

Of student and labour politics

The government's position merits consideration

THE law advisor has recommended a set of proposals related to party-affiliated student and labour politics to the Election Commission (EC). And both merit thoughtful consideration. As for student politics, to begin with, we would like to make it abundantly clear that every citizen of Bangladesh above the age of 18 has the right to be involved in politics and be affiliated with any political party of his or her choice and subscribe to any political opinion. We also believe that our student movements have a long and glorious tradition and their roles at various junctures of national life have shaped our nation's destiny. It needs no repeating that the student community in Bangladesh is a highly sensitive and a conscious lot with a pro-people outlook. Regrettably however, since after the liberation and particularly after 1976, student politics assumed a distinctly partisan character and the abrasive nature of national politics rubbed off on the students bodies too. The result is for all to see.

It is time that all of us acknowledged the fact that the world has changed and the character of student politics must change too. We would want the campus to be free of party politics and the students must not be exploited to further the narrow interests of the political parties. We would like to see the glorious traditions of the students restored to the time when there was no formal student wing of political parties. Student bodies must devote themselves only to addressing their welfare and improving the academic atmosphere on the campus while keeping an enlightened interest in national politics. We would hope that the political parties and the student would not take the proposed changes not as a restriction but an opportunity which provides the students a scope to break out of the fetters of partisan politics and follow the dictates of their own conscience.

As for labour politics, regrettably the traditional role of the trade unions has been blurred and increasingly partisan outlook has motivated their activities. The only ones to suffer are none else but the labourers. Interests of the labourers were sacrificed at the altar of partisan politics and factional tussle had gone against the interests of not only the labourers but also the industries and consequently the nation's.

What the government is contemplating is of far reaching consequences. Of particular significance will be the role of the EC which must engage all sections of the society, including, but not exclusively the political parties, in public discourse to form not only a consensus on the need for the contemplated changes but also on the manner and means of the best way to go about implementing the changes. Meanwhile the civil society and the media must discuss the issue and extend support for such changes.

May Day

An exploitation-free society remains the goal

THE observance of May Day is fundamentally a reminder of certain values that men and women the world over are heir to. It was these values which some workers in distant Chicago in a long ago year tried upholding, and indeed did uphold, through putting up a spirited resistance to the exploitation that threatened to mar the quality of life for them. In a sense, the exploitation they stood up against has persisted down to our times. But what these people from the working classes made clear in 1886 was that those who toiled for long hours could not be taken for granted. They paid a price for their heroism, through death. It was, again, in their death that they attained a symbolism the world has never turned away from.

The day is of huge significance, for very obvious social and political reasons. In a very important way, the struggle that has been waged by successive generations of workers, peasants and other deprived sections of society has been indicative of the strides that yet need to be made in order for us to attain acceptable heights of progress. The spate of industrialization that has gone on in these past two decades has certainly brought about a degree of qualitative change in the lives of the poor. There are, however, the frequent hints of what remains to be done. The recent agitation by jute mills workers in Khulna, for very legitimate reasons, highlights the difficulties that the working classes in Bangladesh still face. Add to that the fairly regular complaints by workers in the garments industry about the deprivations they suffer from.

On this day, let it be our collective goal to ensure a happy, exploitation-free society for ourselves in Bangladesh. It is a task we can accomplish through a strict adherence to all the international conventions relating to a promotion and upholding of labour laws. In a country defined by poverty, nothing can be more important than ensuring the dignity of those who earn their living by the sweat of their brow.

Keeping EC in good health & humour



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

The cynic among us may ask: Will freeing the EC from the PMO ensure a foolproof and ideal election? Maybe yes. Maybe not. It is common knowledge that elections in this country have never been hundred percent foolproof. There were uncontrollable forces that often came to play a detrimental role to thwart the attempts to make it so. And yet, through trial and error, we have been able to establish an electoral system that could present some near-perfect elections in the past.

