

Voter list and ID cards

Acclimatise people to idea of registering with EC

It is encouraging to see some headway being made in the matter of the general elections. The move by the Election Commission to begin the process, even if partially, of preparing a voter list with photographs together with national identity cards in August this year surely answers a question that has lately been raised. The question of course relates to the announcement of a time frame for the elections. After Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed's assurance that the polls will be held before the end of 2008, there ought not to be any lingering doubts over the overall programme of taking the country back to elected government. The decision on the voter list is one step in that direction.

A particular point about the plans announced by Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda on Monday is the decision by the EC not to send its personnel from door to door to enlist voters. In an ideal situation, one would have expected the EC to do things the other way round, given that our social conditions are yet to be of the sort that will impel citizens into approaching voter registration camps to have their names included on the voter list. Such conditions are a pattern in the rural interior. Individuals will require to be photographed for the voter list and the national identity card. Such procedures, including digital entries, will as the EC says be dependent on technology and cannot for practical purposes be utilized especially in the villages and also at many homes in urban areas. We see the point, but we are not quite convinced, though, that such explanations will actually induce people in the rural regions to register themselves as voters in large numbers and of their own volition. A mere setting up of such camps will not fulfill the goal of having the largest number of people going there all the way for registration. For that to be done, the authorities should devise a detailed strategy of dispatching Election Commission personnel or local influential people to homes as part of a concerted campaign to acclimatise people to the idea of being registered with the EC. In fact, the acclimatisation process could begin now in order for people to be ready to respond quickly once work on the voter list begins in earnest in August.

Let there be no mistaking the fact that the work the Election Commission has taken in hand is of huge dimensions. Preparing a voter list with photographs and national identity cards will call for uninterrupted, focused work on the part of the EC. The nation expects that focus to be there.

Outrageous behaviour

Perpetrators must be brought to book

THE other day two senior reporters, Siddique Rahman of the New Age and Musharraf Hossain of Janakantha were beaten up at the office of the Chairman of the Technical Education Board. They would not only be subjected to ham-handed treatment but also held captive at the room allocated for the guards until some journalists, then on duty at the Election Commission, came to their rescue with timely help from the Rapid Action Battalion and the police thrown in.

What was the journalists' fault? They had merely suggested the chairman send a written rejoinder to a report published in Janakantha on allegations of corruption against his office. The Chairman of the Board along with its Secretary had earlier phoned the Janakantha reporter to come to their office 'to discuss' the report. So it appears to be a trap laid.

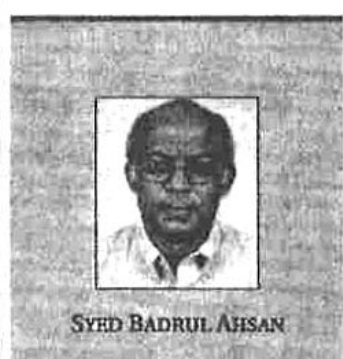
It is learnt that the Chairman of the Board had already been served with a show-cause notice by the ministry for allocating some centres for the ongoing HSC examinations in an act of favouritism. Earlier a report was published in the daily Janakantha for his alleged corrupt practices during the past regime that also contained a statement of the chairman.

We find this incident of bashing journalists while engaged in discharge of their professional obligations highly outrageous and condemnable. Only the other day a concerned international agency in its report has listed Bangladesh as one of the seven countries of Asia where journalists have to often work under threatening circumstances that impinged on the freedom of press.

In not too distant a past, a number of working journalists were killed by terrorists and hired goons of influential people and now it looks as though some senior government officials too have joined the ranks in beating and bashing journalists.

We most sincerely urge the administration to thoroughly investigate the incident and punish those found guilty. We want to see the end of such maltreatment to journalists.

Of courage arising in twilight moments



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

DEMONSTRATIONS of courage that come after the moment for boldness has passed are quite pointless. Back in the days when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party wielded unbridled political authority, the whispers of public discontent about its misrule soon morphed into loud protests without anyone in the corridors of power paying heed to such sentiments. Maybe that is what constitutes the arrogance of power. Whatever.

We will only remember here that when the struggle for a restoration of civility and transparency gained momentum under the aegis of the fourteen-party alliance, in the period leading up to the imposition of a state of emergency, the response of the ruling circles was crisp, sharp and quotable.

