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Ban on indoor politics

Time to lift it

SOME top leaders of Bangladesh Nationalist Party having put across their 15-point reform proposal, reformists in the party are trying to broaden the proposals to cover a wider ground of opinion within the party. They seem to be inclined towards approaching the government for convening their party council, amidst the ban on indoor politics, to discuss and decide on the reforms. Party chief Begum Khaleda Zia, herself a target of the reform proposals, has called for a party council to have the final say on the shape of reform to be adopted by BNP.

It is relevant to recall, however, that party council in the BNP had not been called into session for the last 14 years, so that it will take some doing to remobilise and reactivate it in the present context.

Bangladesh Awami League is also engaged in a process of introducing intra-party reforms. The party is unanimous in its decision for a council meeting to be convened to finalise its reform proposals.

Meanwhile, two advisers of the government have stated that if the political parties should decide to convene their council meetings they could do so after obtaining necessary permission.

In a concurrent development, the Election Commission has given the political parties to understand that they can approach the EC for discussion on political and electoral reform agenda already tabled by the EC in a draft form.

The point we would like to stress here is that the entire reform process encompassing modalities of initiating it through consideration of the reform proposals within the parties to its eventual adoption on the basis of consensus should not only be transparent but also be seen to be so. Otherwise in public perception the outcome won't enjoy the desired credibility .

On the crucial issue of holding party councils this needs to be preceded by meetings held in various party fora including the working committees. Such meetings are essential as preparatory to the council session. How can these meetings be held with the current ban on indoor politics is open to question.

The EC has given to understand that political party representatives may see them for discussion on an informal basis on the reform proposals. But introduction of political party registration act, regulations requiring that political parties democratise themselves, abide by transparency in their accounting procedures, delink from student and labour wings are things that the political parties need to deliberate on before they go to the EC for any meaningful consultation. Hence, the need for indoor politics.

Since the government is committed to holding election by the end of 2008, there is an impelling necessity for completing the reform process in good time to ensure that the quality assurance as far as the elections go is in place; for we are all on the lookout to avert the past ills of the electoral system.

Dhaka's open canals

Must be made operational

THERE was a time when all excess water from Dhaka city used to end up in various adjoining rivers through numerous open canals crisscrossing the capital. But, over the years, in the name of creating new roads, government offices, residential plots, shopping malls etc., all these canals have been filled up by various government agencies. It is reported that the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) are in the forefront of these agencies that have filled up canals without creating any alternative means for the stagnant water to find an outlet. This has resulted in the obvious -- severe water-logging in the city even after a small rainfall.

But, surprisingly, that is not the end of the story of encroachment on open canals in Dhaka. Right at this moment some government agencies and private developers are in the process of grabbing the Begunbari canal and Hatirjheel wetland existing in the heart of the city. According to city planning experts, if the Begunbari canal and adjoining wetland gets filled up, the drainage balance of the city will collapse. The irony is, despite the concern of the environmentalists and experts, authorities concerned are yet to take any measure to stop the illegal encroachment.

The inundation of the capital city after a shower is too conspicuous to overlook. The city virtually comes to a standstill with vehicles clogging the roads and streets for hours together. On the other hand, if the open canals were in operation today the excess water would have been carried away in no time to everyone's relief. We wonder what more is needed to make the city planners wake up and take action.

There is no denying that the capital city has to be kept functional since it is the hub of our economic and other developmental activities. As such, the authorities must have a system in place to keep the city free from such problems. We strongly suggest the relevant authorities to recover the canals from illegal grabbers and make them operational once again to save the capital city.

Being more serious about water logging and the environment

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

NATURE has its own way of dispensing justice. This is becoming apparent on a general scale throughout the world. Unabated pollution of the environment, greed and flouting of nature's checks and balances are creating their own dynamics. The effects of avarice are now being seen also in Bangladesh. It is resulting in fatalities and economic disasters. Unfortunately, in most cases we are to blame.

The latest round of mudslides in and around Chittagong, earlier this month, will hopefully open the eyes of the concerned authorities. More than 100 people were killed and many went missing after overnight torrential rain resulted in villages located in inaccessible areas in Hathazari Upazila, in Pahartoli, in Kusumbagh, near Baizd Bostami and the Chittagong Cantonment being washed away by mud-mixed rain water rushing down the denuded and deforested hill slopes. Fortunately, the joint rescue-relief operation minimised further losses.

This month heavy monsoon downpours have not only resulted in severe water logging but also flash flooding of vast areas of the country. Town-protection embankments and earthen filled embankments (protecting agricultural land) were breached in many villages of different Upazilas. This caused substantial losses to property and also to crops. It has also reiterated once again the pitfalls of unplanned construction, lack of proper maintenance by the Water Development Board and total disregard of environmental principles.

