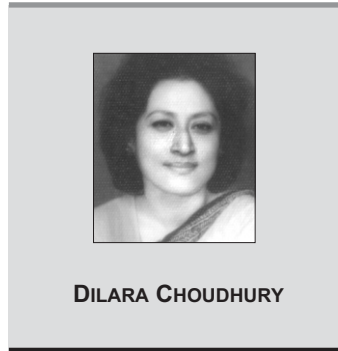


REGISTRATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

A commendable act of the Election Commission



DILARA CHOUDHURY

It is indeed heartening to note that the present Election Commission (EC), perhaps contrary to the wishes of our major political parties, BNP and AL, has formulated Election Commission (Political Parties Registration) Regulations, 2007, which would replace the Political Parties Registration Regulations, 2001 (under which the registration was voluntary), and make the registration of the political parties mandatory. So far, the political parties i.e. the major ones have resisted any such move by the EC and consequently remained outside the purview of public scrutiny of their activities.

According to the proposed regulations, the parties, in order to be registered, without which they won't be allowed to contest the elections, would need to fulfil eight conditions before becoming eligible for registration. All eight eligible conditions are noteworthy, especially the ones which specify that internal organization of parties must conform to democratic norms and practices and must have one-third women members at every tier of parties' internal structure. These are undoubtedly commendable steps in order to ensure transparency in politics and women's impact on parties' policy making. I intend to address these two issues in two instalments of my write-up. First I would like to deal with the question of transparency and consequently why is it so vital to have the registration of the political parties.

To begin with one has to realise

that world wide there has been an erosion of idealism. Gone are the days when peoples' priority was directed not towards self-aggrandisement but in the development of a character that is characterised by selflessness, compassion, empathy and being sensitive to rights of others. In the era of unfettered materialism and material pursuit, I feel, we have become disoriented and cannot really claim that we possess the commitments of the by-gone era when our leaders worked for their country by serving

and campaigning etc. In this purview, it has not been difficult for the political opportunists, with their money and muscle, to make inroads within the folds of the major political parties. The presence of muscle and money and their ability to manipulate elections greatly hampered much needed institutionalisation of our nascent democracy.

The danger has been that this also slowly and steadily contributed to the erosion of people's faith in the parties thereby eroding their

are impacted by their actions, as such, they have a right to know what they (political parties) are up to. And since sovereignty of the state lies with the people and people are source of all powers, the political parties must adhere to their (people's) wishes.

One should also keep this in mind that legal and constitutional measures to regulate the parties is not a Bangladeshi innovation. It is understood that in the past the parties themselves carried the necessary reform in order to

into the 'Cash for Peerages affair' when they were looking into whether the Act had been breached by parties taking loans from supporters in return for nominations to the House of Lords. Since then the government has amended the law to require the declaration of all forms of loans as well.

Another example may be cited from Germany where Article 21 of Basic Law makes sure that the inner organisations of parties contesting the elections do adhere to the democratic norms and prac-

becomes redundant. Our political parties must remember that having reforms and registration of the parties do not mean that the government is trying to put them out of business. On the contrary, policing of the parties by the EC should be welcomed as it aims to bring changes that would introduce clean politics in the country.

They have nothing to fear since the EC will introduce the necessary reforms only after consulting the major political parties, and hopefully, the parties would agree to the reforms through which the country would benefit greatly. It should be kept in mind that introducing new electoral laws or amending the existing electoral laws by the caretaker government is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. We have the precedents from our past caretaker government. As a matter of fact, most of the draconian laws including restriction on the freedom of the press were repealed by the caretaker government and not by any democratic regime. That is the irony of our democratic legacy.

From the development prior to and after January 11, it is amply clear that presently, the country is in a serious political crisis. The political vacuum in the country must be filled without having any major aberrations and by holding free, fair and transparent elections. We know that there cannot be any democracy without political parties. No one is trying to get rid of them. Attempts are only being made so that parties emerge as truly democratic institutions and play their designated role in building democracy in Bangladesh. As such, it would be highly appreciated by the people if the parties also demonstrate that they too are committed, by agreeing to necessary reforms, to ideals of democracy without which the country cannot make any substantive and meaningful progress.

