

Making EC secretariat independent

A welcome move

WE commend the decision made in principle by the council of advisers to the caretaker government to set up an independent Election Commission secretariat. The caretaker government is responding to a proposal initiated by the EC. The constitution says that "the Election Commission shall be independent in the exercise of its functions..." But such free functioning of the EC was negated by the election commission secretariat being an adjunct to prime minister's office (PMO) and dependent on some ministries as well.

Reform of the EC couldn't be narrowly perceived as changing of the guards in the EC with non-partisan people put at the helms. While the latter is important, this wouldn't have been enough by itself to guarantee freedom of action befitting a statutory body. Unless the executive fetters on its free functioning were removed the EC couldn't simply operate as an autonomous entity which is an indispensable precondition to its holding free and fair elections. This is also necessary for taking the electoral reform process forward as such.

Independent EC secretariat would mean powers unto itself to recommend budget, employ manpower and frame its own rules. For certain categories of employment, the commission would have to depend on the Public Service Commission. The EC is likely to ask for a budget from the government along suggested lines, but how it spends the money would be left to itself subject to standard auditing practices. The commission wouldn't be accountable to chief executive; in fact, it is envisaged to be answerable to parliament only.

Now the drafting of a suitable law has been entrusted to the law ministry to render the EC self-contained and thus functionally autonomous. It is important that the empowering process is completed as soon as possible, not only to give the EC freedom of action but also to speed up its preparations for holding the general election.

Mushrooming clinics and labs

Standardisation badly needed

WE were taken by surprise to learn that six clinics and diagnostic centres are given licence by the authorities everyday, and that from January 1 to May 31, 2007 permission was accorded to as many as 380 clinics and 616 diagnostic centres to operate, surpassing all previous records. This has happened at a time when questions are being raised about the efficacy of most of the existing clinics and labs in the country.

No doubt, the rising demand for medical services is not adequately catered to by the public sector hospitals and health service centres. As such, there is no second opinion about the necessity of the private sector coming in a big way to fill in the void. But it needs to be said that the government policy regarding opening of new clinics and labs and control or supervision of the existing ones remains unclear. Against the backdrop of a good number of clinics and labs operating without registration for years together, how judicious the department concerned has been in issuing new licences remains a big question. The case in point is a clinic in Pabna town running for last five years without taking permission from the government. Reports suggest that the owners were close to the power during that period.

The issues that need to be looked into before granting licence to an entrepreneur are: strict maintenance of sanitation standards, proper medical waste disposal, availability of qualified doctors, nurses and paramedics round the clock and having proper stock of screened blood and life saving drugs. But in reality we see a different picture. Stories abound of shoddy clinics, pathological laboratories and blood banks coming up at every nook and cranny and doing brisk business holding service-seeking people ransom to their trickery and deceit. The allegations of a section of doctors and lab owners working in league to make patients pay extra money for unnecessary tests also need to be addressed by the authorities.

In order to stop rampant trade on human misery we urge the authorities in the health ministry to ensure that the clinics and diagnostic centres are given licence only after stringent application of a set of criteria. They must be made to follow all the rules in the book and not take the patients as hostage, which more often than not, many of them do with impunity.

What ailed our politics



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE era of romantic democracy -- the one of egalitarianism, equality, welfare, and social justice is long over. We yearned for it for ages, without ever tasting it. Even after our freedom -- the struggle for which had, indeed, been built up on our quest for democracy -- it has persistently eluded us.

The AL's absolutism, Zia's shrewd political opportunism, and Ershad's decade of predatory rule, deflated it to the extent that democracy started to lose its traditional appeal. The post-1990 political process, and its experimentation with democracy, weren't particularly re-assuring either. This is a setback of historical proportions, and a tragedy for a generation which desired democracy so passionately and sacrificed so much to achieve it.

Ostensibly, the country, after one and half decades of direct and indirect military rule, had been brought back to its democratic frame with a representative government in power. There were the

parliament, the cabinet, political parties, and other trappings of democracy. The elections were held, with regular transfer of power. In a formal sense, Bangladesh was among the world's few parliamentary democracies, and met all of its criteria. Yet, our democracy suffered from a plethora of imperfections and inadequacies.