Company, everyone, even a juvenile delinquent out on the street, seems to know a great deal more about the EC than they knew before.

To be candid, the nation was a silent witness for years together to the process of dark forces taking hold of this office, which is entrusted with the solemn responsibility of determining the fate of democracy in this country. If it functions properly democracy survives. If it falters democracy takes a plunge. Unfortunately, we had actually seen how it faltered and stumbled. But why did it falter? The answer is given below.

The very fact that the Election Commission (EC) secretariat was stapled strong with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) for so long is evident enough that the entire electoral system has been rendered

corrupt by the last political government.

While previously the EC secretariat was attached with the President's Office, it was brought under the PMO through an undemocratic move some years back. Since then the nation has seen blatant politicisation of the organisation with party lackeys adorning important posts who unabashedly facilitated the process of engineering the general election which was scheduled to be held on 22 January.

Hence, one is apt to ask the question, how could a political power control the decisions and works of an organization that was ethically bound to work independently maintaining neutrality and sanctity so that it could perform the given responsibilities to the best of its ability? So,

can there be any second opinion regarding freeing the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)? The greater majority of the people would say no with a capital N.

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There is no denying that there is

plenty of room for improvement and only an independent EC manned by honest, impartial and competent

people would be able to do the job efficiently.

Therefore, it is of fundamental importance for the survival of democracy in this country that we keep the EC in good health and humour, allowing it to be independent, powerful and impartial in taking decisions and executing them without fear or favour. And, first and foremost, it must be freed from the PMO once and for all.

Now, what about the reforms the EC is supposed to undertake to ensure a free and credible election that would bring honest and competent people into the government to ensure good governance and rule of law? The people in general are in favour of a credible election and they want to see honest and competent people in parliament who would devote their time and energy in creating and implementing proper laws, and not remain busy to make money through the backdoor abusing their position and power.

Let's hear what a district level participant at a cross section dialogue said about electoral reform and clean candidates. The views are presented below almost verbatim without much editing to retain the flavour of the original thought.

"Before going to cast our votes we

will have to know about the candidates. You all know that there was a High Court order in this regard in May last year; it was on the eight-point declaration. But now, after receiving the order from the High Court the Election Commission says that it is not mandatory. It is a document from High Court and it could be used to find honest people but instead of doing that EC is playing a negative role. They are saying that it is not mandatory. But had it been followed properly, it would have proved to be beneficial for the country. We want every candidate to give a declaration of his/her asset, liabilities, and source of asset, educational background and whether there is any criminal case against them. We shall cast our vote after considering all the above."

Can you debate that? The prevailing common mood in all the sections of society is for reform before holding the elections. The present government must not falter in taking such public mood into cognizance and act accordingly.

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Freedom on a knife's edge

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

Women "jump" barriers ingeniously -- through dummy websites and blogs. (Iran has the world's third highest number of blogs.) Officially, liquor is a strict no-no. But it flows like water in Iran's living rooms. Iran is one of the few West Asian countries, which hold relatively free and fair elections. But Iran's democracy is deeply flawed, with restricted freedom of political association. Parties are registered only if they conform to Islamic tenets.

"The management isn't censorship-minded," said an art critic, insisting on anonymity. (Nobody wants to be quoted in Iran for fear of harassment.) But it thinks that if it is to keep the institution running, it must not say anything critical of the regime. It ends up practising self-censorship."

Opponents of self-censorship were offered an object lesson last week. The authorities closed down Aban Street's cheerful "Café 78" -- a favourite haunt of radical students who would chat animatedly about avant-garde art, music, culture, Che Guevara, politics, whatever...

The Forum is a beautifully redesigned military barracks, where hundreds of young people "hang out." Its all-vegetarian café serves "chapatti bread," besides sandwiches, soft drinks and teas (including ayurvedic tea). It even offers "Gita Set" and "Lotus Set" *thalis*.

