

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 hillside

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, especially razing 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.

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

I 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

Neeti Gobeshona Kendra, Dhaka, featuring the life of a rickshaw puller. It was a unique experience for me and, perhaps, for many others who attended. I would like to offer a perspective on rickshaw pulling, the entire trade and the related stakeholders' community.

The exhibition allowed me to dwell on the issue of rickshaw pulling. Some comments really struck me hard, and the cases along the exhibition hall depicted real stories, with bonafide rickshaw pullers relating the stories of their lives.

It was painful, needless to say, and many feared that their's and their children's lives would be



SHAHNOOR WAHID

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

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.

Therefore, what is the point in shedding crocodile tears for those people in Chittagong who were no kith or kin of ours?

Compassion for fellow humans? If compassion was really in circulation then none of those hills would have been cut in the first place. Remember how many stories with relevant photographs and expert opinions about the possible impact of hill cutting were printed in national newspapers and weeklies?

The media kept printing those over and over again during the last fifteen years. Environmentalists kept shouting slogans during the last fifteen years. Did anyone read those stories? Did anyone hear those slogans?

Let us ask the mighty mayor of Chittagong, Mr. Mohiuddin Chowdhury, who has been in power for many, many years, and during whose tenure most of the hills have been leveled to the ground.

Did you, Mr. Mayor, read those

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 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 the rest of the money. What about the project?

Well, you would witness some digging and cutting of the roads for one year after a grand opening ceremony, and then, one day, you will forget about it.

The contractor's men would pack up and go home, and forget about you as well. Dear readers, this is what has been happening for decades in this country, in the name of development.

Now, as citizens of this country, and after having paid our taxes from our genuine meager incomes, shall we ask all the past mighty

mayors and the present mighty mayor, past chief engineers and present chief engineer, and all the past ministers -- why did you keep pretending, and telling us lies for the last fifteen years about working on a modern storm sewer system that would take care of the water logging problem in the city?

If you had thought that the present design was faulty, then why did you spend thousands of crores of taka on it? If you think that a new design is needed, then what guarantee is there that you will not take us for a ride again?

The city-fathers had been telling us one story after another when it came to solving some age-old problems of the metropolis. Though the problems never got solved, yet, behind our backs they have been giving away contracts to 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. SHAHUL 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 Bobon 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 Jallil, 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 Jallil 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 Bangladeshis 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,

not the interrogators, to decide who is corrupt and who is not. For the sake of establishing the rule of law, the court must decide the corruption charges without any external influence.

If politicians like Hasina and Khaleda are found guilty by the court, they must pay the penalty, and they must lose their right to remain in politics. But if they are removed from politics by undemocratic means, they will be able to generate public sympathy in their favour by showing that their rights of citizenship were being violated.

And the political histories of many developing countries, such as Iran and the Philippines, suggest that when popular leaders are cut off from their political bases through undemocratic means they make heroic comebacks.

Many people in the AL and BNP, and in the present government, believe that the absence of Hasina and Khaleda from politics will cure our political system. But is it really that simple?

Let's ponder for a moment. There are people in the BNP and AL who are now talking loudly about reform; I just wonder, where they were before. They either benefited from the leadership of the two ladies, or did not have guts to challenge them.

We also have reason to believe that they are demanding reform to save themselves from the government's anti-corruption drive. Whatever the reason for the demand is, it is true that our political parties need reform to establish the mechanisms to ensure the practice of democracy in party forums.

We can't deny that the two ladies are enormously popular among their party workers, and can sway

workers' opinions the way they 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. Shahul Alam Bhuiyan teaches in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka.

gent humans that we are.

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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 unchallenged, and our citizens toil for a meagre living.

A re-evaluation strategy to use the rickshaw pullers' skills need to be put up in front of our faces for social and economic awakening of our policy makers and citizens.

Ziaur Rahman is the CEO of ITM.