

EC-media consultation

Some excellent proposals have come out

THE unveiling of electoral reform proposals by the Election Commission (EC) and the media persons' responses to these have yielded a set of recommendations that seem worthy of adoption when the time comes.

The EC's interaction with the media follows its con-sultation with the civil society leaders. The cycle of dis-course designed to elicit opinions from all stakeholders on the reform agenda will be completed when the EC will have had a dialogue with the political parties following withdrawal of ban on indoor politics. That is awaited now.

We have basically four new proposals to endorse from amongst a plethora that were made at the EC-editors meet. First and foremost, the EC's proposal to adopt a provision for casting 'no vote' in the parliamentary election to denote no confidence in a contesting candidate or two merits support because it can truly help the voter exercise his or her right of choice effectively. But the 'no vote' cannot be just for 'an academic purpose' as suggested by the EC; for, where 'no votes' cast in a constituency would account for 50 percent or above of the total number of votes, it is imperative that re-election takes place to yield a clear-cut result. The second proposal relates to making it incumbent on political parties to accommodate at least 33 percent women as office bearers of its central committee and other committees at different levels. This sounds as a most auspicious addition to women's empowerment agenda. Thirdly, on the question of de-linking student, labour and other front organisations from the political parties we are for repeal of the Political Party Act, 1978 as suggested by the CEC that allowed for front organisa-tions to political parties during Ziaur Rahman's rule.

Last but not least, there is a rationale for debarring government servants from participating in electoral politics within three years from their retirement. This is because there is a plenty of examples where a government servant nurtured his constituency during the last few years in office by using his power and influence and then throwing his hat into the electoral ring immediately on retirement from government service. This is not just unfair to the professional politicians with years of dedicated service to a political party to their credit to be considered as election candidate but also fuels opportunism in politics which basically weakens democracy.

Death in Rab operation

Such incident must never happen again

THE most recent incident of a young man in Rajshahi allegedly done to death by plain clothes Rab personnel who had gone to rescue a kidnapped person in the middle of the night has been very disquieting news. The official explanation of the incident given out by Rab raises more questions than it answers, even more so when reportedly the body had severe torture marks all over, which contradicts police remarks in the inquest report. And when the local police commissioner says that the incident was inhumane it must have been really so.

We would like to think that it was with good intentions that the elite force was set up. It was primarily to go after the hardened criminals and habitual offenders who had money, might and, sometimes political link, to avoid the course of justice. It was these people that the public wanted to see brought to book and incarcerated. And to start with Rab was seen to be doing very well and gained a degree of popular acceptance because of this. Indeed its potential for curbing crime has never been in question. But a number of 'crossfire' killings put a stain on them.

There are reasons to think that there have been transgressions on the part of the elite force, in this case in particular. We are certain that Rab operates under set rules of behaviour where the degree of force employed is proportionate to the resistance encountered. We are inclined to believe that transgressions are due to lack of proper command and oversight of the operations at the lower level of the organisation. And the higher echelons of the force command must address the issue without delay.

Extra judicial killings have no place in our society, and no matter what the gravity of guilt of the alleged offender that the Rab is after, his death in 'crossfire' does very little for the cause of justice and the judicial system that a civilised society should be proud of, not to speak of the loss of credibility of the government. Transgressions of the law by whatever agency of the state must come under the legal purview of the land.

How passive a 'pacifist' Japan?

M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

But one thing is clear -- that Japan still has not come to terms with the legacy of World War II or made the hard choices necessary to sustain economic growth over the long haul. But the bottom line is not unclear: Japan has begun tapping into new sources of strength in order to remain a key player in Asia. Just as it has been many times before, Abe wants Japan to play a bigger role on the regional and global stage.

BETWEEN 1860 and 1938, when Japan was beginning to assert itself as contender for dominance of at least half the world, most Japanese military personnel still carried swords and spears. By December 1940 Japan was designing, building, and deploying some of the most modern battleships and fighter aircrafts in the world.

The Meiji elite adopted the western technology and political institutions that served the purpose of rapidly modernising the imperial army and navy, making them a formidable force. They wreaked havoc at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Even earlier, the Japanese, inspired by the Shinto monument -- Yasukuni shrine founded by Emperor Meiji in 1869 -- had, to their credit, other great military feats, such as the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, when for the first time an Asian country routed a European power.

