

Stopping 'nomination business'

EC's new proposal has meat in it

COMING on top of earlier moves toward political reforms, the new proposal regarding nomination of parliamentary candidates advanced by the Election Commission certainly calls for objective study. The EC has of course made the suggestion as a way of rolling back the centralised nomination process that has been pursued so long by the major political parties. Briefly, the tendency at the last couple of general elections has been for both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to award nominations to individuals whose willingness to inject money into the party coffers was a major consideration behind the nomination-related decisions. The result has not quite been helpful to the cause of democracy, given that individuals with money that again may not have been gained by transparent, incorruptible means walked away with choice nominations. In turn, such a demonstration of the power of money alienated party workers at the grassroots and in quite a few significant cases ignited internal party revolts.

Now that the EC has proposed that nominations be centred on the constituencies rather than on decisions made at the central party level, it is important that the parties, all of them, will see the wisdom of the proposal. The proposal envisages the selection of two or more tentative candidates at the primary level through secret ballot for a particular constituency; and of these candidates, one will be chosen by the party parliamentary board as the party nominee for the general election. The proposal appears to be a reasonable one, especially in light of its emphasis on the opinions of party workers inhabiting a constituency. Besides, such a process of selection of candidates is in vogue in other countries. The primary system in the United States has been a fact of political life for decades. In the United Kingdom, the very suggestion that our EC has made has been a political reality for years on end. Given these facts, and given too the reality of how corruption has seeped into the nomination procedure of the major parties, the proposal from the Election Commission calls for serious deliberation by the parties.

However, for the EC proposal to acquire more substance, it is necessary that the organisation and role of the local, grassroots units of the parties be emphasised. Since at the primaries it will be the local members of the political parties who will be choosing their nominees, the parties must first formalise the functions and leadership structure of their local units. The EC plans to discuss its proposal with the political parties once indoor politics resumes. The results of such a dialogue ought to be fruitful.

Chittagong hillslide

Skeletons in the cupboard revealing

THE Chittagong mudslide, which claimed 123 lives, has brought to the fore a host of issues relating to environmental degradation, especiallyrazing of hills in the port city. The latest report shows that the highly perilous flattening of hilly terrain has not been the doing of a few nondescript anti-socials having no respect for or understanding of the law; rather, the crime has been committed by highly placed influential people ranging from ministers and politicians to top businessmen. There was simply nobody to check the indiscriminate cutting of hills which actually exposed a huge number of people to devastating landslides. The latest disaster has shown what a price the ordinary people had to pay for an avoidable and preventable encroachment upon the nature by predators in the guise of fellow humans.

As it always happens in our context, it usually takes a disaster to awaken us to the need for taking corrective steps when all sorts of appalling details keep pouring in. The saddest part of the story is that the mudslide is not the first of its kind. Yet, the deaths in the past were not deemed to be reason enough to stop tinkering with nature. Timely intervention has never been any government's forte.

The fact of the matter is that there was no enforcement of the law put in place as far back as in 1988 despite the environmentalists being quite vocal about the issue.

So, the responsibility has to be shared equally by the local administration including law enforcement agencies along with CDA and forest and environmental authorities. The process of setting things right must begin with the law enforcers approaching the problem with a firm resolve not to allow such predatory activities on the part of the influential people. The mobile courts that have now come into play should be a regular feature. Simultaneously, a social awareness campaign must also be organised to put up timely resistance against encroachment of all kinds.

Finally, the people responsible for causing so much distress to others must be brought to justice, regardless of who they are, after a thorough inquiry is made into the disaster. In immediate terms, the government has to pay due compensation to the affected families while the surviving and still vulnerable ones are suitably rehabilitated.

Sorry tale of hill cutting and water logging



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

We feel that the present government must investigate this great theft case, and make the past ministers, state ministers, engineers, mayors, bureaucrats and businessmen pay back the money they have stolen from the various projects to make Dhaka a capital worth the name. Even if they have to sell their numerous houses in the city they must pay for the crime.

get.

THE people who died in the mudslide at the foot of some decapitated hills in Chittagong were not close relations or friends of any politician or bureaucrat or CIP (Commercially Important Person). They were just "people" destined to be in poverty and at the mercy of the vagaries of ruthless men and nature.

