to the database; would this database be used for the purpose of "security" by law-enforcing bodies; would this be shared with the foreign intelligence

agencies; would there be enough safeguards against unlawful use of this database? If we do not give sufficient consideration to these questions in the haste to hold a "fair and free" election, we may face the danger of losing civil liberty, and end up from "muscle power" democracy to "illiberal" democracy. Therefore, the voter ID is not a simple issue of cost and timing. It is much more than that.

A number of measures have

been suggested to clean up the political system and to prevent the dominance of money -- black or white -- and muscle power. The aim should be to create space for new generation leaders with vision and dynamism. In this respect, I would like to suggest the following:

a) Restriction on the membership of parliament to two consecutive terms;

b) Separation of executive branch of political parties from their parlia-

mentary wing. That is, the leader of the parliamentary party must not be the president or chairperson of the executive council;

c) State subsidies to cover election costs of candidates getting certain minimum percentage of votes.

The caretaker government has vowed to depoliticise the civil administration and urged the armed forces and law-enforcing bodies to work in national interest. As an academic, I

would like to point out the urgency of depoliticising the higher education sector. The university ordinance of 1972 should be re-examined in light of the experience of the last 35 years. I have been to a number of universities around the world, and nowhere have I found senior positions being filled through elections. Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of Department are all ad interim positions, and in most cases advertised internationally. The

selection is done through a rigorous interviewing process by a high-level independent committee composed of internals and externals.

The universities -- public or private -- are autonomous, governed by a governing body. The governing body appoints the Chancellor, usually a person of high reputation, e.g. a social reformer, a retired judge or an educationist. One of the functions of the Chancellor is to promote the university among the wider community.

One other feature of public universities around the world is that they are encouraged to raise funds through donations from the private sector. In Australia, public universities are allowed to enrol a certain proportion of full-fees paying students. These measures promote public-private partnership and

enhance university's operational autonomy, two vital aspects in producing high quality job-relevant manpower.

One may ask whether these important reforms, no matter how strongly desired, should be entrusted to an unelected caretaker government. While this is a legitimate question, there is no doubt about the general acceptability of the current caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. It is still enjoying unprecedented public support, and it can at least set the agenda of reforms. The final shape of the reform

agenda can be determined through a national convention of stakeholders, representing various parts of the civil society. Anis Chowdhury is Professor of Economics, University of Western Sydney, Australia.

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