The constitution, said they, could not be tampered with, and because it could not, there was an imperative to hold general elections by the twenty second day of January. That was then.

Today, there are the many, and growing, voices in the BNP beginning to see light in their lives. After Osman Farnak, it is now Sadeq Hossain Khoka who feels frank

GROUND REALITIES

Some of the biggest oddities in life well up, froth-like, in the world of politics. Observe Hannan Shah. Having been silent these past five years, he has lately been displaying a considerable degree of courage. You might be snide and suggest that he is sailing against the wind, or even waging war against the windmills a la Don Quixote. But when, one by one, everyone in the BNP seems to be washing his hands of the Zia clan, Hannan's stout defence of it is remarkable. It is, of course, another question whether he is doing the right thing.

enough to let us know (as if we did not know already) that his party made a good number of mistakes in its days in power. And within hours of Khoka's arrival at enlightenment, it became Salfur Rahman's turn to offer the nation the wisdom that political dynasties, in the end, are a burden for the country.

That was a wonderful gesture on his part, except for the irritating truth that it came rather late in the day, and it came from someone who once had felt little need to hold himself back from putting his own dynastic plans, through pushing prematurely the cause of his son, into practice.

In a way, of course, you might feel relieved that, at last, the once upon a time loyalists of Begum Zia have decided to be individuals in their own right again, that they have finally seen the frightful writing on the wall. But then you ask yourself, without expecting any answer, why these good men did not gather the courage earlier, even as they held office, to challenge their leader on the dynastic question.

But that was what a good lot of people in the old Soviet Union said about Nikita Khrushchev fifty-one

years ago. At the 1956 congress of the Soviet Union Communist Party, Khrushchev created waves when he publicly condemned the deceased Joseph Stalin's excesses in the 1930s. Maybe he could have made his feelings known in the times when Stalin was alive and kicking? He could not, of course, a reason being the threat of a fate akin to that which had led men like Bukharin and Trotsky to their sorry deaths.

Even so, Khrushchev's posthumous criticism of Stalin was for many a good instance of opportunism.

It was quite an insight into how the new man in the Kremlin planned to run the show. And he did run it pretty well, until another band of communists led by Leonid Brezhnev ran him out of power in October 1964. Note, though, that Khrushchev's ouster was brought about through plain and simple intrigue.

He was away on holiday when his enemies gathered in Moscow and decided to get rid of him. They then summoned him from his dacha on the outskirts of the capital and told him bluntly that he was no more in office.

Courage in the political world, as you have observed, is often kept in a

state of silent animation. It is the circumstances that prevent some men (and women) from speaking out against those they happen to serve. There are not many instances of righteous defiance you will find around you, unless of course you think of Ukraine's Yulia Tymoshenko. She did not agree with President Yushchenko, who simply threw her out. It did not bother her.

But when you remember, from the old Pakistan days, men like Khan Abdus Sabur, you have yet one more instance of individuals practicing boldness at a time when it is no more in demand.

In 1970, as the campaign for Pakistan's first general election got underway, Sabur Khan, who had served the fallen Ayub Khan as a loyal minister in the central cabinet, told the country that he had advised the former president against instituting the Agartala case against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Well, if he actually did that brave thing, no one heard about it. Besides, for Sabur Khan to paint his former leader in such dark colours really did not amount to anything much for him in terms of enhancing popular respect. You could turn to India.

Throughout the nearly two years of Indira Gandhi's emergency rule, Jagjivan Ram served happily as an influential member of the government. His loyalty was beyond question, his silence taken as a mark of acquiescence to everything the prime minister was doing. And yet Ram shocked a whole country when, immediately after Mrs. Gandhi lifted the emergency in 1977 to prepare for general elections, he bolted from the prime minister's camp and linked up with Morarji Desai and his team.

His conduct during the election campaign was brave. It was bravery that ought to have come earlier. As it was, Ram ended up enjoying the best of two worlds, as Indira Gandhi's minister and then in his new avatar in the Janata government. These days he is not much remembered, despite a whole life spent in politics.

In Bangladesh, there was a tremendous degree of courage in Mohammad Ataul Gani Osman when he renounced his membership of the Jatiyo Sangsad once Bangabandhu introduced one-party Bakal politics in 1975. In an era when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was clearly superman, Osman's protest turned him into a bigger hero than he already was.

