

BNP reform proposals

Signs of change welcome

THE 15-point proposal made public by the BNP reformists contains some forward-looking proposals. If it is for bringing more democratisation and dynamism within the party we welcome it. We welcome the move also because it demonstrates the awareness among many in the BNP leadership belonging to its upper echelons that considerable damage was done to democracy in Bangladesh due to the way the party was run.

However, we cannot but notice a focus in the whole exercise that is leader-specific; to be exact the focus is on the chairman of the party. We feel that in the fitness of things the other leaders in the party hierarchy, in particular the secretary general, should also have been brought into consideration when issues like democratisation and collective decision-making are concerned. However, what the public is more interested in is the substance rather than personalities. We should remember also that no proposal is worth the effort if it cannot infuse dynamism in the party and cannot guarantee its implementation and durability.

The proposal regarding disclosure of wealth needs rethinking too. Why should such disclosures be made to the party only? It should be made public too through the media. It stands to reason that the public must also know about the financial status of those aspiring MPs and other office bearers of a big political party who are seeking their vote or support. Keeping the information restricted within the party could mean having leverage on a minister, or MP or an office bearer.

If the party has worked in the manner that it has done so far it has been due to no small degree to the inability of the leadership to impress on the chairperson to go by the norms of democracy. They should share the blame too. We are concerned by the fact that around the BNP secretary general during his press conference were some who appeared to be ingratiating when in fact it were they who had been for the past five years a party to the chairperson's autocratic conduct. Thus, while the secretary general has decided to probe the reasons of the party's debacle, who will constitute the probe body is very important.

The chairperson is now advocating the role of the party's Council in taking the final decision on any reform proposal. For all we know, she had very little use for it in the last more than a decade.

We have seen the expression of intent by the BNP reformists. We would like to see the overtur taken to its logical conclusion -- a comprehensive reform of the BNP.

Investigating the Rajuk record

Let the corrupt be made to face justice

THE government's decision to target the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakha (Rajuk) as part of its investigation into institutionalised crime is certainly welcome. Indeed, given the long trail of corruption that has for years been the norm on an individual as well as organisational scale in the country, it is the national expectation that such criminal behaviour will be inquired into. Where Rajuk is concerned, the innumerable allegations that have been levelled at its officials and employees make it imperative for the authorities to see the full investigation of its affairs through to the end. Over the years, there has been mounting evidence of a corrupt system at work in Rajuk and yet no government, for obviously shady reasons, has seen it proper to bring those who man it to task.

A particular instance of how Rajuk has been rendered both ineffective and corrupt can be perceived through the politicisation that has gone into its staffing in recent years. During the period of the immediate past political government, as many as seventy two questionable appointments of officials were made in the organisation. Politics and corruption are always a bad brew and this reality has been reflected in appointments such those mentioned above. Moreover, another instance of how Rajuk has been led down the road to a bad reputation is the fact that jobs in the body are non-transferable. Such a system can only spawn an increasingly wider web of corruption. The emergence of a strong real estate sector in any society is complemented by an equally strong and of course transparent set of rules relating to its activities. Clearly, that combination has been absent in Bangladesh.

The time is therefore here and now for service delivery organisations like Rajuk to be made to go through a meaningful cleansing process. Meanwhile, as inquiries into Rajuk dealings go on, it should be borne in mind by the authorities that under no circumstances should the normal flow of work at the organisation be interrupted.

Our diplomacy is in need of intellectual substance



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GOING DEEPER

When the truth is that Bangladesh's diplomats, with rare exceptions, are conspicuous by their absence on the global stage, of course, sometimes for reasons that we understand perfectly well, a change in course becomes a priority. In diplomacy, there remains constantly the need for a subtle articulation of foreign policy objectives. Talleyrand, Metternich, Castlereagh, all men particularly admired by Kissinger, nearly always upheld such a formula of operation. That being the tradition, there is little reason why the intellectually big men in our crowded land cannot follow suit.

need of being saved from the careerists who have long sought to promote it. But, of course, a goodly number of our career diplomats did a good job in the past. In similar fashion, quite a few in the generation that followed them have proved useful in keeping the flag fluttering in capitals abroad.