In Dhaka city, it has been several rounds of frustration. The city authorities were found wanting in terms of management and maintenance. The photographs published in several papers and footage in the electronic media reflected the total helplessness of the city dwellers. Misery was the only epithet shared by over thirteen million Dhakaites. I am not including the other ten million living in the outskirts of our capital city.

The Dhaka City Corporation and other infrastructure institutions associated in looking after the city immediately claimed that exceedingly high rainfalls had caused this year's misfortune. They also pointed out that matters had been worsened because the downpours had been concentrated within short periods of time. They however failed to explain the reasons for the sorry and pitiable state of our storm sewerage system run by Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) and the surface sewerage system run by the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC).

Two aspects are now very clear. The people living in this densely populated city are extremely vulnerable to weather variabilities and that those responsible for city management are not serious in the discharging of their responsibilities. Sociometric overlay, politicisation, corruption, opportunism and bending of laws and regulations have created an unacceptable situation. Criminal nexus between officials of different agencies like RAJUK, WASA and the DCC and the construction industry have further exacerbated the misgovernance in this sector.

I was discussing the current scenario with some officials of DCC and WASA. It appears that the DCC has 999.47km of open drains and 1052.19km of pipe drains. The WASA on the other hand seems to have about 240 km of storm sewerage lines. It was also revealed that in 1960 the city had 43 canals. Since then, all of them have been encroached upon. This has been mostly due to movement and migration of rural population to this city. Millions of impoverished, landless peasantry have come to Dhaka in search of employment and gradually established temporary habitation in the form of bustees on either these canal banks or on the canals themselves. Raised bamboo platforms were initially used to erect temporary structures. Over time, many of these units have become semi-permanent through landfilling and land grabbing. This, in turn has affected natural water flow and water discharge. This critical change has been facilitated through corruption and political muscle power. There has also been faulty road planning (as in the case of Dholai Khal near Nawabpur Road) and this has also contributed to the deepening of the malaise.

Every year, for the last two years, we have seen efforts and drives by the City and WASA authorities aimed at reclaiming lost canals, low-lying government khas land and water bodies. These were supported with funds received from the World Bank. Some of these initiatives tasted success. Such drives were however eventually postponed due to some critics describing such World Bank initiative as being anti-poor. Since then, over the last year, we have read reports of fresh encroachment into areas that had been cleared in Begunbari, Hatirjheel and adjacent areas of Gulshan Lake.

Surveys carried out after the latest bouts of water logging have indicated that major encroachments in and around Dhaka city are centred in the following areas -- Katasur Khal, Ramchandpur Khal, Segunbagicha Khal, Jirani Khal, Shahjahanpur Khal, Mohakhali Khal, Debdholai Khal, Kolyanpur Khal, Ibrahimpur Khal and Mukda Khal. It has also been revealed that water was flowing over a significant majority of the box culverts because of the lack of requisite cleaning and maintenance activities. The lack of dredging of the Buriganga and the Turag rivers around the city of Dhaka, the encroachment into the rivers by illegal land grabbers and unauthorised sand filling of adjoining riverbanks have added to the aggravation.

Dhaka receives about 140 to 160 cm of rainfall during the four months of monsoon that traditionally starts from the end of May or early June. Effects of climate change and climate variability have made this pattern more volatile and sometimes unpredictable (with regard to intensity). Juxtaposed with a poor water discharge system, water logging has now become a part of our lives. This is particularly affecting those who live in and around Swamibagh, Gopibagh, Motijheel, Shaplachattor, Mouchak and Rayer Bazar and other low lying areas. Personal hygiene has been thrown out of the equation with everyone, including school children, having to wade through dirty water with excrement floating all around them. Every heavy shower also makes transportation a nightmare.

Time has come for those in Administration to take the crisis more seriously. We are not looking after our environment. Consequently, we cannot also expect that our environment will look after us.

The Chittagong disaster has underlined the cause and effect of this relationship very well. Cutting of hillsides and denuding of its green cover has raised the chances of erosion and landslides. Unplanned inhabitation has also raised the stakes. Ravaging of the hills has affected the natural and ecological balance of the beautiful port city. Obstruction of natural flow of water coming down hill channels combined with denudation appears to have precipitated the landslides.

Reports have indicated that nearly 70 earthen hills have not only totally disappeared (cut down for landfill purposes elsewhere and also to create greater building space on a flat surface) from the city of Chittagong but also another 40 have been partially cut down in the adjoining areas. I understand that there are strict laws against the cutting down of such topographic structures. Environmentalists have also for many years been drawing the attention of the authorities about such a potential catastrophe. Unfortunately, political clout and black money have held sway.

