

Social safety net programme

The money is not going to all the deserving

IF the social safety net programme (SSNP) is to cater to the marginalised groups in the society of which there are more than a dozen in the list of the government, then many of the most deserving of the state support are not getting it. That is what we are given to understand from the report of a household income survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Doubtless there is a great deal of allocational inefficiency in this regard. We have certain concerns in this matter that we feel the government should address if it wants the purpose of the programme met fully.

Even if we go by what some experts maintain that the programme has not been politicised, there are grounds to believe that there has been a lack of objectivity in dishing out the funds. Otherwise there can be very little rationale in allotting more funds to a region which has lesser percentage of poverty, as in the case of Sylhet division, for example, which in spite of having the second lowest incidence of poverty has received the highest SSNP benefits. But that is not the end of the matter. The percentage of allocation is greatly lopsided too as fund allocation in the same case shows. Sylhet, having 33.8 percent of people living below poverty line, have received 22.42 percent of the allocation, whereas Barisal, having 52 percent received only 13.34 percent. We fail to see the rationale except that some sort of influence was used in determining the allocation.

We feel also that the government should state the criteria clearly and say what qualifies a person as 'poor' to meet the requirement to be a recipient of the fund. This is essential because a very important safety net programme of the government, the primary education stipend programme, may prove a failure if a very large segment of the beneficiaries of the support continues to be the non-poor. Disturbing is also the fact that 11 percent of them don't even meet any single criteria. Similar is the case with the vulnerable group development programme.

For a country like ours the SSNP is indeed a noteworthy programme. More money need to be allotted, and indeed this year's allocation is almost 600 crore more than that of last year. But if the allotted money fails to reach the deserving persons the very efficacy of the programme risks being negated.

Quality teaching at public universities

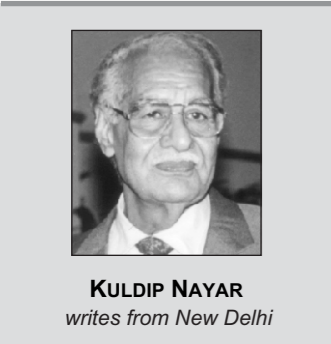
Proposed new rules merit consideration

PLANS to put in place a uniform set of rules relating to recruitment and promotion procedures at public universities are surely welcome. Part of the reason lies in the fact that our public universities have remained afflicted with problems that ought not to have been the case given the legacy such institutions of higher learning have traditionally enjoyed. Of the problems, a fundamental one has been the politicisation that has taken hold of the university, to the extent that even academic positions came to be affected by it. Additionally, appointments and promotions of officers and employees of the public universities raised a good number of questions in recent times. One, therefore, hardly needs to emphasise the fact that when universities come under a question mark, it is time to think about corrective measures.

The University Grants Commission, perhaps in a clear acknowledgement of what needs to be done, has prepared and submitted a set of draft rules that aim at doing away with the ailments currently stymieing the work of the public universities. Such rules, if and when they are implemented, should lead to a restoration of quality education through ensuring the growth and prevalence of standards that one expects to be at work in the institutions of higher learning. Over the last many years, the public universities have suffered badly in terms of teaching through the appointment of teachers whose academic antecedents were not as they ought to have been. Individuals with fewer or qualitatively lower than the required degrees of academic achievement have been seen making their way into teaching positions. Sometimes deserving candidates were bypassed in favour of patently inferior ones. These and other difficulties should now be pushed aside and the public universities, through the suggested new rules, should go for a qualitative change across the board. One might add here that a cleansing process is required at the universities if the goal is for them to recover the glory which was once their defining characteristic.

There is, of course, the matter of what is to be done with those individuals who are already working as academics, having been appointed through means that the proposed rules seek to put a check to. The priorities should be clear here: a full and judicious review of their cases is in order. If the aim of the suggested new measures is ensuring transparency in the public universities, let not stumbling block stand in the way.

Loyalty versus consensus



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

INDIA'S president is a ceremonial head under the constitution. Yet, the office has assumed so much importance over the years that no political party, particularly the ruling one, can afford to have an indifferent or, much less, hostile president.