Although there were promises for transparency, the rulers took vital decisions in secrecy, with the exclusion of the opposition. Welfare was a far cry, and was, at best, meant for party loyalists of the ruling party. Under a creamy layer, it was sleazy all the way. The hands of the successive governments were smeared with stark abuse of power and repression of civil rights, as was experienced during the autocratic regime just preceding the "democratic spring." And social justice and rule of law? Yes, but each ruling party had its own definition of justice and interpretation of law and policies, which were implemented and

PERSPECTIVES

enforced in ways which suited the purpose of the establishment. In the meantime, the parliament had ceased to be a meaningful forum for public debate, due mainly to the egotistic disposition of either of the contending parties. A "back to future" approach of the ruling regime which lacked both experience and vision managed to turn the people's psychological clock back. While the government functionaries had no problem in sustaining themselves -- or even flourishing -- the masses continued to wallow in misery. The public remained doubtful that the country could become a democracy only with its identifying symbols. The symbols may be good enough for the donor agencies and countries to consider aid grants for their clients, but not for the polity itself.

It is an irony that after a traumatic transition to democracy, it was the same lot of pseudo-politicians expediently created by the military itself -- the civil, military, bureaucratic, and political hustlers of various shades who participated in Ershadian looting -- who reappeared in politics in democratic grab. Politics continued to remain the preserve of the same people who, after a period of hibernation, returned under the wings of a triumphant BNP.

Once again the same people -- the tax evaders, the bank defaulters, the smugglers, the criminals and robber barons -- were foisted upon an electorate unable to make an informed political choice. The election under the prevailing system failed to throw up the very best, the noblest or the fittest, but helped the scum of the society who were rich, unscrupulous and most powerful to bag the votes through tricks, manipulation and muscle power. What was the credibility of entire election machinery, when the election could be rigged and the votes could be purchased with black money or through coercion. Besides, a bitter and blind intra-party confrontation, the intra-party

infighting, and absence of intra-organisational democracy continued to impede the growth of democratic culture in our country. It can't be, in any way, conducive to democratic growth if political opponents are hounded, harassed and persecuted, as was experienced during the authoritarian regime of BNP-Jamaat alliance -- while the acts of the betrayal of public trust, abuse of power and rampant corruption went unpunished.

The necessary checks and balances couldn't be expected from the judiciary when even the judges tried to adjust their legal expertise to the exigencies of current politics, and moved with the political wind.

Indeed, we reached a sad pass when the guns of the armed cadres patronised by the politicians spoke louder than their language of democracy. One of the most troubling deficiencies in our democracy has been the absence of the moral authority once exercised by leaders of integrity. Today's self-serving politicians lack the moral courage to exercise that authority. After having lost their ethical compass, the political class keeps groping for direction in thickening political haze.

Yet, an efflorescence of democracy is possible in this country, but it heavily depends on the quality, perseverance, and resolve of the pro-democracy forces. Democratic efflorescence has been likened to the explosion of the "critical mass" in a nuclear weapon system. For our

democracy to flourish, a "critical mass" of people with commitment to democracy has to be accumulated, and a "critical mass" of passions accrued.

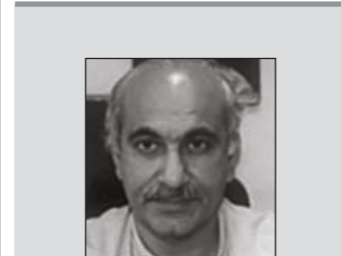
There is in place a highly responsible interim dispensation that promises a new democratic order in the country. It is busy preparing the ground to bring that about with a calculated set of reforms, and has achieved commendable success. We are presently in a political haze and some government steps have been opaque and discriminatory. Yet, the hallmark of democracy is its openness.

Therefore, the sooner the haze clears off the better it will be for the polity. Even if political activities as well as fundamental rights are suspended under a state of emergency, the new parties or platforms that are proliferating cannot be outside the establishment's ken.

Good or bad, the public is not a bunch of cretins. Most of the members of the public may be illiterate, but they aren't clueless. There is an inherent political beast which lurks within the simplest soul who keeps tabs on what's happening in the power centre of the nation.