They were, in fact, lucky to be alive for so many years and hence, had to pay for this profligacy. And that is exactly what they did. They paid with their lives for having been born in a country where human life is cheap.

What happens when people die by the dozen in unusual circumstances? They turn into statistical figures and get buried in a mass grave.

But what happens when a close relation of a politician or a bureaucrat or a businessman dies? He or she gets a decent burial in a decent place, with all the pomp and grandeur that money and influence can

stories and care to ponder a while on what could result from such an atrocity on nature? Did you exert your influence to stop the hill cutters and their political allies (some belonging to your own party), the way you always exerted influence to keep control over the Chittagong Port?

Today, even in a jail hospital, you must be reading about the tragic deaths of those hapless, landless people who had taken shelter under some of those hills. Do you feel any compassion for them? You should not, because you did nothing when there was time to do plenty.

You, as the mayor, perhaps gave unwritten permission, gave the nod of your head, when unscrupulous contractors whispered in your ears about the profit all of you would make by cutting down those hills.

Mr. Mayor, you are a man from Chittagong, a true son of the soil, and yet you are a party to the destruction of the pristine beauty of your own city. How strange! How

Did you, Mr. Mayor, read those

shameful! You have deformed the once majestic port city, where people from all over the country used to go to enjoy the scenic beauty, especially the hills.

How much money, Mr. Mayor, did you and your cronies make by selling the soil from those hills? Have you become rich enough? Is your greed satiated? Are you sorry that you did not get the opportunity to finish off the rest of the hills?

But we feel sorry for you and your political cousins belonging to other parties. Sorry for the kind of politicians that you all proved to have been. The more that is revealed about you people, the more we feel our appetite going. We had trusted you and you deceived us, you deceived the entire nation.

Water-logging in Dhaka city

The chief engineer of a powerful agency said that the entire storm sewer system of Dhaka city has to be redesigned if we want to get rid of the water-logging problem.

Well, whether or not the new design would solve the problem is another issue. What is the most interesting issue here is -- he is talking about, let's take a hypothetical figure, a four-thousand-crore-Taka project. What a lovely thought!

The wise engineer has, perhaps, already done the calculation. Out of the four thousand crore, three thousand five hundred crore would be distributed amongst the minister and state minister of the relevant ministry, parliamentary committee members, ministry big brasses, ministry small brasses, DCC top cats, DCC small cats, and the engineers involved in the project.

The remaining five hundred crore would be given to a reliable contractor who would make three hundred crore for himself from there, and the small fries would get their kin to do some superficial repair works. And this is how they have been eating up hundreds of crores of taka from the yearly DCC budget.

We feel that the present government must investigate this great theft case, and make the past ministers, state ministers, engineers, mayors, bureaucrats and businessmen pay back the money they have stolen from the various projects to make Dhaka a capital worth the name. Even if they have to sell their numerous houses in the city they must pay for the crime.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Our politics without the top two

Nobody can guarantee that the new force will do better than the two big parties did, unless we establish a democratic system and institutions. As I have said many times, it's easy for a person or a party to exert a lot of due and undue pressure on our society because we have not developed democratic institutions as yet. I, along with many others, was hopeful of seeing a new beginning when the present caretaker government started initiatives to build the institutions -- an independent Anti-corruption Commission, judiciary, and Election Commission. But these initiatives seem to have slowed down.

A.J.M. SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

MANY newspaper reports are suggesting that there has been a move to free our politics from the two top leaders -- Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. It has been reasoned that they are corrupt and are obstacles to political reform in their parties.

They harbour criminals and sponsor cronyism. Their hatred for each other has debilitated our democracy. If the move is successful, it will have a huge impact on our politics. We need to understand the consequences of eliminating the two from politics.

Both Hasina and Khaleda were prime ministers and contributed to the progress of democracy in the country, staging anti-autocracy movement against General Ershad. Hasina ruled the country for one term, and Khaleda for two terms.

I have always harboured a notion that Hasina and Khaleda were personally honest, but were misguided and misled by corrupt elements in their inner circles. I also have an impression that Hasina's term was way better than Khaleda's second term as prime minister.