He should have held on to that charmed position. But when, in August 1975, he turned up at Khondokar Moshataque's side, as the usurper's defence adviser, our bewilderment was indescribable. He proved ineffectual in holding Bangabandhu's assassins to account. Besides, being with Moshataque was in itself a huge blemish for anyone worried about his reputation in those turbulent times.

When courage goes lacking in politicians, they cease to matter in

the public consciousness. When you add to that the many tales of men who have simply turned around, and turned away from their leaders in belated fashion, you will be appalled at the way in which civilised behaviour thus takes a good beating.

Sartaj Aziz and Chaudhry Shujaat, in Pakistan, lost little time in repudiating Nawaz Sharif after October 1999. Sharif's close friend, the journalist-turned-politician Mushahid Hussain, does not recall the fallen prime minister these days.

You could add a little more spice to such stories, through going back to the careers of certain men you have known. In Pakistan, Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada has cheerfully served every military government in every conceivable capacity. Bangladesh's Moudud Ahmed was with the Awami League, before joining General Zia and then, after a spate of politics with Begum Zia, linking up with General Ershad. And then, rather incongruously, he found his way back to the BNP.

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Why is the US pressing for early election?



HARUN UR RASHID

IN recent weeks, the Bush administration has been pressing the caretaker government (CTG) for holding an early election in Bangladesh. On May 9, Sean McCormack, the spokesperson of the US Department of State, reportedly stated that the continuation of an unelected government in Bangladesh would pose a danger to democracy. It is further reported that a few Congressmen expressed their desire to see a fair election at the earliest possible time.

It appears that there has hardly been any impact on the Bush administration of the discussions between the special envoy of the chief adviser and high officials in Washington. The special envoy reportedly presented a report about the various actions initiated by the CTG since January 12.

A few months ago, the US had supported whatever initiatives the CTG had taken to create a congenial environment for holding a fair and credible election. The US ambassador in Dhaka publicly questioned the neutrality of the first CTG headed by the president. It appears that the Bush administration has changed its policy towards the CTG. The question is, why?

There appear to be many reasons, but some of them deserve mention:

First, the US is the dominant power in the world. It wants to set

BOTTOM LINE

Many suggest that it is desirable that, while the CTG decides on the time-table for its task, it be sensitive to the demands of political parties and civil society. One fact that cannot be ignored is that people get restive if a government stays for too long. This is partly psychological, and partly because a government often commits mistakes when it stays for a long time.

the agenda to which the rest of the world has to respond. It has established military bases in about 100 countries. As a superpower, it deals with multiple players within a country so that its basic interests remain intact. In the words of Lord Palmerston: "There are no eternal enemies or permanent friends." What is permanent is national interests, and the US, like any other big power, adheres to this doctrine.

Second, the Bush administration's support for Pakistani military president Musharraf seems to be waning because, once the Musharraf regime goes out, the US knows well that it may not have political support in Pakistan. That is why the US wants both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif to return to Pakistan for contesting the coming election. It is assumed that the US has established links with both of them, and once President Musharraf goes it will have political support either from Benazir or Sharif.

Third, President Bush has made the promotion of freedom and democracy throughout the world the centre-piece of his program, but his administration has spectacularly failed in its mission of spreading democracy in the Middle East because of its flawed, unilateralist policy. Rather it has generated tension and war from Beirut to Kabul. This being the case, the Bush administration does not wish to fail in its mission in other

countries, including Bangladesh. Fourth, Bangladesh is one of the countries to which the US attaches importance for numerous reasons. One of the reasons appears to be that Bangladesh is overwhelmingly a Muslim majority country, and Bush does not want it to turn into a fortress of Islamic militants. That scenario is inconsistent with its war on global terrorism.

Fifth, the CTG is an unelected interim government and, in the long term, the US may not get political dividends by lending its support to it. Short-term interests cannot obscure its long-term interests. It seems that the Bush administration has realized that for long-term strategic reasons it is preferable to support political parties in Bangladesh, which have a popular base.

After the election is held, political parties will represent the people in the parliament. The US, then, would be able to deal with the elected government with some leverage, arguing that during the difficult period the US had stood for them.

Sixth, the US administration found a weakness in the initial decision of the CTG, even though it was temporary, to bar Awami League chief, Sheikh Hasina, from returning to her country. This afforded an opportunity for the Bush administration to criticise the decision.

