

REGISTRATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

A commendable act of the Election Commission



DILARA CHOUDHURY

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 practices.

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

PANORAMA

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the needy, the helpless, and the disempowered.

Such single-minded pursuit of materialism has made undeniable mark of self-centeredness, egotism and insensitivity on our self. It has also polluted our politics. One is, thus, not surprised at the findings of a survey that indicate rampant practice of corruption among the parliamentarians world wide. It is discernible that it has become easier for the parliamentarians to indulge in all sorts of corruption and malpractice when the state power is at their disposal. Such tendencies are heightened when there is a total lack of transparency in politics. Bangladesh is one such example.

In Bangladesh, during out fifteen years of democracy, we have witnessed steady deterioration of moral values among our political leaders who refrained from building the political parties as democratic institutions. As a result, the parties in Bangladesh are fraught with problematic predicaments like authoritarianism within the party, non-democratic nomination process, and improper party-funding

faith in the system itself. These danger signs were repeatedly highlighted by the civil society members and concerned quarters but that fell on deaf ear. The parties refused to go for their reforms and registration voluntarily in order to bridge the gap between them and the people and do away with the notion that they are out of reach of the people to ventilate their grievances. The demand for a comprehensive approach to regulate the activities of the parties was of no avail. But people's faith in political parties and politics cannot be restored unless there is transparency in politics and clear politics is introduced.

Now the political parties in Bangladesh may not like the idea of conditional compulsory registration on the grounds that their freedom of activities would be hampered under such action of EC, but they should keep this in mind that as they have their constitutional rights to form association without undue interference, we the people also have the right to know how they operate. The people's daily lives

remain transparent but as mentioned earlier, with factors like erosion of moral values, emergence of non-state actors and the like, politics without transparency has now become a dangerous game and certain activities of the political parties may be detrimental to the interest of the state.

Even in a country like Great Britain, which considered to be the mother parliament and known for its impeccable reputation of traditions and conventions, reform of the political parties has been brought about through The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The Act, which is a part of the constitutional reforms programme implemented by the Labour Government, building on the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998 two years earlier, allows parties only to accept donations in excess of sterling pound 200 from 'permissible donors.'

In December 2006, police questioned Prime Minister Tony Blair and other politicians of other parties as part of their investigation

tices. This constitutional provision came about after Germany's bitter experience of Nazi party's rule, which came to power through election but did not have democratic practices within its inner organisation, and played havoc in Germany's history.

Canada has elaborate regulations of registration that make the parties abide by the procedures of selection of party leaders and stalwarts through a system of national leadership convention where each party delegate can cast his own vote through a secret ballot. There are examples from our region as well as other countries.

It is, thus, evident that even in the developed democracies legal and constitutional measures are being introduced in order to guide and regulate the political parties and presently, it is not at all out of rule. In this context, the question as to whether or not only the parties have the right to carry out the relevant reforms and any initiatives by the government means interference by outsiders

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To begin with one has to realise

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 educated British citizen Bank employee, favoured with a hefty pay rise from \$60,000 to \$193,000 and reprimanded 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 pre-emption.

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

is shifted over a passage of 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 consequences for ecological balance and dispossessions 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.

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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.

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

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