Hasina's government failed to maintain law and order, and her

relatives who are involved in Awami League politics, and some party leaders, misused power and made fortunes. The telecom sector, the share market, and law and order were the zones of disaster.

Her government also failed to take action against religious fundamentalists. But her government's performance in maintaining stability in the prices of essentials, managing a post-flood crisis, and reducing ethnic conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, was outstanding. Hasina was also successful in keeping her immediate family members from abusing state power and money.

The BNP began its second term with a vow to take action against the alleged corruption of Hasina's government. But the second term BNP was a total disaster. Corruption, killing, misuse of power, and the rise of religious fanaticism, broke all previous records.

The parallel government run by Khaleda's son, Tarique, from the notorious Hawa Bhabon added a new dimension to our political culture. Khaleda's government also failed to probe the alleged corruption charges against Hasina. And finally, Khaleda's desperate attempt to regain power through a caretaker government led by her

party's yes-men was about to destroy the whole democratic system.

If the AL-led opposition had not challenged the yes-men's government, our democracy would certainly be in disarray. All these strengthened my conviction that Hasina was not corrupt. Otherwise, given the hatred our political parties have for each other, the BNP would have done everything to jail Hasina.

Now the present caretaker government, which has identified corruption as the number one problem, has found allegations of corruption against many politicians, including Hasina.

It has brought charges against many politicians and arrested some of them. The law enforcement agencies have remanded and interrogated some of the arrestees to learn about their associates and the sources of their money.

During interrogation, AL leaders Jalil, Selim and Quader, and BNP leaders Babar and Falu, allegedly told the investigators that their supreme leaders entertained various corruption schemes.

Babar and Falu related how Khaleda made fortunes for herself and her family, and Jalil and Quader revealed how Hasina demanded money from some businessmen, most of whom are

directly linked with her party, for enriching the party coffers. A few businessmen have come forward and filed extortion charges against Hasina.

The so-called confessions are available on CDs and on the Internet. After hearing the confessions, you can't wait to ask some questions. Do the investigators have a magic wand which makes the suspects so easily and meticulously confess their involvement in illegal money making?

How did these confessions become available on CDs? How true are they? We don't know the answers to these questions, but we do know that during an interrogation only two parties are involved -- interrogators and suspects.

No other people have access to that setting. The government cannot and, I am sure, has not officially released the confessions because they are useless until the court accepts them as true.

It is well known that people make confessions under duress, and to avoid harsh treatment during interrogations. And they can rightfully deny them before the court, and can even complain against the method of interrogation.

Confessions are only useful for collecting further evidence against suspects. It is dangerous to treat people as corrupt just on the basis of the confessions which they gave during interrogation. If we do so, we run the risk of influencing the court towards making biased judgments.

We Bangladeshi are, by nature, suspicious about the honesty of the people in power. We are rightly so, because we have seen many people becoming filthy rich by misusing state power and money. But I think we need to wait and see.

We need to leave it to the court,

want. They are also symbols of unity in their parties. It would be much easier if they lead the reform of their parties.

But their elimination from politics may break up their parties, creating a chaotic political environment where a third force may gain political power. However, it is not yet clear who will be that force.

It may be the religious fundamentalists, who have created many social institutions across the country over the last few years, or a new right wing party made up of splinter groups from the two parties.

Nobody can guarantee that the new force will do better than the two big parties did, unless we establish a democratic system and institutions. As I have said many times, it's easy for a person or a party to exert a lot of due and undue pressure on our society because we have not developed democratic institutions as yet.

I, along with many others, was hopeful of seeing a new beginning when the present caretaker government started initiatives to build the institutions -- an independent Anti-corruption Commission, judiciary, and Election Commission. But these initiatives seem to have slowed down.

An independent Election Commission can deal with the reform of the political parties, and an independent Anti-corruption Commission along with an independent judiciary can take care of corrupt elements. The government should expedite the efforts for building these fundamental institutions to keep our hope alive for a truly democratic society.

A.J.M. Shafiqul Alam Bhuiyan teaches in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka.