Only he has the power to invite a party to form the government, and it doesn't need to be the largest. This situation has arisen because there has not been a single party that was able to secure a majority in parliament in the last two decades, and none looks like having one in the next two decades.

The president will continue to be an arbiter. This may well be the reason -- the general election is in 2009 --

BETWEEN THE LINES

What matters is a unanimous choice. The biggest argument in favour of Kalam -- and it is a weighty one -- is that he is acceptable to all in the opposition, including the BJP which is not known for favouring Muslims. In Kalam, the nation has a known personality. Nehru selected Rajendra Prasad, Radha Krishnan, and Zakir Hussain, all towering personalities, for the office. The name is important because the president must be famous, and one whom the people respect and trust.

why the Congress is insistent on having its loyal member Pratibha Patil at Rashtrapati Bhavan, when there could be unanimity on President Abdul Kalam.

Another clout which the office of president has come to acquire is the power to dismiss state governments. The constitution's Article 356 authorises the president to take over the administration of a state in case of "failure of constitutional authority." He and his nominee, the state governor, are judges.

Pronouncements of failure have been made on dubious grounds. Often the party or coalition at the centre has dismissed state govern-

ments of the opposition for political reasons. The president's concurrence is essential, hence the anxiety of the Congress to have its own person.

Incidentally, the president has dismissed state governments nearly 95 times since independence, beginning from the ouster of a communist government in Kerala during Jawaharlal Nehru's rule.

Nehru, however, saw to it that the constitution-makers would not give the president authority to take over the government at the centre. Even when a government loses a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha, a

caretaker government takes charge, not the president.

This has stalled dictatorship in India. There is yet another crucial power the president enjoys. He can withhold assent to a bill passed by parliament. President Zail Singh returned the Postal Bill, which authorised the government to intercept private mail.

The government could have re-endorsed the bill in the cabinet, whereby the president would have been bound to give his assent. But this did not happen because of widespread public protest.

These considerations have led political parties to propose their

candidates to succeed Kalam, who finishes his five-year term this July. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Congress and supported by the Left, has nominated Pratibha Patil; the National Democratic Front (NDA), led by the BJP, vice-president Bhairon Singh Sekhawati; and the Third Force, (United National People's Front) President Kalam for a second term.

The Congress was the first to make the announcement which, to say the least, poured cold water on general expectations for a well known person. A party, which at one time mentioned the name of its stalwart, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, had only the unknown Pratibha Patil to field.

I have no doubt that India would bring laurels to womanhood when it elects Pratibha Patil. All those who have welcomed her candidature because she is a woman would feel gratified at her victory.

It is strange that the UPA should highlight the gender angle. Surely, there is more to the office of the president. I met Pratibha Patil when she was Rajasthan governor. I found her simple, austere, and clad in khadi from head to toe.

However endearing this quality,

the country is looking for the next president, not for the chairperson of a khadi board or a social welfare organisation. And the manner in which the UPA and the Left came to arrive at the name does no credit to those selecting it.

When Home Minister Shivraj Patil was not acceptable to the Left for his "soft Hindutva views," CPI (M) leader Sitaram Yechuri said: "How about a woman?" Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, apparently at the nod of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, mentioned Pratibha Patil's name.

CPI leader Bharadan said that he had known her to be a good person. The name was finalised then and there. Unfortunately, the president's election has got mired in politics and controversy.

The office enjoys so much respect that it should never be subjected to voting, which may vitiate the atmosphere and divide the nation. Whether it was the BJP's googy, or a desperate move to stall the person who has unflinching loyalty to Sonia Gandhi, the result was a pleasant surprise.

The name of Kalam came to the fore. Practically, all parties, except the UPA-Left combination, rallied behind him. Kalam is a tried hand, non-

partisan, and above communal and provincial pulls.

His popular rating is over 90 percent, as the response to the surveys conducted by TV networks indicates. True, the name figured almost towards the end. This was because the two main parties had their own candidates.

Kalam rightly did not throw his hat in the ring. He could either be a consensus candidate, or not in the race at all. Even after knowing that Kalam's election could be unanimous, Sonia Gandhi went ahead with filing Pratibha Patil's nomination. When Sonia can get a Congress member as the president, why should she have a person who was the choice of the Third Front and the NDA? But this is not the point. What matters is a unanimous choice.

