

Voter list preparation

We are still confused

WHILE the election commission (EC) must be thanked for its latest decision to have enumerators visit door-to-door to collect voter particulars, (a shift from its previous plan) frankly, we are still confused about the final shape the voter list will take and how inclusive it is eventually going to be. And we should not be blamed for being befuddled. Confusion is progressively being compounded by change of decisions by the EC almost every other day.

First we were told that we are going to have voter list with photographs, only to be told not very soon thereafter, that voters may register their names without photographs. The decision to have the voter list prepared at registration centers, where all the eligible voters were required to turn up, was changed in favour of door-to-door options where, understandably, the voters will be helped to fill in the forms. But what has complicated the matter further is the fact that it has not yet been decided by the EC whether those registered without photograph would be allowed to vote.

We admit that there is no dearth of dedication on the part of the EC to prepare a voter list that would meet all the requirements and help the holding of a free and fair election. All sorts of options are bound to be tried out and understandably various alternatives will be brought under consideration to arrive at the best possible solution. And that is just what the commission is doing, and we have no issue with that. What we cannot but take issue on is its inability to give a clear picture of how they plan to proceed. A new element appears to emerge every other day.

We are constrained to say that the EC's pace of work has been, compared with the need of the hour, rather slow over the last four months since its reconstitution and there is a perceived lack of urgency in its efforts, although its only job, we must point out, is to hold a credible election. There is no time for procrastination. All confusions must be removed in taking the job forward and a workable, foolproof and accurate voter list presented to us within a reasonable timeframe.

Suu Kyi's continued captivity

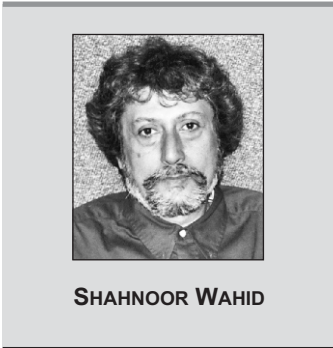
The world must take a stand for her release

THE military regime in Myanmar has once again spurned appeals from the outside world for freedom to be granted to democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Having already spent seventeen years in house arrest, the leader of the National League for Democracy has been served a fresh year's interment, a step that can only revive concerns about the state of human rights in a country truly isolated from the rest of the world. One would have thought that the ruling classes in Yangon would heed international opinion, particularly the joint appeal made by as many as 54 former heads of government and other luminaries only a couple of weeks ago for Suu Kyi's release and thereby demonstrate their willingness for a change of course. It is a blow for Myanmar that global opinion has thus been rudely pushed aside in the narrow interests of a junta.

The refusal of the Yangon military authorities to lift the ban on Suu Kyi's movements must now be regarded as a fresh signal for a concerted campaign to convince them that the Nobel peace laureate must be freed in the larger interest of the country. The reasons why Suu Kyi needs to be released are simple enough. In the first place, with democracy or popular government quickly gaining ground as political realities nearly everywhere, it makes sense to think that Myanmar cannot afford to fall behind. In the second place, the isolation that the ironically named State Peace and Development Council (that is how the rulers call themselves) has pushed the country into has quite succeeded in stunting the political and intellectual growth of the people of Myanmar, a fact that hardly allows them to come level with nations beyond their frontiers. Since General Ne Win's military take-over in 1962 (Ne Win quit in 1988), Myanmar has been under a relentless military dictatorship. Attempts by Suu Kyi and her supporters to inaugurate a new era of democracy, as evidenced by the NLD's convincing victory at the eventually aborted elections of 1990, have never succeeded owing to the ruthlessness employed by the junta in putting down dissent.

It is time for the outside world to increase pressure on Myanmar's rulers, both economically and politically, with a view to convincing them that they cannot continue to keep the country in the straitjacket they have so far. Nations which have engaged in trade with the country must accept the thought that as long as they ignore the pains the people of Myanmar go through in the political sense, they will only be adding to the trauma first inflicted on the country long ago.

Politicians -- already in demanding mode



SHAHNOOR WAHID

AS soon as the caretaker government opted to show leniency to politicians, and allowed them to talk on various issues, some of them began to do what they do best -- demand.

Don't get me wrong; I said some of them. After crouching low for a couple of months, they are back in business. Give us this. Give us that. They have begun demanding various facilities, and even money to contest elections!

They want their arrested compatriots freed unconditionally, and they want the ban on internal politics to be lifted immediately. They want bail for their dacoit friends. They want division in jail for thieves. They want elections at the earliest. The bottom line is, they want to go on a joy-ride once again with their merry band of marauders.