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A speck of dust



M. J. AKBAR

WE no longer expect politicians to write, but we still expect them to read. There will probably come a moment when they will neither read nor write. The descent from Jawaharlal Nehru will then be complete. But that point has not yet arrived.

The lady who would be president, Mrs. Pratibha Patil, clearly did not write the speech she delivered at Udaipur to mark the 467th birth anniversary of Maharana Pratap. What is less clear is whether she had paused to read the transcript. In any case, she has offered a view of history that might have been entertaining, were it not so frivolous.

Muslim women, she claimed, began to wear the veil during Mughal rule in order to "save" themselves from "Mughal invaders." Was this a slip of the tongue? No. Your tongue can slip for a sentence, or even two; it cannot slip for two paragraphs.

Mrs. Pratibha Patil was obviously referring to the face-veil, rather than a head-cover. Why? Well, to begin with, Mrs. Patil covers her own head in public. She



Little specks of dust are like little drops of water. They add up. The Mumbai Central District Cooperative Bank has sent a notice to a sugar factory in Jalgaon, which was floated by Mrs. Patil, for default on a loan of Rs 17.70 crores. The notice is not part of a conspiracy; it was sent following a Nabard directive to cooperative banks to recover bad debts, after all efforts to do so had failed. People with political clout tend to believe that they will never be held accountable for loans taken from a government bank.

certainly chose to do so when she came to Delhi to be presented as the ruling coalition candidate for president. Check out the pictures.

I am no advocate of the face veil, a practice that was borrowed by the Arab Umayyads in the seventh century from their elite counterparts in the Christian Byzantine and Zoroastrian Sassanid lands that they conquered.

Covering the head with a scarf, or the pallav of a sari, or a dupatta, but keeping the face visible, is the more traditional expression of modesty among women across faith lines, as is evident in the manner that Mrs. Patil wears her sari.

I do not know if this will surprise her, but when Muslim women go to Mecca for Haj, they are not obliged to cover their faces. Iran has women in its armed forces: they carry guns and do not cover their faces. They only cover their heads.

The logic of Mrs. Patil's thesis runs thus: Indian culture has always respected women; the face-veil system, which is an affront to self-respect, began during Muslim rule to "save women from Mughal invaders." Muslim women used the

face-veil to hide their beauty, to avoid becoming targets of Mughal lust.

From one angle, of course, I suppose those who are interested in protecting the reputation of "Muslim rule" should be delighted. The Mughals were the last Muslims to invade India, not the first.

If, as per the history of India written by Mrs. Patil, the veil began only during Mughal rule, one must infer that there was no need for it before. This is high exoneration of all Muslim invaders prior to the Mughals. The ghost of Mahmud of Ghazni is probably writing a thank-you note to a possible future president of India at this very moment.

I do not want to show the tiniest bit of disrespect to Mrs. Patil, who has made the dignity of women the central point of her manifesto. But I have to add, with the greatest respect, that she was talking utter rubbish.

Purdah existed among the upper echelons of Indian society long before the Mughals came to our country; and it existed, in different forms, in the ruling Rajput families. This did not mean that women were not respected; it was part of the elite culture of the time.

In addition, the practice of sati was prevalent among Rajputs. Mrs. Pratibha Patil did not mention this, not because she forgot to, but because she was selling an argument.

Part of her motivation was, I suspect, political. She was a surprise nominee; in fact, it was a male Patil, home minister Shivraj, who did most of the running till the last minute. Since loyalty could hardly be advertised as her principal virtue, a politically correct justification had to be drummed up.

Gender was the easy way out. The bureaucrat who wrote the speech may have shoved in the theme of "women's self-respect" to bolster the new image. Nothing in Mrs. Pratibha Patil's record suggests that she has ever launched a crusade against the veil during many decades in public life.

The issue is not that the facts are wrong; politicians who barely read and rarely write are prone to such mishaps. The problem is a mindset in which the most obvious communal overtones never raise the slightest inner doubt.

The Pratibha Patil thesis is a perversion of history, in which the

Muslim has been vilified as an iconic invader and rapist. It is not an accident that the Mughals, arguably among the most enlightened and sophisticated of the many dynasts between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries, are being vilified, for to destroy their reputation is to distort in public memory the finest examples of political synthesis and shared culture.