Even so, when you reflect on the state the Foreign Office has been in for the past many years, you tend to wonder if a wholesale change in approach and attitude is not really called for. Just the fact that the country does not have a fully functional foreign secretary is symptomatic, or should be, of the ailments that Bangladesh's diplomatic arena suffers from. That is poverty of a kind. Worse, it is a debilitating thing to have a whole diplomatic establishment that does not seem to have the manpower to speak for it full-time or with fullness of purpose.

As we have been going on without a full-fledged foreign secretary is a question you can place before the government. If you are lucky, you might come by an answer. And until that happens, go back to that matter of people from outside diplomacy actually enriching diplomacy through the sheer

intellectual brilliance they can bring into what they do abroad.

In Bangabandhu's era, the emphasis on projecting Bangladesh's politics and cultural heritage abroad was most refreshingly noted through placing Khan Shamsur Rahman, K.G. Mustafa, M.R. Siddiqui and Azizur Rahman Mallick in key spots around the globe. Syed Abdus Sultan in London did not fall behind either. But it was a time that was to be too brief and too tenuous for our liking.

It soon passed, and what we had before us after that particular phase drew to a close was a time when career diplomats and retired or serving military officers took charge as our chief spokesmen abroad. To what extent such men succeeded in presenting Bangladesh before the outside world remains a question.

As a caveat, though, we will note that Pakistan's Sahibzada Yaacob Khan did a fine job, both as foreign minister and ambassador to the United States, long after his professional life in the army came to an end in the early 1970s. Perhaps Khwaja Wasiuuddin could have accomplished a similar feat for us here in Bangladesh, but he died a little too early.

In times closer to ours, Major General Mahmuduzzaman happened to be doing a good job as ambassador to South Korea, until the hangers-on of the government of the day thought that he was not doing them any favours. What then followed was the predictably macabre: he was recalled with alacrity.

The trouble with diplomacy, which relies a little too much on professional practitioners of it, is that a sure sense of predictability comes into it. Sometimes for reasons that are quite inexplicable, and, yet, for those that are to be easily fathomed, career diplomats are in little position to bring newer dimensions into the relations their country may be enjoying with other nations. Which is precisely why it often becomes, in the historical sense, necessary to send an Averell Harriman to Moscow, or have an Andrei Gromyko serve for whole decades as foreign minister of the Soviet Union.

Henry Kissinger remains by far the brightest instance of a nation's foreign policy shaking itself back to purposefulness at the hands of an individual who had never had a career in diplomacy. The Kissinger reality, in turn, was to spawn a whole new breed of diplomats

coming from outside the charmed circles of the State Department. Jimmy Carter had his Zbigniew Brzezinski and Edmund Muskie, Bill Clinton had his Madeleine Albright and George W. Bush has Condoleezza Rice.

When it comes to talking about non-diplomats serving as diplomats for Bangladesh, a few glaring examples of how spectacularly some of these non-diplomats failed to live up to expectations will quite naturally come to mind. Indeed, some extremely intelligent as well as intellectually powerful men, former bureaucrats and poets-bureaucrats included, have in recent times been sent abroad as ambassadors and high commissioners.

They did poorly, not because they did not know their job but because they worked in the mistaken, pretty selfish belief that they were there to serve a partisan government rather than an entire country. There are, thus, the pitfalls associated with sending men and women from outside the foreign service abroad.

On balance, though, it is always people from academia, journalism and politics who make a bigger impression on the outside world than do those who have professionally been trained to speak for their country abroad. Girish Karnad did an admirable job heading the cultural wing at the Indian high commission in London.

In his time, as a diplomat abroad, Pablo Neruda built and widened a network of men and women deeply involved in studies of Chilean culture. It was a feat few have accomplished, in Chile or elsewhere.

Nasim Ahmed, for ages correspondent in London for Pakistan's Dawn newspaper, served quite

creditably for a while as his country's ambassador (not as high commissioner, for Pakistan had walked out of the Commonwealth in a huff in 1972) in Britain during the years of Z.A. Bhutto.

The case for non-diplomats in Bangladesh to play a corrosive role in the nation's diplomacy, at its various levels, is therefore fairly strong. The more non-diplomats we send to our diplomatic missions abroad the merrier, for reasons we have already, in so many words, cited.