Look at the other side of the story. While the entire nation still remains aghast, stunned, stupefied, dazed and profoundly angered at the extent of theft and

robbery by their kind, surprisingly, politicians hardly talk about corruption.

They never demand severe and exemplary punishment for those politicians who have made millions in terms of dollars through massive abuse of power. They are pointing fingers in all directions but not at themselves!

They never handed over to the police those corrupt elements who cheated the country of revenue worth billions of Taka by under-invoicing the quotations for expensive cars; by over-invoicing each and every supply and manufacturing contract; by cutting down pristine hills; denuding forests; drying up water-bodies; grabbing state property; grabbing prime plots in the capital; grabbing railway land; taking commission against each and every signature; collecting toll by force from bazaars, shops, factories and business concerns of their locality; by taking commission from peon to secretary for appointment and promotion; by taking commission from old and poor teachers for releasing their pension money,

and so on.

Here is another aspect worth looking deep into. Presently, the entire country is talking about reforms of the political and electoral systems. The nation wants a voter list with photos to make it as authentic as possible in order to ensure free, fair and credible elections in the coming days. But we hear nothing substantial from the politicians about it.

To be candid, reform does not seem to be the most popular subject among the politicians, and whenever asked they prefer to keep mum about it. When asked about practice of democracy and cleansing operation within the party, they mumble something that does not quite make any sense. See the funny side of it, they go public seeking (read begging) votes, but when it comes to reforms in the party they say it is their internal affair.

Well, they may not talk about reforms, or corruption, or their bank accounts, or Humvees, or even transparent ballot boxes, but they have started to talk about elections. Their hearts and minds

are focused only on elections.

They hardly care about the suffering of the farmers in the fields, or workers in the factories, or fishermen in the rivers, or our expatriate labour force suffering in foreign countries. All they care about is how to go to power.

So the questions that naturally come to our minds are: What will this same band of politicians do once they go to power? Are they qualified and skilled enough to build this country into the modern, developed country that we dream of?

Well, to be frank, we have our doubts, because they have left behind a legacy of sheer indiscipline, incompetence and absurdity. They have proved again and again that all they are good at is attacking the opposition on the streets in a shameless manner, and letting loose verbal tirades in every public meeting, in every talk show, and even inside parliament.

We have seen in the last fifteen years that they are not qualified enough to talk about developing the IT sector to compete with the modern world.



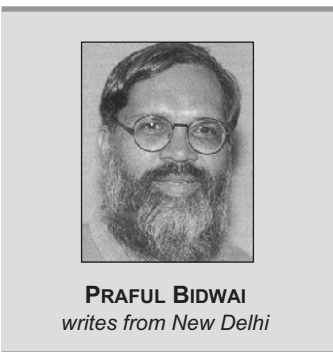
They are not informed enough to discuss the intricate points concerning our energy reserves, and whether we should conserve or export; they have no knowledge concerning our mineral resources and what to do about them; they have no idea about the merits and demerits of genetically modified organisms, especially crops, fruits and fish etc.; they have no clue about how to improve the health sector; they have no expertise to talk about finding an alternative export oriented product to earn foreign currency in case garments export suffers a set-back in the

future. And yet, ironically, the country's fate is entwined with these grossly incompetent people who are in politics and who wield authority. Is there no way we can find better people to run the country?

The answer lies in our unwavering determination to look for them, and give them the chance. But do we have the determination? Do we have the time? Shall we be able to sustain the pressure for long?

Shahnoor Wahid is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

When the state turn lawless



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE detention in Raipur of noted human rights activist Binayak Sen under the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act 2005 (PSA) has rightly attracted nationwide condemnation.

Dr. Sen, general secretary of the Chhattisgarh People's Union for Civil Liberties, and PUCL's national vice-president, was arrested for his alleged links with Maoist groups. The critical charge is that he met Maoist leader Narayan Sanyal more than 30 times in recent months in Raipur jail.

The charge is preposterous. Dr. Sen met Sanyal with the authorities' knowledge and consent and always in a jailer's presence. It's his legitimate function to meet detainees and defend their fundamental rights. Whether he met Sanyal 35 times or 100 times is irrelevant.

Yet, the Chhattisgarh government cavalierly levelled scandalous charges against an activist-

intellectual of Dr. Sen's standing, with an illustrious record as a paediatrician connected with the people's health movement. Dr. Sen was involved with the setting up of the Shaheed Hospital, an initiative of the great trade unionist Shankar Guha Niyogi.

The hospital, owned and operated by a workers' organisation, remains unmatched in India for helping the tribal population of a backward area neglected by the state. Dr. Sen was also on an advisory committee, which drew up one of India's most successful community-based healthcare programs.