It is time to establish a fact-finding commission, composed of urban planners, transportation and sewerage specialists that will not only determine existing areas of vulnerability in our hilly areas and within city limits but also propose remedial measures and a suitable environment regulatory mechanism that needs to be adopted and legally enforced throughout the country.

We have many government institutions and departments who are responsible for providing a safer and cleaner life for our citizens. Unfortunately, there appears to be very little coordination between these agencies. They also pay very little heed to the suggestions made by appropriate representatives of the civil society. This is something that needs drastic improvement.

We have to understand that continuous failure on our part to address this issue can and will seriously affect our economic development, our health and our standard of living. We cannot afford that.

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POST BREAKFAST

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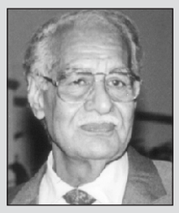
Putting the cart before the horse



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

THERE is a saying in Punjabi: Pind vasay nahin shareek phela e aagaye (villages have not yet taken roots but the claimants have come first). The proverb came to my mind when I read that Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were disputing who should be the prime minister first.

The dispute is unfortunate.

Even a small tiff between them can cast a shadow on their joint resolve to re-establish democracy in Pakistan, sans the military. Only last year they showed solidarity, when they signed the Charter of Democracy together. They declared that: "only the people, and no one else, have the sovereign right to govern through their elected representatives."

The question of who should be the prime minister can arise only after elections, when the Pakistanis get back their democratic right to rule themselves.

Sharif's spokesman has a point when he says: "It is for the people of Pakistan to decide who will govern, after free and fair elections." True, this is what democracy demands. Yet, the fact remains that Sharif offered prime ministership to Benazir if and when elections ere held in Pakistan.

When I interviewed Sharif at Jeddah a couple of years ago, he told me that he called Benazir to request her to be the prime minister first. "I am young and have all the time to wait," were his exact words. Checking with Benazir in Dubai a few months later, I found that he had telephoned her to make the offer: "You become prime minister first."

Both have been living outside Pakistan since the advent of President General Pervez Musharraf's rule, and cannot return without his consent. Both have wide support in

Pakistan, Benazir leading the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the largest party, and Sharif the Muslim League, part of which has been gobbled up by Musharraf.

Both have had ups and downs in popularity, but their relevance to Pakistan's polity has seldom been questioned. Were they to come back even today, they would sweep the polls, provided elections were free and fair. Benazir looks like winning in Sind, and Sharif in Punjab. The NWFP and Baluchistan may go mainly to the combination of religious parties, with Benazir claiming some seats.

In the conditions obtaining in Pakistan, it is futile to debate who would be the next prime minister. So many important matters remain to be settled yet. The first and the foremost is whether Musharraf would give up his uniform before holding elections, and whether the intelligence agencies and the military would hold free and fair elections.

Yet, if the election machinery stays as it is, there is no way that Pakistan can have free and fair polls. The entire set-up is reeking with such people who have perfected the art of manipulating elections, from the preparation of bogus electoral rolls to the declaration of unelected candidates as elected.

Things can be retrieved if the Election Commission is reconstituted to include one lawyer and one NGO enjoying credibility. Foreign observers can never detect the finesse with which the army and the intelligence agencies manage the polls. The return of Benazir may make some difference, because her effort would be to ensure the sanctity of the ballot box.

However, it looks as if Benazir is in the midst of a settlement on power sharing with Musharraf. He may not have to drop the uniform straightaway, but wil do so subsequently. It is possible that America has brokered the deal because it wants both of them, Benazir and Musharraf, "liberal political forces," to jointly run the affairs of Pakistan. How cold-blooded is Washington in its calculation to tow democracy and dictatorship together!

On the other hand, the long wait in the wilderness has convinced Benazir that she cannot return to power without a deal with Musharraf. True, his image is damaged beyond repair. The lawyers' agitation has cut into his standing in the class, which, although unhappy, did not revolt against him.

What helps Musharraf is that political parties have practically kept away from the agitation. They are supportive of it, but they have not shoved their cadres into the fire. For this, Benazir has to be blamed. Political parties are not sure how she, the key person, will play her cards.

Whenever there has been a move to get all parties on a single platform to support the lawyers' agitation, the PPP has dragged its feet. Probably, Benazir believes that by doing so she may make Musharraf's exit certain, but not her prime ministership. That she is not reckoning is the damage she is doing o her party.

If people see her joining hands with Musharraf, her popularity may take a nosedive. An army-PPP tie-up may be formidable, but it will ruin the reputation of the PPP, which is still considered an anti-establishment force.