Since then, the US has gradually

become vocal in supporting the demand of political parties to hold the election as soon as possible (some say by November, some say not later than March), and the time-period of 18 months appears to be too long and seems unacceptable to them.

Circumstances leading to CTG on January 12

People inside and outside tend to forget that, since 1991, the history of elected governments in Bangladesh appears to be characterised by a persistent tendency of many government leaders to disregard the necessity and relevance of morality in their actions and conduct.

This is often done by resorting to favouritism, cronyism, nepotism and corruption. In such circumstances, friends, relatives, and party supporters generally not only got appointments to positions of high responsibility and high income, regardless of merit, but also government contracts worth millions of dollars.

Democracy is more than a set of constitutional rules and procedures that determine how government functions. It is more than the sum of its institutions. A healthy democracy depends largely on the development of a democratic civic culture. Culture, in this sense, means the tolerance, behaviour practices, and norms that define the ability of leaders to govern for

the welfare of the people.

People saw parliamentary democracy turning into a 'tyranny of the majority, and a recalcitrant minority.' The winning party got all the prizes. Untrammelled powers of the prime minister have been characterised by gross abuses or inaction.

The hostility between the two major parties had driven the country almost to the brink of a civil war in early January. The president had to declare a state of emergency on January 11, and install the Fakhruddin government on January 12. The CTG restored law and order in the country with the assistance of the armed forces, and released the people from anarchy.

The CTG has been confronted with a huge task in creating a level playing field for all parties to contest a fair election. It reiterated that its sole purpose was to create a congenial environment so that the Election Commission could hold an election that was fair, impartial and peaceful.

The CTG has been taking action to curb corruption, muscle power and black money. The newly constituted Election Commission has been engaged in revising the rules of the People's Representation Order, 1972, for ensuring transparency and accountability of political parties and integrity of intending candidates.

The newly formed Anti-Corruption Commission has commenced lodging cases against those allegedly involved in corruption. Trials are expected to commence soon. The long-standing issue of separation of judiciary from the executive, as required by Article 22 of the Constitution, has finally been addressed. Previous elected governments neglected the issue.

Where does CTG go from here?

How long it should take to create a

congenial environment for a fair election could be a matter of constructive debate. One side wants more time for the CTG to cleanse the mess left by the elected governments, while the other side, including political parties, allege that the CTG has not yet engaged in necessary reforms pertaining to holding elections as the Election Commission has not begun its task of making a voters' list. Furthermore, indoor politics has not yet been permitted, and political leaders claim that they cannot get on with the task of reforming their parties.

Many suggest that it is desirable that, while the CTG decides on the time-table for its task, it be sensitive to the demands of political parties and civil society. One fact that cannot be ignored is that people get restive if a government stays for too long. This is partly psychological, and partly because a government often commits mistakes when it stays for a long time.

It appears that the majority of ordinary people on the streets supports the CTG in its actions, and does not mind if it takes some time to strengthen state institutions, including its actions in removing the tentacles of corruption.

Bangladesh has been passing through a critical moment in its history, and it has given the CTG a one-time opportunity for restoring the basic norms of democracy, and accountability in governing the country.

At this juncture, many political observers believe that the support of the people in the country, and of friendly countries, is necessary for helping the CTG in completing its tasks within the time frame it deems appropriate, taking into account ground realities.

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Follies old and new



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AFTER the emergence of the 1/11 army backed civilian government Bangladesh is being tracked on the radar screen of the global media. The mass arrests of political activists and suspected hooligans, and their subsequent detention without due process, are being portrayed as human rights violations in international forums. The aborted scheme to exile Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia also caused uproar in the world media.

Other embarrassing episodes that captured British news headlines included Hasina's series of reckless and irresponsible state-

NO NONSENSE

The country has seen what these two self-styled leaders were capable of delivering during their tenures in office. Who could have thought that their pledges for eliminating corruption, if nothing else, would one day become their image tainting liabilities? How many corrupt politicians, public servants and businessmen were prosecuted for corruption during their governance?

ments to influence policies back home, once the ban on her homecoming was reversed. While in London, Hasina pleaded with Commonwealth Secretary General, Don McKinnon, to pressure the CTG and the EC for an abbreviated, shorter than 18-month, election time-frame. What is truly self-deprecating is that she urged McKinnon to send observers to watch the EC's activities to ensure enhanced transparency (DS May 5).