Mrs. Patil was not a politician bending the rules in search of votes when she made the speech; she was governor of a state of the Indian union, and guardian of a Constitution in which secularism is a basic principle.

India's political class has long lost the sensitivity that would have once made such a speech a touchstone. Her invidious reference to "Mughal lust" has already been shrugged off as a speck of dust that can be dusted off without any damage to the official ideological lustre.

I wonder what Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and Dr. Manmohan Singh would have said if President Kalam had ever made a speech like this.

But little specks of dust are like little drops of water. They add up. The Mumbai Central District Cooperative Bank has sent a notice to a sugar factory in Jalgaon, which was floated by Mrs. Patil, for default on a loan of Rs 17.70 crores.

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Whatever this may say about

Mrs. Pratibha Patil, it does say one thing about the Congress: the simplest form of due diligence was not followed when nominating a candidate for the office that may not be the most powerful in the country, but certainly remains the most honourable.

By coincidence, the 39th volume of the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, edited by the eminent historian Mushirul Hasan, reached me while I was writing this column. On October 31, 1957, Nehru sent a note to his principal private secretary about a riot in 1956, at a place called Orail in Uttar Pradesh, which was ruled by the Congress.

"As a result of this, I am told that twelve Muslims and two Hindus were killed," writes Nehru. "According to the report I have received, no step was taken against any Hindu, although so many Muslims were killed. A case was, however, started against the Muslims, and recently judgment has been given in this case, convicting about nine of them. I should like you to get full particulars of this case from the Uttar Pradesh government. A copy of the judgment should also be obtained. You should enquire from them also, if any steps were taken against any Hindu because of these disturbances at Orail."

Nehru spent his life in service, to his nation, and to the minorities whose pain he felt deeply. Many prime ministers later, service has changed to lip service. If Mrs. Pratibha Patil becomes president, even that lip will be removed from service.

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Pakistan's own Hitler diaries

To his intended audience of modern Pakistanis, though, Ayub Khan's diaries will cause a queasy discomfort. One uncorks them expecting a vintage, and instead flows a stream of acidic personal opinions, rancid biases, and vapours of oracular prophecies whose subsequent accuracy make one suspicious of their source.

F.S. AJAZUDDIN

IT is impossible to be both a diarist and a statesman: each has a different focal length. One observes the minutiae of a day's activities while the other views the broad sweep of contemporary history, leaving its chronicling to others. The most successful and famous diarists have been those who have stood on the periphery of their times, involved and therefore informed, yet detached and perceptive.

Those who make history such as royalty or presidents often feel a personal responsibility to maintain a record of it for reasons of state as much as for their own personal purposes. This was Queen Victoria's motive, as it is Queen Elizabeth II's, who maintains a hand-written journal meticulously at the end of each day. Presidents by contrast tend to subcontract

such a task to their underlings.

An exception would seem to have been President Ayub Khan. His diaries have recently been published, covering the years 1966 to 1972 -- from his decline in power to his descent from it. In a manuscript note dated September 1, 1966 (reproduced on the book's cover suggesting that the entire diary was also handwritten), Ayub Khan gives two reasons for starting the diary: in case he decided to write a sequel to his autobiography "Friends, Not Masters," and as reference material. Ayub Khan deferred the publication of this "sensitive material" until such time as "it ceases to be part of contemporary history." The manuscript was therefore "impounded for thirty years," although it is not clear by whom.

Today, thirty-three years after Ayub Khan's death, there is unlikely to be anyone left alive

whose sleep would be disturbed by its revelations. Those who are dead (wherever they are) must have expressed their own remonstrances to him already. To his intended audience of modern Pakistanis, though, Ayub Khan's diaries will cause a queasy discomfort. One uncorks them expecting a vintage, and instead flows a stream of acidic personal opinions, rancid biases, and vapours of oracular prophecies whose subsequent accuracy make one suspicious of their source.

Was Ayub Khan the "onlie begetter" of these diaries? That is what his editor and publisher would have us believe. And yet every page reveals fingerprints that clearly do not belong to the author. On March 7, 1971, for example, Ayub Khan is admitted to hospital with a severe attack of angina that makes him "not afraid of death, but terrified of

living in such a condition." Despite his pain and his life-threatening trauma, he nevertheless finds the time to write (or dictate) over 500 words on the situation fomenting in East Pakistan and its sinister implications for both wings.