Academics of high intellectual calibre, those who have retired from teaching, can be prime candidates as our spokesmen abroad. There are then media people whose comprehension of history and culture, not just of their own country but of places beyond their national frontiers, could certainly provide a dash of vigour to our diplomacy abroad.

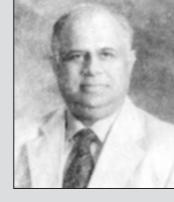
The goal, after all, is to do away with the effete and the ineffectual, not to say the snobbish, in our approach to the world. When the truth is that Bangladesh's diplomats, with rare exceptions, are conspicuous by their absence on the global stage, of course, sometimes for reasons that we understand perfectly well, a change in course becomes a priority.

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Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Presidential options

IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

AS I SEE IT

The acid test for Pervez Musharraf will come on Oct 8, 2007, when the present chairmen of JCSC and VCOAS retire. The president has to take "the calculated risk" of appointing a full-time COAS Pakistan army, advancing the date will be a sign of good faith and will go a long way in defusing the present situation. Thereafter, the aim should be the conduct of free and fair elections. It makes the least difference as to who the genuinely elected representatives of the people will be, and which party they belong to, as long as they swear allegiance to Pakistan before entering the electoral process.

the post-haste visit of the US-establishment trio of Negroponte, Boucher and Admiral Mallon to Pakistan for an on-the-spot high-level assessment of the situation. The US has no loyalty towards friends who have outlived their utility, they have a bad reputation of throwing them to the wolves.

Intelligence agencies, that have a compulsive penchant for "selecting" favourites, will find their effectiveness vastly limited in the prevailing environment. Mass manipulation on the scale witnessed earlier will not be possible, even "judicious" injecting of funds will invite a very strong street reaction. Those who break the law in the conduct of fair polls should expect to be prosecuted under those laws.

The ability of civil servants and the police to locally influence elections in their areas of responsibility must be (but probably can't be) curbed. Mandatory statutory punishments for those trying to defraud the electoral process will act as a deterrent. To those getting unlawful commands to rig the electoral process, there is only one advice, "Just say no!"

A spate of anti-Musharraf media and intelligence reports inspired

within the next 3-4 months, or in the next 5-6 months. This does not preclude the possibility of a snap presidential poll in July/August, followed by the elections in October/November this year.

The alternative would be to delay the dissolution of the assemblies till September/October, getting the president elected by the existing assemblies, and having the elections in late December. The present regime would be more comfortable in having the election later.

Given the political circumstances on the ground, this option is a non-starter, unless called for by a genuinely neutral caretaker PM because of extenuating circumstances.

On the PM's advice to dissolve the assemblies and have new elections, the president can ask him to continue, or possibly appoint a caretaker PM. The opposition's lack of confidence in the present Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) has been further compounded by the missing millions of names from the electoral rolls.

Even PML (Q) stalwart, former PM Zafarullah Jamali and his family, find their names missing from the electoral list. NADRA have

issued Computerized National Identity Cards (CNIC) to about 80% of the voting population, and the data bank available could provide foolproof electoral rolls, along with CNIC numbers, addresses, etc for each constituency. Why isn't NADRA given the job of preparing fresh electoral rolls?

Stage-managing the 2002 assembly almost came to grief despite extensive manipulation; only a last-minute makeshift sleight-of-hand got the PML(Q) candidate for PM, Zafarullah Jamali, a slim two-seat margin. This time around, the success of such a "calculated risk" cannot be guaranteed.

In working out a game-plan with the best interests of the country as the major objective, the president will do himself a service by trying to regain the moral high ground, and he has to make some concessions before they are forced on him. Despite the negatives, the masses (and many in the intelligentsia) still do appreciate his many pluses and would like him to continue in a power-sharing arrangement.

The president should consult with the opposition for a consensus choice of caretaker PM. The oppo-

sition may also hold out for a consensus CEC. Accommodation of their views will prevent post-election "fraud" accusations. The CEC may take more than 90 days to prepare fresh electoral rolls, and it is important that all eligible voters get to participate.

Article 44 of the Constitution states that the incumbent president will remain in place till he (or someone else) is elected by assemblies. The opposition may have cold feet because fresh electoral rolls will mean delay in elections. Obviously most politicians would be averse to accountability, howsoever impartial!