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ELECTORAL ROLL

Some suggestions



CAPTAIN HUSAIN IMAM

As we can understand from the recent press briefings of the EC, they have decided to prepare voter list with photo and national identity card and it will, as per their estimate, take about 18 months to complete the job. As of methodology, 12000 units, each manned by at least four persons and equipped with laptop, digital camera, printers, etc. will carry out the job setting up camps at strategic points, preferably the previous polling stations, where voters will be asked to come and have their names registered.

The idea of setting up camps instead of going door to door has received mixed reaction from different quarters including the political camps. Most of the political parties including BNP and Awami League have already expressed their doubt about the success of this methodology from the apprehension that many a people especially those conservative women folk, the old and sick people living in the far flung rural areas may not like to come to the camps for enrolment of their names. Even those who will be interested may not feel encouraged if they have to stand in queue for hours for this purpose.

The EC have their own arguments in support of their decision. They think it will not only be difficult but also technically unrealistic to go door to door with all the equipment that will be required for the job. They are confident that, if not anything else, their decision to issue national identity card, without which they will be barred from availing certain state facilities, will work as incentive for the voters to respond to their call. They also argue that if the voters can go to the polling stations for casting vote, why wouldn't they be able to go to the camps for registration of their names as voters?

The EC may be right but only partially, says the opposition camp. According to them, it is most unlikely that all people will instantly feel the necessity or be interested enough in the ID to take the trouble of going to the camps. As regards casting of votes, only 50-60 percent voters go to the polling stations, that also after so much of efforts and persuasions by the workers of the contesting candidates, to exercise their right to franchise.

Undeniably, both sides have points worth considering. I am sure, the EC will take due cognizance of these views and adjust their programmes as the work progresses. What we strongly feel is that the EC should start the work immediately. They have already spent a lot of time in formulating a methodology for preparation of voter list.

The decision of the EC to start two pilot projects, one at Savar and another at Gazipur, as test case from early June before starting the actual field work from August is most welcome. A large number of people of the Dhaka city being floating, it is always a difficult job to make a flawless voter list of this cosmopolitan city. The EC might as well include one of the eight constituencies of this capital city in the pilot project.

It is good to see that Bangladesh army have expressed their confidence and willingness to carry out the job. They have demonstrated that they are capable of doing the job in 5 to 6 months time. Why not we avail their services, albeit under the overall supervision of the EC?

The difference or confusion that had arisen with the time frame estimated by the Bangladesh Army experts and the EC for preparation of voter list with photo and ID has been I think amply clarified by the CEC while talking with the top journalists of the country last Saturday.

However, taking into consideration the time estimated by the Bangladesh army to complete the field level job and the time assessed by the EC to complete other formalities prior to and after the field work, we do not see any reason why we should not be able to get a complete voter list with photo by June 2008, if everything goes well.

As an ordinary citizen I have a few humble suggestions to make. If it will be difficult, as is apprehended by the EC, to go door-to-door with equipment and other logistic support, the proposed camps should be set up in almost every village or mahalla and in such central locations where the inhabitants of that area can simply walk in.

The better alternative could probably be that the enumerators go door-to-door, have the names and other particulars of the prospective voters entered in the prescribed form and then ask them to visit the camps with the counterfoil or token (the enumerators will leave behind with the voters) for photography and other formalities as and when the camps are opened.

This will save the voters' considerable waiting time at the registration camps and also help the camps identify those whose names were enrolled by the enumerators earlier but have failed to call on the centers for photography and other purposes and thus ensure an accurate and complete voter roll with very few missing from the list.

The other good aspect of this alternative approach is that the job (of going door-to-door for collection of data) can start forthwith, say within two to three weeks from now, allowing the time the EC may require for printing of forms and appointment of enumerators, instead of waiting till August 2007 for the equipment to arrive, thereby setting in motion the process of electoral roll, which the people are so eagerly waiting for.