It's tragic, therefore, that the Forum is becoming a target of censorship. Last week, it hosted the release of a special issue of a remarkable magazine "International Gallerie," published from Mumbai, devoted to Iran's contemporary culture. But its management refused to allow live vocal music during the event, or the display of some posters based on the issue.

Both events are part of a new drive by Iran's authorities to regiment individual conduct. In a current nationwide drive, 150,000 women have been detained for wearing skimpy headscarves. Such campaigns are customary at the beginning of summer.

Yet, this drive has generated great fear because it follows countless other repressive measures. These include detention of feminists for collecting one million signatures demanding gender balance in the

Constitution. Schoolteachers have been arrested for agitating for higher pay. Worse, secular teachers have been purged from universities. More than 110 pro-reform periodicals have been closed over six years.

The repression isn't a response to a particular threat. "It's part of 'regime maintenance,'" says a political scientist. "Iran's hardliners don't want people to feel free. Iran's youth loathe regimentation. The hardliners cite the Constitution's "Islamic" values and *vilayat-e-kharg* (government guided by clerics) to enforce discipline on them."

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Iran is one of the few West Asian countries, which hold relatively free and fair elections. But Iran's democracy is deeply flawed, with restricted freedom of political association. Parties are registered only if they conform to Islamic tenets. Freedom in this deeply paradoxical society has had many ups and downs. Today, it's badly threatened.

Three factors will influence Iran's short-term evolution: President Ahmadinejad's growing unpopularity; the ability of reformists to counter the government's use of the current slogan, "Islam and the Nation;" and Iran's confrontation with the West, in particular, the US.

Mr Ahmadinejad recently suffered several setbacks, including defeat of his nominees in local elections. His

populist handouts have blown up the

nuclear issues, is banned. But people discuss these everywhere -- in classrooms, buses, homes, and cafes.

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The more Iran is cornered over its nuclear activities, the more it'll be

defiant -- and make boastful claims about its uranium enrichment

prowess.

In fact, Iran is many years away from enriching enough uranium for a bomb. Its facilities for converting uranium into hexafluoride (Natanz), and its centrifuge plant (Isfahan), are under Iaea safeguards and cannot make weapons.

Contrary to the claim of installing 3,000 centrifuges, the Iaea says Iran has 1,300 primitive machines. It's unlikely that Iran has stabilised the centrifuges, which are extremely delicate and fragile. (Even India has had serious difficulties here.)

Worse, Natanz's uranium gas is too impure to lead to enrichment. Iaea director-general Mohammed El Baradei discounts Iran's claim to "industrial-scale" enrichment and says: "Iran is still at the beginning stages."

This offers the US, UK, France and Germany an opportunity to negotiate nuclear restraint with Iran while not denying its right to enrichment for peaceful purposes. Iran is willing to talk. A way out is possible. But the US must muster the will to negotiate while abandoning ill conceived plans to attack Iran.

Much of what happens to and in Iran will depend on the US -- as in 1953, when it toppled Iran's first elected leader, and in 1979, when it courted the Revolution's hostility by backing the Shah.

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Finale to the Elysee palace

Royal is opting for short-term tactics to kindle the economic growth rate, whereas Sarkozy has more of a coherent long-term, pro-market reformist program. In the first round, Royal successfully managed to entice the majority of socialist voters to support her instead of splitting their verdict among other unimportant socialist candidates. Again, for the May 6 run-off, her focus will be to further capitalize on her socialist appeal, while projecting herself as "near-to-centre" to attract the still undecided centrist voters.

DR. IMRAN KHALID

REGARDLESS of the outcome, it is certain that French politics is destined to take a big swing after the May 6 run-off in the presidential election. The voters are in a fairly aggressive mood in France. The heavy turnout in the first phase (83.8 percent, the highest since 1965) is indicative of the French voters' fatigue, and growing aversion towards the Chirac legacy.