A caretaker PM should carry out accountability, "a la Bangladesh," including the armed forces and the superior judiciary. The present Bangladeshi scenario approximates our problems closely, the correcting of electoral rolls and accountability across the board.

Why should democracy be held hostage for the misdeeds of some individuals? Ten years ago, many in the country advised a delay. To quote my article of Dec 5, 1996, entitled "The 90 plus 90 formula," "while elections are held on schedule within 90 days, the assemblies should not be called into session for another 90 days, in order that the accountability process for at least a majority of the elected representatives is complete. Either the president can approach the Supreme Court for adjudicating a time frame of 90 days post-election, or the caretaker government can approach the Court for the relief. There is a temptation for having more than 90 days but, while it is necessary to give some time, it must be for a very limited period so

that those who have got power temporarily, i.e. the caretakers, do not get used to it and try and make it more permanent 'due to the doctrine of necessity' as per 'the will of the people,' a la Gen Zia. There is great apprehension that, unless the accountability process is complete, those who would have been elected but fear accountability will frustrate the process by using public pressure. The '90 plus 90 formula' meets the demands of both elections and accountability, and fulfills both, but not at the cost of each other. Most importantly, within the parameters of the Constitution, it gives legitimacy with respect to public perception."

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Thereafter, the aim should be the conduct of free and fair elections. It makes the least difference as to who the genuinely elected representatives of the people will be, and which party they belong to, as long as they swear allegiance to Pakistan before entering the electoral process. Unless governance of the country is in the hands of those chosen by the people, it will eventually descend into the violent hands of those who control the streets.

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

Reform or retreat



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

There is no iota of doubt in any mind that both Awami League and BNP are run by people having the mentality of the colonialists. They consider their own party supporters and workers, and the citizens, as their subjects and, accordingly, expect them to work at a flick of their fingers. These leaders possess the mindset of the landlords, and the zemindars of the bygone eras, and act accordingly. Therefore, reforms are only ploys to stay away from the jail, where many of the leaders actually belong.

fishes, like many of those beautiful birds, like the herons and doves, like the tall grasses and large haors and beels, we are seeing fast erosion of things that once we were so proud of.

We are witnessing deliberate destruction of things splendid,

built with care and love by our forefathers. And, every day, the media is presenting such news items with great diligence, much to our embarrassment and

shame.

This week the law enforcers dug out some more forest destroyers from under the bushes, the very people who were supposed to protect the pristine resources of the country!

After having nabbed the large cat of the forest, the chief conservator, law enforcers were looking for the hideouts of the smaller cats. Once on the run, these cats tried to hide in a hole but, unfortunately,

nately, their tails remained exposed and they got caught.

The shocking part of the story is that, while the virgin forests were being raped openly by these officials, the relevant people in the government in power looked the other way. Obviously they were beneficiaries of the looting scheme.

Stories abound of the chief conservator and forest officials paying huge sums to the top brass

about reforms in BNP. Finally it came on Wednesday. People, no doubt, took it with a pinch of salt.

What is there in the reform proposal, and why did it come so late, when irreparable damage has already been done to the party? Why didn't they resign en masse when the party chairperson had been running the party like an autocrat? Did the reformists exert influence on the chairperson to change her style of running the party? There is no such record in the past five years.

The other question that is clouding the minds of the people is, what about reform of the reformists? What about their antecedents? Do they have clean records as far as corruption and amassing of wealth is concerned?

Have they all submitted the wealth statements and sources of their income?

Were they ever vocal about the

rampant politicisation of the judiciary, education sector and health sector, and politicisation of state organs like the Anti-Corruption Council, Election Commission, Public Service Commission etc?

It is interesting to read that Mannan Bhuiyan "dodged" a question concerning the tenure of the party secretary general, which he has been holding for last ten years. It only exposes the innate autocratic nature in some people, and that Mannan Bhuiyan is no different.

People in general are already quite sceptical about the outcome of the reform proposal, judging the background of the people who are now trying to eat the same dinner on a separate plate.

We wish to end this piece by throwing the question in the air, what is meant by "council has final say?" As far as we remember, no BNP council meeting was held in

the last fifteen years or so, but many major decisions had been taken by the party chairperson, without caring to go to them.

Therefore