The last but not the least, the political parties being the key players in the game, obviously their active participation and cooperation is important in the entire electoral process including reform and preparation of voter roll. The EC might be well advised to initiate dialogue with them sooner rather than later.

Captain Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

A good riddance at the World Bank

ABDUL HANNAN

EMBROILED irretrievably in a personal scandal over his involvement in aphrodisiac escapades with his girl friend, Shaha Ali Reza, a Libyan born Oxford employed British citizen Bank employee, favoured with a hefty pay rise from \$60,000 to \$193,000 and repimanded by the Board of directors dominated by Europeans for bringing the bank to disrepute by his act of indiscretion, the beleaguered Paul Wolfowitz was finally forced to quit the presidency of the World Bank. It is seen as a good riddance in the Bank. He is the latest addition to the long list of casualties of neo-con associates of Bush Administration.

The scandal was merely the tip of an iceberg. The departure of Wolfowitz, nonetheless, was inevitable as revolt against him was brewing within the Bank for quite some time. He was widely despised as an architect of Iraq war and when President Bush foisted his nomination on the Bank for appointment as its president, he was fiercely opposed. Ever since, rage and resentment within and without simmered and had been building up against his high handed, arrogant and unilateral management style and arbitrary and selective loan giving criteria based on political consideration and not economic needs and performance.

Without consulting the Board he filled up senior staff positions in the Bank management by his former colleagues from the Pentagon and

The Bank which channels about \$25 billion loan a year suffers from a deep malaise of credibility loss due to the manner in which it operates and needs a thorough review and overhaul with structural reforms. Wolfowitz episode has also turned focus on the operation of bank privileged with lavish pensions, tax-free high salaries and subsidised private school fees the staff enjoy. The president of the bank draws a staggering annual salary close to \$355,000. This is highly

the State Department regardless of their lack of managerial experience in finance or development credentials. It soon became apparent that he used the Bank as an instrument to promote Bush foreign policy. His anti-corruption and good governance campaign in determining aid giving to developing countries was merely a ploy and a cover to attain his hidden agenda to serve US foreign policy interests by rewarding the "coalition of the willing" and punishing the recalcitrants unwilling to support US policies.

He suspended loan to Bangladesh, Chad, Kenya, Cambodia, Uzbekistan and Congo Brazzaville -- countries he considered corrupt. But he expanded aid to Iraq Trust Fund and made exceptions of Indonesia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Democratic Republic of Congo -- considered US allies -- their corruption notwithstanding. He could not possibly forget that his former boss Rumsfeld returned home empty handed from his visit to Bangladesh requesting for troops contribution to Iraq. Uzbekistan suffered his wrath for giving ultimatum to Bush Administration to wind up US military bases from there.

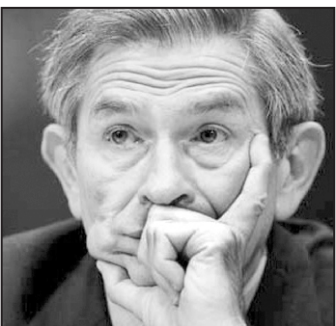
Emphasis on programmes to combat climate change and global warming and reproductive health and family planning received a short shrift by his conservative leanings.

Wolfowitz balked at the annual G 8 summit decision to double aid to Africa by 2010 and write off \$40 billion in debt to 18 African countries. However, the role of World Bank is poverty reduction of the poor countries and not to be the world policeman. Also it does not make sense to penalise the poor for the wickedness of the corrupt governments. It is a pity that instead of expiating his sins as a war monger by devoting to the service of the poor countries, he remained a compulsive errant sinner, a cerebral neo-con founding member of "Project for a New American Century" to promote American foreign policy goals by espousing unilateralism and policy of preemption.