The biggest argument in favour of Kalam -- and it is a weighty one -- is that he is acceptable to all in the opposition, including the BJP which is not known for favouring Muslims. In Kalam, the nation has a known personality. Nehru selected Rajendra Prasad, Radha Krishnan, and Zakir Hussain, all towering personalities, for the office. The name is important because the president must be famous, and one whom the people

respect and trust.

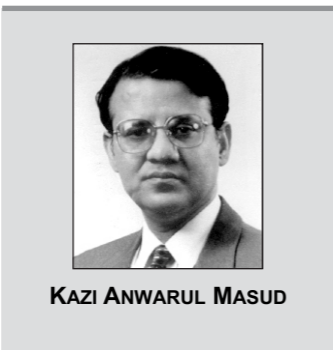
The contest can also be messy and uncertain. The Electoral College has a little more than one million votes comprising the elected members of parliament and state legislatures.

The UPA-Left commands a little less than half a million. With Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party, the vote goes up to more than half a million, clinching the election of Pratibha Patil. But since there is no whip allowed for presidential polls, and balloting is secret, cross-voting cannot be ruled out. This happened when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi fought against the syndicate, the old guard in the Congress, and opposed the party's official candidate Sanjiva Reddy. V.V. Giri, the independent candidate, supported by Mrs. Gandhi, won on the vote of second preferences.

The Congress cannot take Pratibha Patil's election for granted. However belated, the effort to have Kalam is a step eminently worth cherishing and pursuing -- and defending to the last ditch -- because it can avert a fierce, divisive contest. The nation will emerge more cohesive and more united.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Is early election an absolute necessity?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GIVEN the penchant for democracy throughout the world regardless of the presence or absence of institutions essential for sustainable democracy, any discussion on non-representative government becomes instantly unpopular. Questions are inevitably raised about the "temporariness" of the non-representative government. Little attention is given by the advocates of democracy as to why autocratic rule has been and remains more the norm than the exception in many countries of the third world.

Western political thinkers would have us believe that patrimonial personalist regimes are more readily accepted in most third world countries mainly because of extreme poverty that afflicts the overwhelming majority of the population of these countries -- who are used to looking towards divinity or His "representative" in the form of a dictator for relief.

Some of these leaders received immediate acceptance from the people because they led the war of independence from the colonial masters. Some, like Fidel Castro who militarily defeated corrupt Batista regime, were credited by

GOING DEEPER

It has been argued that the ability of the communicative action of the poverty stricken people who lack the ability for instrumental actions necessary for economic self-preservation would not be very strong. As democracy demands implicit moral and political integrity, it may be advisable for countries like Bangladesh to wait a while (period being indeterminate but not exceeding reasonable time) for institutions to mature before participatory democracy is resorted to.

the people with introducing a superior brand of ideology than what they had been preached at for long.

But once having captured power, leaders like Castro did not chose the democratic path and denied "social coordination" e.g. the right to political and economic autonomy to the people in the name of egalitarian distribution of national wealth.

History of many third world countries is replete with the presence of such dictators. Some conservative historians believed that since communist totalitarian states had been ideologically inspired and had utopian overtones, the disappearance of communism would usher in Western capitalist democracy, which necessarily did not happen.

The Failed States Index 2007 just published by the Fund for Peace ranks Bangladesh at 16 (Pakistan at 12 and Burma at 14) out of 177 countries surveyed where the risk of failure is running high. Of the 12 indicators of states' vulnerability Bangladesh has been accused of persecution of religious minorities and also of incapability to deal with environmental

disaster.

According to the study the world's weakest states are not just a danger to themselves but also threaten peace and stability of other countries.

The argument for a pause in our quest for democracy is due to the reluctance of many people to replace one group of kleptocrats with another. Since nature abhors a vacuum, the elected rulers have to be replaced by non-elected group of people whose competence and honesty are widely trusted.