Dr. Sen isn't a Naxalite, or a Maoist sympathiser. Everyone who knows him, as I've done for years, will testify to his commitment to a peaceful struggle for a compassionate, humane society. Yet, the government arrested him under the draconian PSA. This permits the detention of a person on the vaguest of charges, like committing acts with a "tendency to pose an obstacle to the administration of law," and actions which "encourage(s) the disobedience of the ... law."

The PSA criminalises even

non-violent protests, including Gandhian civil disobedience. It's a disgrace that the law remains in India's statute books. Dr. Sen was detained before the police had a shred of evidence against him. They have since searched his house and collected "hundreds of incriminating documents."

Now, most of the documents belong to the public domain. They include newspaper clippings, CDs on "fake encounters," and letters from victims of state repression, since published. Much of the material pertains to Sen's work as a civil liberties activist.

The malicious police allegations against Dr. Sen are of the same variety as those against Kashmir Times journalist Iftekhar Geelani. He, too, was accused in 2002 of possessing "classified" documents, suggesting links with terrorists. The police had to retract the charges when it was established that the "secret" documents were public.

Geelani was detained for 8 months -- and released without apology -- because he is related to Kashmiri separatist Syed Ali Shah Geelani. Dr. Sen is being

harassed because he's a civil liberties activist who has exposed police atrocities.

These, remarkably, include 155 "fake encounters" in 2 years. The latest was the murder of 12 Adivasis on March 31 -- which made headlines even amidst the shocking revelations about the "encounter" killing of Sohrabuddin Shaikh in Gujarat.

It would be a grave injustice if Dr. Sen has to languish for months in jail before charges against him are disproved. Surely, the courts have a duty to prevent such miscarriage of justice. Surely, it hasn't escaped the attention even of India's creaking justice delivery system that draconian laws, which allow preventive detention and forced confessions, are usually misused. They create a climate of impunity, in which no official is held accountable for his/her misconduct.

It bears recalling that the conviction rate under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act was less than 2 percent. This speaks of gross abuse of the law. The police didn't bother to collect evidence, but used TADA (and POTA) to bung people into jail and

extract confessions from them under duress, including threats of "encounters." Such laws became excuses for not conducting diligent investigation, while raising alarms about terrorism and threats to "national security."

The PSA was used in Chhattisgarh four times earlier -- for instance, to arrest a petty shopkeeper for selling groceries to Maoist sympathisers (whose identity he probably wasn't aware of), and to harass a class XII student who befriended a suspected Naxalite.

The Chhattisgarh police are planting stories about a "close relative" of Dr Sen's, who is subversive by virtue of having studied at Jawaharlal Nehru University! Only a warped khaki brain can think in such philistine, irrational ways.

Yet, it's precisely this way of thinking that led the Chhattisgarh government to set up Salwa Judum, a viciously right-wing band of thugs who kill Maoists. They have razed villages, raped women and looted what little the poor possess -- with police collusion. Salwa Judum has unleashed a reign of terror. No fewer than 47,000 people have become homeless owing to its depredations. However, Chhattisgarh's anti-Naxalite juggernaut rolls on, setting Advasi against Advasi, village against village, and undermining the

state's legitimacy.

The government now plans to use helicopter gunship to intimidate villagers, cut down prime forests, and repeat the United States' "Strategic Hamlets" strategy pursued during the Vietnam War. And yes, they plan to use grenades in skirmishes with Maoists.

There's a larger purpose behind the anti-Naxal operations. It is to make Chhattisgarh safe for huge mining and industrial projects, which dispossess people. Chhattisgarh is selling its precious mineral wealth cheap to promote neo-liberal capitalism. It has signed more than 30 memoranda of understanding with business houses.

The consequences of this strategy have become obvious -- in Jharkhand and Orissa, besides Chhattisgarh. In Orissa, there's popular resistance to the South Korean POSCO's steel plant and Tata's steel mill. 2006 began with the gunning down of 13 Adivasis at Kalinganagar. And last fortnight saw attacks upon peaceful protestors by POSCO's goons.

This insanity must stop. The monstrous industrial projects must not be cleared by bypassing environmental and rehabilitation scrutiny. Or else, the state will lose its popular legitimacy.

Then, the Maoists will have really achieved their purpose.

Bush's attempts were doomed from the start

The United States must also give up its idea of spreading democracy through guns, and use what Prof. Joseph Nye of Harvard University calls the "soft power" at its disposal. Soft power involves economic incentives and educational and cultural influence to prod nations into becoming more democratic. This will be a slow process, but it promises far greater success than the current policy of persuasion through gun.