Similarly, when he hears of the election results on December 8, 1970 that propel Mujibur Rahman into electoral prominence in East Pakistan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the West, he can foresee "that Bhutto and Mujibur Rahman would soon get together to chalk out a joint plan if possible. In any case they are bound to agree on demanding declaration of the assembly as a sovereign body and forcing their cabinet on Yahya. Bhutto would demand foreign affairs and the defence ministry."

And before the day is out, he has altered his tune: "Whatever the cost to the country and to the people, he [Bhutto] may even precipitate a war with India and spoil our relations with countries like America and the Soviet Union. Mujib is no less dangerous and reckless. If my assessment is in any way correct, then December 7, 1970 will prove to be the darkest

day in the history of Pakistan and an unmitigated tragedy."

In fact, it was Ayub Khan's assessments of events and more particularly of his subordinates that proved to be his undoing. He was once asked: "How is it that I could assess men and their character on casual association and contact?" He replied: "It has been my lifelong profession."

Yet, his diary reads like a shopping list of his more spectacular failures. Sharifuddin Pirzada, his foreign minister? "Very suspicious by nature [...] Chases small things most of the time and frightened of taking a stand on any issue."

Syed Ghiasuddin? "Askunk." Ghulam Faruque, his governor in East Pakistan, then commerce minister and defence advisor? "[H]as doubtful scruples ... and is very expensive, especially with public funds."

Pir Dewal Sharif, his spiritual mentor? "Askilful fraud."

Ayub Khan saves his vitriol though for the two persons who were to succeed him to the presidency -- General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (whose name he

misspells throughout his diary). Despite the assertions he makes in his diaries, Ayub Khan never recovered from the trauma of being eased out of his presidency, as he claims by Yahya Khan. The entries for the fateful days in March 1969 are of value for their reticence. On March 13, less than a fortnight before he quits, Ayub Khan receives Marshal Grechko, the Russian Defence Minister. Grechko expresses the concern of the Soviet leadership about Pakistan and about Ayub. "I, who had put the country together, given it recognition in the eyes of the world, why did I decide not to fight the next elections when the armed forces and a vast majority of the people were behind me? I gave him my reasons."

Perhaps we must wait for Marshal Grechko's diaries to reveal the reasons that Ayub Khan withheld from his own diary.

On March 24, 1969, Ayub Khan signs his own suicide warrant. "Today, I have written a letter to General Yahya explaining how the civil machinery has ceased to be effective and why it is necessary for me to step aside and hand over to

him so that normalcy and decency can be brought back."

The word "decency" was to haunt him during Yahya Khan's presidency. Less than two years later, he complained in his diary of his hand-picked successor: "What surprises me is that Yahya indulges in such laxities and debauchery when the country is facing such critical problems [...] I told someone that if this is the way to run the presidency of the country then I wasted my time working day and night and leading the life of a hermit and ruining my health in the process."

For Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whom he hand-picked with the other hand as his commerce and then foreign minister, Ayub Khan scours his Thesaurus: "The damage done by Bhutto is deliberate, incalculable and unforgivable. He is the past master of disruption and agitation. He has shaken the roots of the country by simply posing as a socialist and a friend of the have-nots. And this is believed by an enormous amount of people despite the knowledge that he dresses and lives like a millionaire, drinks like a fish day and night,

misbehaves with women, is a mimic, a clown and a liar, unfaithful and thoroughly disloyal."

Forgetting his own lapse in choosing such a confederate, Ayub Khan asks rhetorically: "What can you do with people who put their faith in such man? They will get only what they deserve -- chaos, deprivation, and suffering."

One could go on, but it is best to let this self-serving chronicle collapse under the weight of its own all too obvious inconsistencies. Ayub Khan's diaries have to be read, if only to be disbelieved.

In 1983, more than thirty years after Hitler's death, the German magazine Stern published extracts from sixty volumes purporting to be the Fuhrer's diaries. Although authenticated by the British historian Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, they were later discovered to be the imaginative work of a Stuttgart forger Konrad Kujau. He was sentenced to a prison sentence of forty-two months in jail. One wonders whether he might not have found another assignment after his release.

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