The problem in such a solution, even for a short period, is that no one can give guarantee that the non-elected group of people lacking democratic accountability would not fall into the trap of Actonian precept that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The recent mudslide in Chittagong that killed more than one hundred persons would not have been possible if the so-called elected governments over decades had not been either collusive or uncaring about the massive deforestation and unauthorised cutting of hills that

led to this man-made disaster.

The aggrieved people without food and shelter in this period of incessant rain can now only look to the government for succour. Similarly, the daily accounts of alleged extortion and corruption on an unimaginable scale might not inspire the people of Bangladesh to go for early elections for a putative democratic form of government.

Indubitably, our foreign friends mean us well when they at every available opportunity give us lectures on the value of democracy. It is, however, not understood whether their well intentioned lectures are given from their experiences in their own countries where democracy had taken firm roots a long time back or they have taken into consideration dynastic politics and vote buying practices Bangladeshis have been used to since our liberation.

Professor Emeritus Robert Scalapino of Harvard University writes: "Political institutionalisation enables a movement from the erratic practices and arbitrary decisions stemming from a high dependence on personalised rule (the success of institutionalisation

and) reduces the likelihood of abrupt drastic change in basic structures since change is made possible in legal, evolutionary manner."

Since the extent of institutionalisation largely determines the viability of any particular regime it would, perhaps, be advisable to create the foundations of institutions supportive of democracy instead of mimetic adaptation of new practices, regardless of its value, for which we may not yet be ready.

The chaos that followed the fall of the Soviet empire has been a lesson for the Chinese leaders who understood the necessity of a strong central authority for the stability of the state.

Accordingly, the dismantling by Deng Xiaoping of Mao Tse Tung's economic and cultural hegemony was not followed by dismantling of Maoist political system. China's enviable economic progress is the global talk of the town despite the massacre at the Tianamen Square of progressive elements in Chinese society.

The argument proffered here is not to follow the Chinese example of political system but to be clear about the targets to be achieved and our ability to achieve those targets within a specified time frame.

It is true that growth of institutions should be evolutionary for their permanence and not revolutionary as has been seen after the Islamic Revolution in Iran which was then supported by almost all the people being unaware of the Islamist "election trap" that provides a one way street for people as the hurriedly held national

referendum on the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishing clerical rule has shown.

One, however, wonders as to why given the present demographic structure of the Iranian population, where majority of the people were born in post-revolutionary Iran and reportedly have little respect for either the concept of the superiority of clerical rule or sacrosanctity of the Iran-Iraq War, have not, as expected by the Americans (e.g. General Zinni who commanded American troops in the region) risen up against the government.

Among the reasons, one can cite generous governmental expenditure on education, health, and other social sectors, as well as the success of the government in gathering popular support for their cause on the nuclear issue and against Western "intrusion" in Iran's sovereign right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

It has been argued that the ability of the communicative action of the poverty stricken people who lack the ability for instrumental actions necessary for economic self-preservation would not be very strong.

As democracy demands implicit moral and political integrity, it may be advisable for countries like Bangladesh to wait a while (period being indeterminate but not exceeding reasonable time) for institutions to mature before participatory democracy is resorted to.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Retiring from politics



ANM NURUL HAQUE

IT came to me as a big surprise when seasoned politician and chairman of a faction of Jatiya Party, Anwar Hossain Monju, announced his retirement from politics, as I had an idea that politicians in Bangladesh never retire. Though he did not specify any reason behind his decision to retire from politics, a widespread rumour was that a few senior political leaders received suggestions from different quarters to quit politics.

Monju's name appeared on an unofficial list of 50 corruption suspects published in different newspapers following the crack-down on corrupt political bigwigs after declaration of the state of emergency on January 11. He, however, withdrew his announcement a few days later and finally managed to leave the country to escape arrest.

There has been a rapid change in the political spectrum after launch of the crackdown on the corrupt political bigwigs. Veteran BNP leader and former finance

BY THE NUMBERS

The two top political leaders of the country, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina seem to be destined for a possible political catastrophe. Popularity of both the leaders has drastically eroded due to their alleged involvement in billions of taka scams. Both the leaders are increasingly losing political ground to continue as the party chief. Everybody feels that Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina should sacrifice their present through retiring from politics for brighter future for us all, that they themselves failed to deliver when they had the chance.

minister M. Saifur Rahman told media that he will no more contest elections and is thinking to retire from politics.