But after courting humiliating defeat in 1945, Japan was forced to

accommodate the US occupation and a new US-dominated international order. However the country's conservative elite operated to maintain Japan's core values while effecting necessary adjustments to maximise the country's relative strength. The architect of this post-war strategy, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida believed that the pre-war leadership had not been sufficiently alternative to international power relations and had mismanaged Japan's source of national strength.

Yoshida closely aligned Tokyo to Washington and ensured Japan's post-war focus on economic rebuilding and not militarisation -- even after the Eisenhower administration began to regret the imposition of pacifist Article I in Japan's US-drafted 1947 constitution until the country had recovered. His successors also ensured that Japan institutionalised Article I in domestic law as a break against entrapment in US Cold War policy. Yoshida was particularly concerned that Japan

retained a relatively freehand to pursue commercial relations with China which, he was certain, would eventually wean itself from government influence.

Later in his life, Yoshida expressed regret that Article I had become an excuse for Japanese passivity, including for banning collective defense efforts with the United States beyond the narrow purpose of defending Japan. With the end of the Cold War, Japan's political elite was again forced to adjust to yet another international order. However, after five decades of strong economic growth, the nation seemed to possess the tools necessary to enhance its position while remaining aligned to the world's sole superpower.

Much of Japan's elite subscribed to the country's famous assertion that Japanese economy had "surpassed capitalism," and that, according to Tokyo, would be able to shape its strategic environment from a position of leadership within Asia without having to re-militarise.

Yet 1990 saw a Japan paralysed by inaction during the Gulf War. It was then bereft of a credible economic model. After the collapse of the bubble it was unable to use economic interdependence to shape China's rapidly expanding strategic reach and threatened by a North Korea bent on developing nuclear weapons. Only after the drift of a decade did Japan find its bearing again under a charismatic Junichiro Koizumi and a steadfast collegial pragmatist Shinzo Abe -- both scions of anti-Yoshida families.

Although major reforms to Japan's economy had begun years prior to Koizumi's election in 2001, he greatly advanced the process -- in part through specific achievement but more important, by catalyzing public demand for change and by giving reform an aura of inevitability. Now Shinzo Abe, his hand-picked successor, is trying to live up to the expectations Koizumi created.

Koizumi attacked the power base of the Liberal Democratic Party

Dynasty should not be destiny

ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

Dynastic leadership is now facing jettison from a number of stalwarts both in BNP and AL. M. Saifur Rahman, a veteran member of the BNP standing committee, former education minister Osman Farruk and Dhaka mayor and senior BNP leader Sadeque Hossain Khoka publicly criticized Khaleda Zia for her undemocratic practice and denounced dynastic leadership. Some leaders in AL are also vocal for democratic process in the party.

As slowly but surely changing scenario has surfaced in our political arena following the crackdown on the corrupt political bigwigs by the joint forces. The dynastic leadership, which became a dominant feature of politics in the country over the years, has also suffered a jolt. The dynastic leadership, grown under the shadow of two tragedies, bringing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia into the maelstrom of politics and power, is now facing challenges.

Though the dynastic leadership is a unique phenomenon in four South Asian countries, Bangladesh differs from other three countries in respect of its characteristics and magnitude. Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia where both the major political parties are headed by dynastic leaders. Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan are other three countries where participation of family members in politics exists but without stunting the growth of democracy.

Srimavo Bandarnaike, the successor to her assassinated husband Solomon Bandarnaike, who was made prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1960, was the first lady in dynastic leadership. Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has been led by two generations of Bandarnaikes -- Solomon Bandarnaike, his wife Srimavo, and daughter Chandrika Kumeratunga. Chandrika also became the president of Sri Lanka. But the dynastic The Nehru family in India was of course the genesis of dynastic leadership. The Congress party in India has also been led by three generations of Nehru family -- Jawaharlal Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi, Indira's son Rajiv Gandhi, and Sonia Gandhi, Italian-born widow of Rajiv. Sonia has chosen to discontinue dynastic leadership declining to become the prime minister of India.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto led Pakistan People's Party (PPP) for

last many years. After her father, Benazir became Pakistan's prime minister twice, but only for brief periods. Her family name helped her to win the election, but dynastic connection did not help her to remain in power.

The charisma of a family name, whether of Nehru, Bandarnaike, or Bhutto, has been considered as something of an aberration from the norms of the present day politics of liberal democracy. It was not only the charismatic force of the family lineage that catapulted Indira, Chandrika, and Benazir to power, each had their personal accomplishments and qualities. In fact, dynastic leadership in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India is now facing more serious challenges than before from other leaders.