The World Bank also known as Bretton Woods Institution which took shape in 1945 in the wake of ravages of second world war began its work as a bank for reconstruction of post war Europe. The Bank's role, focus of attention and emphasis

has time towards economic development and reduction of poverty of the developing countries, motivated by a blend of idealism and real politik. Even under the best of circumstances, the bank has never been perfect falling short of expectations of poor countries.

In the 50s its strategy was to help countries to contain the spread of communism. In the 60s under its President Robert McNamara, former defence secretary of President Lyndon Johnson Administration the Bank concentrated on infrastructure development, explorations of oil and not renewable energies often with disastrous consequence for ecological balance and dispossession of population in the developing countries. In the 70s and 80s it turned to what it described as structural adjustment of economic activities by advocating free market economy, privatisation, liberalisation of trade and investment giving rise to suspicions of reducing the developing countries to producers of primary commodities and serving the interest of manufacturing industrial West and multinationals.



In the 90s and to date, although the lexicon of aid has changed to lofty aims of promotion of human rights and rule of law, poverty reduction, education, health, sanitation and prevention of AIDS/HIV, empowerment of women, environment, combating corruption and poor governance, there has been little difference in the content and style of the programmes with the result of no substantial improvement in the standard of living of poor people or distributive justice in the society regardless of so-called rise in economic growth rate.

There is a general perception that the World Bank and IMF conditional loans have done more harm

than good to the developing countries by fostering corruption, perpetual debt repayment trap and a vicious cycle of dependency syndrome.

The Bank which channels about \$25 billion loan a year suffers from a deep malaise of credibility loss due to the manner in which it operates and needs a thorough review and overhaul with structural reforms. It is losing its legitimacy due to its flawed governance structure. The ground rules for choosing a president of World Bank should be changed immediately. America, the biggest share holder of the bank holding 17 percent of shares, traditionally has chosen an American national as the president of World Bank. The deeply flawed selection process has produced Wolfowitz debacle. The selection should be open worldwide based on merit, quality and appropriate qualification.

Wolfowitz episode has also turned focus on the operation of bank privileged with lavish pensions, tax-free high salaries and subsidised private school fees the staff enjoy. The president of the bank draws a staggering annual salary close to \$355,000. This is highly immoral for a bank which is supposed to work for the poor. The Bank urgently needs winnowing of its bloated 13,000 bureaucracy and appended array of coddled consultants, unsustainable perks and institutional intransigence.

Abdul Hannan is a former press counselor at Bangladesh UN mission in New York.

How long should Iraq bleed and the drama continue?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

SINCE President Bush declared "mission accomplished" on May 2, 2003, Iraq has been under the occupation of US soldiers. Now, President Bush has been presiding over a civil war between two factions of the Muslim community: Shiite and Sunni.

While President Bush has proposed a surge in US troops to Iraq, and requested additional funding of \$100 billion, violence and road-side bomb blasts have increased manifold in Iraq. As of May 14, 3400 US soldiers have lost their lives, and 34,180 were wounded in the fighting.

The Bush administration does not keep track of the number of Iraqi civilian deaths, and the Iraqi Health Ministry is shy about disclosing the figure. The death toll of Iraqis is reportedly in the hundreds of thousands. According to one statistics, more than 68868 Iraqi civilians were either killed by US and coalition forces or by Iraqi's themselves. Apart from this figure, about 2 billion

Iraqis have taken shelter in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey.

One day after vetoing the supplemental spending bill, which attached conditions, President Bush met with congressional leaders on May 6 to begin negotiations, a measure to fund on-going operation in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Bush said: "Setting a deadline for withdrawal is setting a date for failure."

Since Democrats are not in a position to override the veto, they are contemplating some other options. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi declared: "The congress is not going to give a blank check to the president." One of contending presidential candidates, Democrat John Edwards, urged the Democratic leadership in the congress to stand firm, and avoid negotiations on Iraq.