Hasina's follies on foreign soil continued in a London rally where she questioned the legitimacy of the CTG -- only to be immediately contradicted by constitutional expert Dr. Kamal Hossain who told

another London gathering that the incumbent CTG was 100 per cent constitutional. By asking McKinnon to influence the internal political dynamics of her country, Hasina just proved that national pride and sovereignty can take a back seat to her lust for power.

Asking foreign observers to check the transparency of the EC's activities simply disparaged her country's constitutionally appointed, highly competent EC officials.

Maybe the ACC will hire some AL and BNP politicians to work for the Commission as OSDs to ensure transparency of the ACC's activities, and quell Hasina's suspicions.

With reference to Khaleda and Hasina, Kamal Hossain, in his May 7 interview with ATN Bangla, said: "Both of them are responsible, and should be accountable to the people for the misrule and corruption perpetuated during their respective governments."

About Khaleda Zia, he added: "She will have to answer for all the irregularities and atrocities committed during her regime." Similarly, he added: "Sheikh Hasina should behave and react in a positive manner, as irregularities committed during her rule are being questioned."

Although I am not an attorney, I can easily defend Hasina's and

Khaleda's "not guilty" plea for the crimes of mis-governance, and penchant for overlooking corruption during their respective tenures as premier.

Khaleda's kleptocracy can be defended perhaps due to lack of proper education, resulting in her incapacity to grasp how public policy, governance and the country's laws interrelate.

Similar arguments would also constitute Hasina's defence, except that her psychosis wasn't as advanced as her counterpart's with regard to political cronyism. While Khaleda lacked the mental capacity to decipher and comprehend the advice of experts, Hasina hardly cared who advised what.

The country has seen what these two self-styled leaders were capable of delivering during their tenures in office. Who could have thought that their pledges for eliminating corruption, if nothing else, would one day become their image tainting liabilities? How many corrupt politicians, public servants and businessmen were prosecuted for corruption during

their governance? No wonder that the ACC Chairman, Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, in aggrieved voice, expressed his concern that two years from now the drive to punish the corrupt may not exist.

If the past of our elected representatives is any indication of the future, the people who are accustomed to the culture of political omnipotence may not feel at ease, having to deal with the power of the independent judiciary, the ACC, the police, and other reformed institutions.

Would the elected politicians try to make these institutions dysfunctional or irrelevant then? Pragmatically speaking, no political government will ever stage a crusade against corruption with the same vehemence as the current reformers.

While it is imperative that we keep the pressure on the CTG and the EC to hold a free and fair election sooner than later, at the same time, a realisation of the conditions that would make the holding of the election possible is also equally crucial. Unlike Sheikh Hasina, Don

McKinnon recognised that there were reform issues that needed to be addressed for organising the elections and ensuring sustainable democracy in Bangladesh (DS May 5).

But the over-anxious politicians would rather let the reform initiatives get derailed, and seem willing to accept any quick-fix election now. Why so? They're afraid that honest and competent people will emerge with a new party if election is delayed by 18 months. They're afraid that more of their people will be netted for corruption by then.

Certainly, lifting the ban on indoor politics would be considered a prudent move, allowing intra-party reforms to begin, but the state of emergency must continue through the 2008 election.

The reform initiatives can't be halted. Politicians must appreciate that the country never saw so many competent and honest people in different branches and departments working tirelessly in unison to reverse the disastrous fallout of past misrule! Don't forget that the Aугean stable created by Khaleda's

administration once raised the spectre of a failed state.

Many of us may be long gone in 20 years, before the damage to the higher judiciary is undone. People want changes now -- not 20 years down the road. Therefore, there shouldn't be any quibbling about the ground-breaking intra-party reforms. Even BNP's well known senior leaders are slowly coming out of their closets and demanding reforms. But Khaleda seems as ambivalent as ever.

The doctrine of "ending dynastic politics with minus two" has certainly misfired with regard to Khaleda. In a direct affront to this doctrine, Khaleda elevated her brother Syed Iskander (alleged to have amassed millions) to the position of BNP's vice-president to consolidate the party's command, whilst reinforcing the party doctrine "BNP means Zia family". It seems that many of Khaleda's accomplices are striving to espouse that doctrine and save their Madam.

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