The march of the dynastic leadership in Bangladesh began with the taking up the helm of BNP by Khaleda Zia and there has been no stopping since. Her brother Sayeed

Eskandar and sister Khurshid Jahan Haq were an influential force in BNP.

Zia family's involvement in politics would have come to an end with Khaleda's retirement from politics at some point of time. But her son Tarique Rahman's (now senior joint secretary general of BNP) entry into politics, assured dynastic continuity of Zia family.

The other side of the same coin is the AL camp. Sheikh Hasina was made president of AL, more because of the absence of consensus candidate than to make obeisance to her father. But dynasties began to grow. That was 1981 and today Sheikh Hasina is still the president of AL -- even after a quarter of a century has already passed. Some members of her clan including Sheikh Selim, Sheikh Helal, Sheikh Rehana and Hasnat Abdullah remain an influential force in AL.

Same scenario is also observed while going beyond BNP and AL,

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(LDP) and fostered the restructuring needed to get the economy back on the track. He also broke new ground by despatching the self-defense force to Indian Ocean and Iraq as part of more robust security policy and a closer relationship with the United States. When Koizumi retired as Japan's prime ministers last September, he left big shoes to fill. Shinzo Abe is, with difficulty, doing exactly that.

Since becoming prime minister -- the first one to be born after World War II, drawing inspiration from his late grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, a wartime leader imprisoned for three years after Japan's surrender, Abe has elevated the Japan defense agency to the level of a ministry and announced his intention to revise Article 9. Both leaders, Koizumi and Abe, have enjoyed broad support for this new direction among the elite, which include Yoshida's grandson, Taro Aso, who now serves as Abe's foreign minister.

It appears that Japan will continue to recalibrate its national power to accommodate a changing international environment. Even if the collapse of Soviet Union has removed some of the Japanese concerns, fresh ones have been added by the emergence of a more assertive China and a nuclear armed North Korea. Unavoidably, therefore, both Koizumi and Abe embrace Japan's ongoing metamorphosis and recognise the passing of the old

Japan of 1970s and 1980s which was characterised by passivity in foreign affairs and a highly regulated corporatist economy.

Moreover the visits by the leaders to highly symbolic (also emotive) Yasukuni shrine, where two and half million Japanese war dead (including 14 convicted World War II era war criminals) remain enshrined, are indicative of Japan's changing mood reflected in its new assertions. During the 2001 election campaign Koizumi promised to visit the shrine and he did so every year after that, sparking violent reaction in the country's neighbourhood. Despite pleas from Japan's political and business leaders Koizumi refused to break his pledge. The Chinese, anxious to repair ties with Japan, accepted Abe's silence about whether he would visit Yasukuni. As long as Tokyo's ties to Beijing and Seoul remain solid, Abe will probably avoid the shrine.

But one thing is clear -- that Japan still has not come to terms with the legacy of World War II or made the hard choices necessary to sustain economic growth over the long haul. But the bottom line is not unclear: Japan has begun tapping into new sources of strength in order to remain a key player in Asia. Just as it has been many times before, Abe wants Japan to play a bigger role on the regional and global stage.

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Mayawati's stupendous feat

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writes from New Delhi

M S. Mayawati has engineered a major political shift in India by pulling off what most pollsters thought she would never be able to do: win an unambiguous majority in Uttar Pradesh's 403-strong Assembly. The number of seats she won (206) greatly surpasses the 115-168 range that opinion polls forecast for her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Her feat is the more impressive because she's a Dalit and a single woman in one of India's most socially backward and conservative states. Her sole political instrument was the BSP, with its small

Ms. Mayawati has emerged as India's tallest Dalit leader after Dr. Ambedkar. Indeed, no Dalit leader has enjoyed the spectacular electoral success that she has achieved through a new form of "social engineering," and extraordinarily energetic campaigning. The BSP has impressively increased its vote-share from 23.2 to 30.5 percent since 2002 -- by garnering non-Dalit votes across the board.

Dalit core and without the experience, visibility, social acceptability and favourable media attention its rivals enjoy.

Ms. Mayawati has broken UP's decades-old "impasse," under which the state had a series of hung Assemblies: different caste/community groups voted to achieve political self-representation, leading to no clear majority for any party, except briefly in the early 1990s.