MAHMOOD ELAHI

I am writing with reference to: "Taking stock of realities," by Kazi Anwarul Masud (DS, May 27).

Mr. Masud has raised some important issues about American efforts to promote democracy abroad. He writes: "One may wonder whether the US policy of supporting undemocratic regimes has changed in the post-Cold War era, particularly relating to Bush's declaration of promoting democracy in Third World countries." Well, it might have changed for the worse.

During the Cold War, the corner-stone of American foreign policy was to stop the Soviet

Union and its ideology of communism from gaining ground around the world. The Soviet Union, with its ideology of spreading communism through a world revolution, was perceived as the greatest threat to the Western democratic capitalism. In Western Europe, it led to the formation of Nato and the policy of containment. In the developing world, it was based on proping up anti-communist regimes.

The US policymakers were aware that the developing countries were too poor and too inexperienced in democracy to act as anti-communist bastions in the Third World. This is why the United States poured economic and military assistance into

undemocratic regimes like South Korea (which became a democracy only recently), South Vietnam, Taiwan, and Thailand -- all dictatorships of various types. And when Marxist leader Salvadore Allende was democratically elected as president by the people of Chile, the CIA conspired with the Chilean military to oust him in a violent coup d'etat. The rest belongs to history.

The situation changed dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Freed from the Soviet threat, the United States could finally look at the world without an ideological periscope. It seems the world might be seeing a new era when the

Americans don't have to prop up dictators in the name of realpolitik. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein was the first test, and the Americans under President George Bush sr. responded with resolve, and Saddam's forces were squarely defeated. Then came the equally brutal attack on Bosnia by Milosevic's forces. Again the Americans under President Clinton responded, and Serbian forces were forced to withdraw from Bosnia and, later, Kosovo.

By the time President George W. Bush was elected in 2000, the world seemed to be settling down without any great conflict. This led Dr. Francis Fukuyama, a former senior US State Department official, to write a book The End of History. In the book, Dr. Fukuyama argued that great conflicts of human history were now over, and the American ideas about democracy and capitalism faced no challenge. Now the world was left with the boring job of day to day manage-

ment. But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed all this. The new menace of al-Qaeda, with its fanatic vision of Islam, rose on the horizon.

The threat from al-Qaeda is different from the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a super-power bristling with nuclear weapons and missiles. The Soviet threat was countered by a retaliatory threat posed by the United States. As such, there was no direct military confrontation between the two rival super-powers.

Al-Qaeda is a different matter. It doesn't have any military force of its own. It is composed of a rag-tag group of extremists working out from their sanctuary in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. What makes them dangerous are their cells operating in the west, and the ideological support they get from their sympathisers. This makes the war against terrorism more protracted and less certain.

Bush decided to counter al-

-Qaeda on two fronts. One, by invading Afghanistan and Iraq and, later, promising to bring democracy in the Middle East. Democracy, he declared, would end the culture of violence in the region, and the people would themselves turn against terrorism and anti-American rhetoric. But it proved to be exactly the opposite.

Bush failed to realise that democracy could not be imposed on any people by military means. It must grow from within, and over a long period of time. His contention that the American occupation of post-war Germany brought democracy is without any basis. Germany was a democracy before the war, and Hitler himself was elected by the German people. In fact, Hitler is an example of how a democratically elected leader can turn against other democracies.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was also elected by the Venezuelan people, and yet he has emerged as the most anti-American leader in South

America. The United States is now facing total disarray in foreign relations. It is embroiled in a bloody war in Iraq and both democracy and peace look like distant dreams, while anti-American sentiments have spread around the world.

Unlike during the Cold War, the United States has no friendly dictators in this war. Even Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has proved to be a fair-weather friend. Gen. Musharraf is playing on both sides, siding officially with the Americans in the war against terror while allowing al-Qaeda a free hand in tribal regions, and al-Qaeda seems to be regrouping in the region beyond the reach of the Americans.

The United States will need a revised policy when Mr. Bush leaves the White House. It will have to reorient its policies from military options to political and security options. This calls for improving economic and political ties while downplaying the military objectives. Despite 9/11, the

United States is not facing a military threat. Unlike US-backed rebels during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, today's al-Qaeda doesn't have the backing of any military power and is not a threat in the military sense.

The United States must also give up its idea of spreading democracy through guns, and use what Prof. Joseph Nye of Harvard University calls the "soft power" at its disposal. Soft power involves economic incentives and educational and cultural influence to prod nations into becoming more democratic. This will be a slow process, but it promises far greater success than the current policy of persuasion through gun.

Mahmood Elahi is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star. aeda