There may well be a revolt in her party. Leading lights like Aitzaz Hassan and Choudhary Manzur may quit the PPP and constitute a new progressive alliance. After having fought Musharraf's military rule relentlessly, they will lose their credibility if they are seen compromising with the Mushrraf forces.

Still, Sharif would be ill advised if he were to go to town to denounce the Benazir-Musharraf settlement. However indigestible, this could be the way to break the logjam, particularly when Musharraf continues to be the darling of the West.

Sharif should not under-estimate the strength of the jehadis and fundamentalists who are gaining ground in Pakistan. The restoration of democracy, even though not fully, will weaken the extremists. It is an open secret that there are a substantial number of radicals in the armed forces, with the Jamiat-e-Islami supporting them.

Sharif, who is totally against any deal with the military, must be disappointed with Benazir. But he should study how Mahatma Gandhi waged the struggle against the British, and how he made up with them even when he had the upper hand. He knew that conditions were not ripe for a change, and the people were not fully committed to it.

The lawyers' agitation, however successful, has got into a pattern. The establishment allows the "sacked" chief justice receptions which are undoubtedly getting bigger and bigger. The lawyers on their part do not have the influence or clout to bring the masses to the streets. Musharraf still does not like what is happening. But he cannot help it. What is worrying him -- and America -- is that the fundamentalists are increasing their hold.

At one time I thought Musharraf would go, but not the fauj. Now it looks as if both are staying for the time being with, of course, reduced powers. It cannot be helped, because Benazir wants to return soon. She is worried about Pakistan going the wrong way, unless the people's exasperation with the military is politically directed. She may be right.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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OPINION

For the sake of the nation

HABIBUL ISLAM

IT is rather noticeable that every time there is any news item which says the government is about/ready to make decisions on foreign direct investment (FDI) proposals that have remained stalled for months, somewhat extraordinarily a chorus rises in different forums, including the media, against the right of the government to make any decision in these matters. Lately the case has been familiar.

In all these attempts it is evident that, for whatever reasons, a fact of the real life and real world is completely ignored: i.e. FDI has become the engine of development and economic progress around the world---irrespective of political and social systems existing in the respective countries. China, Vietnam, India, among many, are prime instances.

But for causes that are either quaint or outdated or perhaps because of misinformation everytime there is talk of FDI in Bangladesh certain by-now-well-known quarters begin a well-coordinated campaign against FDI in Bangladesh in spite of the positive impact it has been seen to have on the lives of the people of the countries which have benefited from such foreign investments.

And there is no dearth of disinformation either. Recently a commentator wrote, "Earlier it was strongly indicated that this government would not take a decision on this (FDI proposals) controversial issue involving vital national interests and would reserve it for the next elected government to decide." This is, as any fairly informed person should know, is quite fanciful because this government never said any such thing.

What is more, why should not this government be able to make decisions on these issues? Is it not taking decisions on many other "vital national interests" with the overwhelming support of the people? What could be the reason for anyone to contemplate that this government is not qualified to make decisions on these matters---unless some lobby is against such investments for reasons best known to it?

Additionally, there already exist and operate in this country entities which are the result of foreign investment. Consequently, the question that arises is, if there are already functioning FDI companies why should some others be barred? Why should there be any fears about foreign investments if they benefit the nation especially when countries all across the globe are frantically chasing similar investments?

At other times opponents of FDI claim that such investments will kill local industries even when the proposals clearly spell out that the industries to be set up will, in fact, substitute imports of products that are not produced in the country and will moreover assist local industries to access production materials that they now have to import. Surely, reduction of import dependence cannot be against the national interest!

Asking for security of feedstock is not an unknown phenomenon is business and industry; but in reality it in no way risks complete depletion of Bangladesh's gas reserve and certainly does not create any ground for apprehending that we will have to "import" gas. It's a preposterous notion given that, for example in Tata's case, a mere six percent of today's proven gas reserve will be consumed in the lifetime of the project and evidently much less during the secured period asked for. Equally significantly, gas will not have to be supplied at a subsidized price ever.

Yet despite the facts to the contrary opposition on imagined and/or ill-informed ideas continues against much-needed FDI. Furthermore, opposition to the utilization and enhancement of our energy resources also persists in some easily identifiable quarters even though power requirement of the nation, both for household use and industrial needs, is not merely urgent but demands immediate solutions if we are to develop economically and societally.

Obviously the saner route to take at this point in our economic progress is to judge investment proposals, not on emotional or partisan responses, but on the basis of clearheaded economic criteria keeping the national interest above everything else. Otherwise the consequence is self-evident: this country will continue to debate and argue endlessly but the faster development and the subsequent industrialization required will not come our way.

Habibul Islam is an expatriate Bangladeshi now residing in New Zealand.

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