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It fielded as many as 139 upper-caste candidates, including 86 Brahmins. But this couldn't have translated into votes without the relentless grassroots bhaichara (social amity) campaigns by the party's cadres. The BSP now has the largest number of Brahmin MLAs (34). It also has the largest number of Thakurs.

However, no less important were the BSP's gains among the OBCs (51 MLAs) -- compared to the quintessentially OBC Samajwadi Party's 27. It also drew strong support from the Most Backward Classes.

The BSP has decisively breached the SP's stronghold among Muslims, who account for 18 percent of UP's population. Of the 62 constituencies where Muslims form 20 percent-plus of the population, the BSP improved its tally from 10 to 22. The SP's tally fell from 24 to 13.

Significantly, most of the BSP's 26 Muslim MLAs come from the poorer ajlaf communities. Most of the SP's 16 Muslim MLAs are from upper-class ashraf groups.

This, like the MBCs' gravitation towards the BSP, speaks of its emergence as the chosen party of subaltern groups.

It's tempting to argue that the BSP's new coalition is a replica of the Congress's "winning coalition"

of the 1950s and 1960s, comprising the upper castes, Muslims and Dalits. But this would be a grave error. Many of these non-Dalit groups voted for the BSP, but on terms set by its Dalit-centred agenda.

It's a tribute to the BSP's stature and the acceptance of the centrality of its subaltern appeal that UP's upper castes voted for it. The key lies in the BSP's relentless rise over two decades, and the BJP's erosion. The BSP ceaselessly expanded its Assembly tally -- from 11 seats in 1989, to 13 in 1991, to 67 in 1996, and 98 in 2002.

The results are a major blow to the SP (down from 143 to 98 seats), the Congress (25 to 22) and the BJP (from 88 to 50). There's a difference, though. The SP's vote-share has marginally increased.

The Congress suffered a tiny one-half percentage point decrease in votes -- despite a high-profile campaign by Mr. Rahul Gandhi. The Congress represented no specific social bloc. It emphasised an intan-

gible "Hindustani" identity, ignoring caste self-assertion.

The election's biggest loser is the BJP. It suffered a 3 percent-plus decline in its vote-share. And it forfeited advantages from the return of Mr. Kalyan Singh to its fold, and an alliance with the Kurmi-dominated Apna Dal.

In 2002, the BJP and its allies were at the Number 1 or Number 2 spots in 238 seats. Now, the figure has fallen to just 124. The BJP's own Number 1 or Number 2 spots have fallen from 197 to 120. Evidently, the BJP's recent electoral successes in Delhi, Uttarakhand and Punjab were transient.

The BJP ran a dirty, divisive campaign in UP which used inflammatory communal material and a CD roundly condemned by the Election Commission. It focused on "minority appeasement" -- the Sachar Committee, the Afzal hanging case, etc. This strategy miserably failed. The tallest of BJP leaders, including Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, couldn't

rescue it from humiliation.

The BJP stands reduced in UP to its pre-Ayodhya avatar -- a Number 3 or 4 urban parties in a predominantly rural state. Half its seats have come from large cities like Lucknow, Varanasi, Allahabad, Agra, Meerut, Kanpur, Gorakhpur and Ghaziabad.

After the UP elections, the BSP has gained handsomely in national stature. Yet, it faces major challenges in UP -- in delivering goods to its constituency, in particular, the Dalits. This it can only do through serious social reform, including land reform, by pursuing the redistribution agenda while concentrating on law-and-order and responsible governance.

A major source of the BSP's success lay in popular disgust with goonda raj under the SP. It will be judged severely on law-and-order. The Dalits expect the BSP to catalyse their substantive empowerment through land reform, education and employment.

UP can now return to the

agenda of development with distributive justice -- from which it has retreated, especially under the SP's cronyism, links with shady businessmen, and its contempt for social justice issues.

The BSP's victory will influence Indian politics -- not least because it places equity and redistributive justice on the agenda amidst a dangerously misplaced euphoria over (unbalanced) growth. The SP's defeat will put the idea of a Third Front on the backburner. The CPM lost heavily because of its tacit alliance with the SP. It must learn a lesson from this.

The BSP may not be able to replicate its UP success in many other states. But it can gain influence in some. It can best capitalise on these gains if it adopts a Left-of-Centre program with an emphasis on radical reform.

That's the best way of building on the Ambedkar legacy.

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