The desire for change is very much palpable in this heavy turnout. The results show a mixed division of votes among the top three runners; Sarkozy mustered 31.18 percent vote, ahead of Royal's 25.87 percent share, while the centrist candidate Francois Bayrou got the third place with 18.57 percent votes.

Though the outcome of the April 22 round does depict a kind of vagueness

or indecisiveness in voters' thinking pattern -- with respect to right, left and center -- three clear inferences can be drawn from it.

One, Sarkozy's tangible lead over Royal is a corroboration of the pre-election opinion polls that showed that a majority of French voters would opt for drastic reforms in the social and economic system. So, Sarkozy must be relatively more confident about his success on May 6. Two, Francois Bayrou, who, at one point during the presidential campaign, was neck-and-neck with Royal, has effectively established himself as "third man" of French politics.

Despite his inability to make it to the finale, he has built a base for himself from where he can emerge as the real challenger in the next presidential race in 2012. He is there to stay in French

politics.

His score of almost 7 million votes (three times more than what he garnered in the 2002 presidential poll) is a testimony to the existence of a big chunk of "centrists" that has all the potential to swell up to a decisive level in the coming days. Against this backdrop, Bayrou is now expected to focus on the June legislative election where he will be trying to further strengthen the centrist presence in French politics.

And three, despite his refusal to personally take sides in the May 6 run-off, the supporters of Bayrou are going to play the crucial role in determining the final outcome. Although the duel between Sarkozy and Royal seems to be a return to traditional right-left dichotomy in the final round, there are clear indications that the centrist voters will be one of the main factors in deciding

the fate of the two contenders.

Nonetheless, 7 million votes can make a big impact in the almost 44 million voter pool. That is why both the camps have been frantically trying to woo the centrist. But Bayrou has rightly kept himself away from the run-off episode. His stance is that his supporters are "citizens who are free to choose." This is certainly a pragmatic approach.

Any endorsement of either Sarkozy or Royal at this stage is likely to negatively affect his campaign for the June legislative election -- which is perhaps more crucial for his centrist Union for a Democratic France (UDF), and his own political survival as the "third man" image.

Apparently, since April 22, Nicolas Sarkozy has been cruising smoothly ahead of Royal in opinion polls, which must give him some sort of satisfaction. Interestingly, both Sarkozy and Royal have been propagating two strikingly different recipes for bolstering the meager growth, and growing unemployment, of the world's sixth largest economy.

Sarkozy is eager to stimulate consumer demand and consumption by enhancing job security, pension spending and fixing the minimum wage, while

Sarkozy suggests increasing corporate efficiency by trimming taxes, removing overtime compensation and weakening labour protection.

Sarkozy, who is particularly aggressive on the labour market, is proposing to deregulate the labour market by making firing easy, and discouraging overtime by removing taxes and charges on overtime beyond the statutory 35-hour-a-week.

He also favours decreasing inheritance tax rates, capping individual's tax payments at the maximum of 50 percent of income, and replacing only half of the retiring civil servants. On the other hand, Royal has been working on an economic agenda that revolves around job protection and increasing consumption.

She wants to emulate the Scandinavian model of blending economic security with worker flexibility, and her main slogan is job protection through scrapping a contract that permits the small companies to sack new employees without cause during their first two years on the job.

She is also planning to augment the minimum wage by 20 percent by 2012, boost the lowest pensions and create 400,000 jobs in the public sector. Both are looking at the economic issues from

entirely contrasting angles. Royal is opting for short-term tactics to kindle the economic growth rate, whereas Sarkozy has more of a coherent long-term, pro-market reformist program. In the first round, Royal successfully managed to entice the majority of socialist voters to support her instead of the still undecided centrist voters.

But, practically speaking, Sarkozy,

despite his hard-looking reformist agenda, is in a better position to take the psychological advantage of his first round lead to out-perform his rival in the finale to the Elysee palace.

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