The plight of rickshaw pullers

Let us not give the feeling that we, as a nation, are dwarfed by low-tech transportation, and that our fate allows us not to move beyond a rickshaw. Like Dr. Yunus, I would like to keep the rickshaws in the museum, and build hyper-speed transportation gateways for the future of Bangladesh. My views were echoed by the editor of New-Age -- a local English daily. I would rather offer these unfortunate rickshaw peddlers a decent life, and not let them be used by the affluent people for their merry rides.

ZIAUR RAHMAN

had been contemplating writing about the plight of the rickshaw pullers of Bangladesh. Two recent issues have made me share my views in this regard. I recently read a piece on rickshaw pulling and how we should not blindly emulate the Western model to stop rickshaws from plying the cities of Bangladesh as they claim that it has accelerated global pollution and ecological imbalance and put severe stress on fossil fuel for a small country like Bangladesh.

The second catalyst was a recent exhibition at the Russian Cultural Center, organized by

wasted away in this profession. One rickshaw puller commented that the police tend to think of them as traffic jam creators, and also project the view that before a person becomes a thief the last straw of hope that he clings onto is a rickshaw. This really demeans the profession.

Another puller commented that even their wives felt hesitant in saying that their husbands were rickshaw pullers. Imagine the pangs of emotion that one may feel, given how the society feels about a "rickshaw puller."

I sense that the society needs to change its mindset, because pulling a rickshaw is a dignified profession, and is much better

than stealing, bribing, or conniving to defraud the government and the public. We need to pay respect to someone who deserves it, and not to the rapacious bureaucrats and politicians in Bangladesh.

It was a pleasant surprise when the ambassador of Netherlands called the rickshaw pullers the "real heroes" of Bangladesh, because they (the rickshaw pullers) worked hard to carry a significant number of people from point to point.

The ambassador also said that social justice demanded that we, the informed citizens of Bangladesh, should find ways to raise their (the rickshaw pullers) economic standing, and create social safety nets for them and their families so that they were not left behind in strengthening the fabric of the society.

A rickshaw puller commented that the laws of the land, especially for the rickshaw pullers, were framed with the mindset that the rickshaw pullers were inconsequential human pawns in our

society who needed to obey the rules of the city corporation.

The rickshaw puller cited the example of the badge that the city corporation had given him, where it is mentioned that he (the rickshaw puller) needed to behave properly with the passenger, but there was no mention of how the passenger should behave towards the puller.

These may be insignificant issues to the policy makers, but they are real issues of importance for the pride, welfare and sustainability of the rickshaw pullers' community, and their subsequent social acceptance.

Added to these dimensions is the issue of our politicians using the rickshaw pullers as vote banks during elections in the city, and this system of misuse has taken an ominous turn, hurting the proper functioning of effective voting while contributing to the increase of inhabitants in the urban slums.

The huge number of rickshaws also tells of the many backward

ing.

I believe that our national prestige is being severely lowered by having rickshaws. When the global trend is taking us towards travel at lightening speed, and people are thinking of energizing humans to travel at the speed of light, here we are, trying to retard our progress by thinking of traveling at the pace of a turtle.

Social justice and equity are needed in our journey to make Bangladesh technology enabled, but it is ridiculous to believe that rickshaws are a functional medium of travel in this era of warp-speed and extensive travel.

If serious efforts need to be made to help the rickshaw pullers to move out of this profession and into more value added professions, and allow Bangladeshis to walk for cardiovascular exercise, become less lazy, and believe and work to invent the next hyper sonic age communication platform. Anything less would be insanity on the part of the smart, intelligent humans

that we are.

Let us not give the feeling that we, as a nation, are dwarfed by low-tech transportation, and that our fate allows us not to move beyond a rickshaw.

Like Dr. Yunus, I would like to keep the rickshaws in the museum, and build hyper-speed transportation gateways for the future of Bangladesh. My views were echoed by the editor of New-Age -- a local English daily. I would rather offer these unfortunate rickshaw peddlers a decent life, and not let them be used by the affluent people for their merry rides.

We, as a nation, continue to stay unperturbed while gargantuan loss in our national productivity goes un-challenged, and our citizens toil for a measly living.

A re-evaluation strategy to use the rickshaw pullers' skills need to be put up