Not so long ago, when Sheikh Hasina was the prime minister, she announced her intention to retire from politics at the age of 57 years. Hasina, who will be 60 this September, in the end refrained from retiring in the wake of election debacle in 2001 and repression of the AL leaders and activists following the election..

Mr. Wail Khan, the then president of the National Awami Party in Pakistan, also proposed that there should be a retirement age for politicians. Having said this, he promptly called it a day and went home to rest, leaving Ajmal Khattak in charge of the party. But no one from any other political party in Pakistan chose to follow his footsteps.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, the former prime minister of India, retired from politics in 2005, at the age of 81 years. He

announced his decision to retire in a party congregation held at Mumbai. Vajpayee, who brought the BJP to limelight and power, relinquished the party's top position in favour of L.K. Advani in the event of his failure in the election of 2004.

L.K. Advani, the BJP president also stepped down in the same congregation at Mumbai at the age of 77 in favour of a 54 year-old party leader, Rajnath Singh.

CPM leader of legend Jyoti Basu, who ruled the state of West Bengal for almost two decades without any resistance, also stepped down in favour of relatively less known Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. Jyoti Basu at the age of 93 is still a member of the CPM politbureau.

Fifty-seven is the age of retirement for government employees in Bangladesh. Age 67 is deemed as a mandatory retirement for the High Court and Supreme Court judges while it is 65 for the public university teachers. But there is

no age bar for the politicians.

The heavyweight champion Mohammad Ali, West Indies captain Brian Lara, and Australian cricket superstars Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath retired with colourful feathers intact in their caps. These sorts of illustrious persons go for voluntary retirement irrespective of their age, once they have inkling that they no more can deliver.

But the politicians in our country do not think for retirement even when their vivacity ostensibly on the wane. Rather they choose to be stubborn on the plea that they would have nothing left to do if they were to eschew politics.

We have no mechanism to ascertain whether or not our politicians are suffering from any mental problems like dementia that may jeopardise decision making capability of the public officer holders. The Election Commission (EC) in the country

did a lot of things to reform politics. I think, it would not be unfair if the EC go to formulate some rules to earmark the elderly politicians to send them to retirement.

The illustrious American writer and humorist Mark Twain said, "The first half of life consists of the capacity of enjoy without the chance and last half consists of the chance with out the capacity." It is very much applicable for our politicians, who remain anxious on the fate of their court cases than on their political careers, in the latter part of life.

Sheikh Hasina will have to quit the post of AL president, as she has made a dramatic proposal to allow young leaders to lead the party. According to the proposal, no leader above the age of 60 will be allowed to remain a member of the AL presidium or central working committee. All leaders above 60 will be accommodated in the advisory council. Hasina, who will be 60 this September, gave the proposal through her special aide on June 19.

Sheikh Hasina's astounding proposal has come at a time when some senior party leaders are preparing a set of reform proposals to curtail the party chief's absolute power and not to allow any leader to simultaneously hold the posts of party president and prime minister. If Hasina's proposal is implemented, only two presidium members can continue in their posts as all other members have already crossed 60.

Top pro-reform leaders of AL

are likely to place their 25-point proposal for reform to the central working committee, opposing Hasina's contention that no one above 60 will be allowed to remain in the party's central working committee and termed it as a new tactic of Hasina. Sheikh Hasina, who has been holding the top post of the party since 1981, is now passing the most crucial time of her political life.

BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia is also facing similar situation from the senior party leaders, who have agreed to ask her to step down from the party chief's position. The pro-reform leaders are also trying to lobby the councilors who can bring changes in the party constitution.

The two top political leaders of the country, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina seem to be destined for a possible political catastrophe. Popularity of both the leaders has drastically eroded due to their alleged involvement in billions of taka scams. Both the leaders are increasingly losing political ground to continue as the party chief. Everybody feels that Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina should sacrifice their present through retiring from politics for brighter future for us all, that they themselves failed to deliver when they had the chance.