According to Washington Post of May 07, Republicans have stood behind the president's increasingly unpopular war policies. House majority leader John Boehner said that members wanted to know how

The people in the United States have exhausted their energy listening to same song, time and again, on Iraq. The latest CBS-New York Times poll indicates that approval rating of the president has dropped to 24 percent. It may be noted that President Nixon's approval rating went down to 23

well the Iraq plan was working, and if it was not what plan B was.

In Iraq, the government's largest Sunni coalition threatened to withdraw its cabinet members, saying that Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, a Shiite, was protecting Shiite extremists. In a bid to prevent defection, Bush invited Iraq's Sunni vice-president, Tariq Al-Hashimi, to Washington recently.

This shows how independently the Iraqi government operates. Recently, retired general Barry McCaffrey pointed out that there is essentially not a single province in the country where the central government holds sway. Therefore, there is no justification in blaming the puppet Iraqi government, which has no control over the entire country.

While the debate is on the additional funding and withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, there is no word on the construction of four military bases there, on which billions of dollars were spent over the past four years. Taxpayers in the US have been contributing towards civil war in Iraq. As of now, the cost of the operations in Iraq stands at 456 billion dollars. Every taxpayer is contributing around 3,400 dollars for this civil war in Iraq.

It is not a war, it is an occupation. The reason for the occupation, and more sacrifices by the people of US to sustain the conflict, was not explained at any stage by the president or his administration. The neo-conservative motivation, from the very beginning of the war in Iraq,

was the privatization of Iraqi oil in favour of the global oil corporations.

In this context, I would like to quote from a letter to the editor of The Examiner (May issue): "Framing the Iraqi debacle as a 'war' and as an 'insurgency' is an attempt to legitimize the illegitimate. The Bush administration is pushing the puppet government in Iraq to enact the Iraq hydrocarbon law. The law would give control of Iraq's oil to global oil corporations. To end the occupation would spoil the administration's plan to privatize Iraq's oil."

That President Bush will not leave Iraq has been reflected in the opinion column of the Washington Post (May 9) by David Ignatius, who informed the readers that President Bush told Saudis that he would not

withdraw from Iraq. There is reason to believe this. When President Bush was contemplating invading Iraq he discussed the matter with Prince Bandar bin Al-Sultan, Saudi Ambassador to the United States, before discussing with his own Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Prince Bandar, who served 22 years in US, is a friend of the Bush family, and is presently as advisor to the National Security Council of Royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Bush administration claimed several successful projects in Iraq, but they turned out to be non-existent. In the words of Barry Landolt, a columnist (former producer of CBS's 60 minutes program) of syndicated Agence global: "When other inspectors arrived to check out

the claims from sampling of eight projects, they found that seven were no longer operating at all. And, more unfortunate, the inspectors reported that they were unable to take a truly random sampling because many of the projects were in areas too unsafe to visit."

President Bush, in his remarks to Associated General contractors, blamed Al-Qaida for ratcheting up the sectarian violence in Iraq, not the government of Maliki, who is Shiite. He is now counting on General David Petraeus, top military commander in Iraq, to win "the war" in Iraq.

On the other hand, Vice-President Dick Cheney who was on a trip to the Middle East countries very recently, to counter the impending influence of Iran in the region, has blamed Iran for creating the mess in Iraq. He warned Iran by saying: "we will stand with our friends in opposing extremism and strategic threats. We will disrupt attacks on our forces." While Cheney was making imaginary

threats, the State Department was in the midst of preparing a meeting between senior US and Iranian officials in Baghdad.

This reflects the diametrically opposite approaches of the State department and the vice-president. The vice-president's rhetorical call resembles the past tactics of the US administration for showing Saddam Hussein as a pawn on the political chessboard to win the hearts of dictatorial and corrupt regimes in the Middle East.

The people in the United States have exhausted their energy listening to same song, time and again, on Iraq. The latest CBS-New York Times poll indicates that approval rating of the president has dropped to 24 percent. It may be noted that President Nixon's approval rating went down to 23 percent during the Watergate scandal, when he was forced to resign.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia