

Margin of error



ZAFAR SOBHAN

Election Commission's dialogue plans

Some form of indoor politics must be allowed before September 12

THE Election Commission has made a good move toward re-energising its polls-related programme. By informing the country that it plans to begin consultations with political parties on September 12 (in the expectation of course that the ban on indoor politics will have been lifted by that date), it has given a new spurt to its goal of holding free, fair and transparent elections before the end of the year 2008. We welcome the announcement and at the same time hope that the EC will stay focused on its programme. The dates announced must be kept unchanged as far as possible.

We cannot but note, though, that everything the EC plans to do relates necessarily to how soon the ban on indoor politics is lifted or relaxed. Chief Election Commissioner A.T.M. Shamsul Huda remains hopeful that the ban will go before the dialogue between the parties and the EC gets underway. His expectations are also those of the nation as a whole, which is why we urge the government to move expeditiously towards creating an enabling political environment through doing away with the ban on indoor politics. If, however, the government has certain reservations about lifting the ban or feels that some minimal restrictions must accompany a lifting of the ban on indoor politics, it must seriously consider raising them with the political parties in order for a solution to be arrived at. By its very nature, indoor politics is itself a restrictive affair. Making it more restrictive may defeat the very purpose of lifting it. Another component of the EC's plan involves the inner working mechanism of the parties themselves. For its dialogue plan to be successful, the EC has to ensure that those who speak to it on behalf of their parties have a truly representative character and are fully involved with the decision-making apparatus in the parties and therefore have the mandate to decide on the reform proposals. It is extremely important that the EC's plans create the conditions that will allow politicians to initiate discussions on such plans at different layers within their respective party structures. The government must realise in its own interest that the parties must be in a position to own the plans if they are to pay off. Any sidetracking of the decision-making mechanism of the parties will have negative consequences, with the reforms agenda within the parties threatening to become a casualty.

In the next few days, let the necessary confidence-building measures be taken in order for the Election Commission to implement its plans in the larger interest of the nation.

FBCCI's good counsel

Traders need to pay heed

NOTHING like the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) urging its constituents not to make 'extra profit' during the month of fasting. It has appealed to the businessmen to be imbued with a sense of social commitment and responsibility to keep the profit margin at a minimal level. Their exhortative counsel welcome as it is, we would expect they take upon themselves some of the responsibility of ensuring consumer-friendly market behaviour. As well as playing a monitoring role as the apex body the FBCCI should be in constant touch with the representatives of the associations of wholesale and retail networks for any market correction needed to attain the objective of containing price jacking.

The case in point is the negotiated retail price of edible oil between the government and the oil refiners' association which is being disregarded by the retailers. The manufacturers' association takes the view that organisationally it can only monitor the price in the wholesale market. It is difficult to oversee the activities of over two lakh retail oil sellers by them. The retailers' association should be held to account by some mechanism to be devised by the FBCCI.

In pricing the essentials the trading community can think of spreading their profits thin and yet get handsome returns during Ramadan when the demand for a wide range of consumer items doubles. They should conscientiously avoid windfalls to gain popular esteem, especially against the backdrop of inflationary erosion of purchasing power of the common people and in due deference to the hardship they are undergoing due to flood effects.

That is as far as the trading community goes. What about the role of the government? We share the FBCCI's concern over 'questions being asked by the banks during the opening of Letter of Credit (L/C) and depositing and withdrawing money from the banks'. This infuses a sense of fear in the business community impacting ultimately on the supply chain. Businessmen need to be encouraged by the FBCCI to bring up specific cases of harassment to be taken up with the government for remedial action. Overall, we have to put in place some tangible confidence-building measures for the rather shriveled business community rather than verbalising assurances from time to time.

It is said that King Richard III of England lost the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 when his horse's shoe came loose, throwing him to the ground. His troops were in retreat against the forces of Henry, Earl of Richmond, and Richard was trying one last ditch attempt to rally them when his horse lost one of its shoes and fell.

"A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" Richard is said to have screamed as his troops fled in panic and Henry's forces closed in around him, bringing the battle, his kingship, and his life, to an end.

Legend has it that Richard, in a hurry to reach the battle-field, had not waited for his horse to be shod properly by the local blacksmith and that he rode into battle with one nail missing from one of his horse's shoes. It was due to this missing nail that the shoe eventually came loose in

the thick of battle, hence the nursery rhyme:

"For want of a nail a shoe was lost / For want of a shoe a horse was lost / For want of a horse a rider was lost / For want of a rider a battle was lost / For want of a battle a kingdom was lost / ... and all for the want of a horseshoe nail."

I wonder what went through the head of the chief adviser as Dhaka university campus erupted. A seemingly minor altercation between students and army personnel at a football game -- and within hours the interim government is facing its first existential crisis.

And crisis is the right word. What started as a small protest on DU campus soon spread to different localities all over Dhaka and around the country. Cars and buses were torched and buildings smashed. Things threatened to get so out of hand that the government declared a curfew on August 22 to contain the problem.

STRAIGHT TALK

The only thing that will keep this government out of trouble is if it understands that its margin for error is near zero, or even less, if that is possible. If the smallest of sparks can start up a fire, it is important to ensure that there are no sparks. But if sparks are unavoidable, as they seem to be, then perhaps it is time to reconsider whether it is wise to keep the tinder so dry.

It must have struck the chief adviser as ironic that after seven months of high-profile arrests and power shortages and rising prices that it was over a few ill-chosen words and actions that his government faced its most severe test so far.

It is always tricky being a caretaker government. Caretaker governments by definition have no political base. This is their great weakness as well as their great strength. The strength lies in the fact that they are, by their very composition (in this case, at least) non-political and thus non-partisan. They can preside over everyday affairs of state without taking sides and can therefore deliver a free and fair election (their intended function under the constitution) or can level the playing field and clean up the system (as this government is doing).

But their weakness is that even when they have well-wishers, they do not have active

supporters. They do not have cadres or loyalists or people who will take to the streets to defend them when the chips are down.

This makes their existence extremely precarious and explains why every caretaker government we have ever had (even the last one) thus far has been so keen to get out of the firing line as soon as is humanly possible: to hold elections within 90 days and then get out.

But this government is different. It is not in for 90 days. By the time elections are held, if all goes according to schedule, it will have held power for almost two years. That's a long time for a government without a political base. That's a long time for nothing to go wrong.

And, of course, things will go wrong. It's Murphy's Law. And, truthfully, as far as this government is concerned, just about everything that could have gone wrong has gone wrong. Minus two. Minus one. Prices. Power. Jute. Floods. Court cases. The

only saving grace was that it hadn't had to face any serious protest, at least until August 20.

So what is the lesson to be learned from this incident? The lesson is that the smallest of sparks can derail things and bring the country to the brink of catastrophe.

Yes, none of this would have happened had the police been more restrained in corralling the protesters. Yes, none of this would have happened had there not been pockets of resentment and opposition already built up due to the government's failure to control prices and other issues.

But the lesson, surely, is that everything began with a trifling altercation at a football match.

The lesson, therefore, for the interim government and its backers is that their margin for error is pretty close to zero. There is nothing either the chief adviser or the army chief can do to stop these kinds of altercations. Despite their best efforts, friction is inevitable.

The government even quickly and sensibly acceded to the demands of the protesters to remove the army camp from the DU campus. But it was not enough. Thus, even when the government has done nothing wrong, it still remains vulnerable, such is the nature of their current situation.

There will always be opposition to this government.

There are those who want this government to fall so that they can return to power. There are those who have been mistreated by this government and are filled with anger and the desire for retribution. There are those who feel that they have waited patiently for seven months but have received nothing for their pains. There are those who think that we have gone long enough with a non-elected government in office.

This will be constant. No government can make everyone happy. There will always be discontent. And, as we have seen, sometimes there will be discontent even when the government is initially blameless. Those are the breaks.

So what can this government do to protect itself?

The only thing that will keep this government out of trouble is if it understands that its margin for error is near zero, or even less, if that is possible.

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Zafar Sobhan is Forum Editor.

A seminary for the jailbirds



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

As the list of people getting prison terms keeps lengthening, an idea comes to mind whether they can form a sizeable class for a jailhouse seminary. I know exactly what should be the curriculum for that class. They should study history, philosophy, and lots of religion. No math since they have already done enough calculation. Throw in a little bit of literature. I would highly recommend "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence. These people have to learn that what they have done is very very wrong.

No, I am not trying to be funny. The seminary should be started to prevent a future avalanche of counterculture. I have talked to some of the admirers, relatives, friends and children of the politicians and businessmen who have been arrested since the crackdown on corruption. In

their minds they are convinced that their loved ones are victims of circumstances, innocent people, who are paying price for love their country.

That line of thinking needs to be addressed so that another thirty-six years down the road we aren't drawn into another conflict. It is possible that once again the political wheel is going to turn when the victor's hand will write history that will undermine the vanquished. If left to the current state of doubts, this nation in future will be drowned by renewed shouting match over who was innocent and who was guilty.

It means, once again the nation will stand divided over right and wrong. This is where the seminary can help, because unless the guilty are convinced of their guilt, the people who love them will not be convinced. It is, therefore, necessary that we work to change their minds while they serve their sentence.

CROSS TALK

It will also change the minds of those who are blind about them. Unassimilated truth is the mother of all contentions and it grows cantankerous in the seedbed of long-seething vengeance. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. But when one man blindly follows another, it is even worse. The whole world can erupt in the blink of an eye. A seminary for the jailbirds may be one chance to avoid it.

It is not enough to physically accept the punishment unless it is also accepted in the minds.

In other societies, people do it all the time. A US senator from Idaho pleaded guilty to lewd behaviour. He was arrested for making sexual advances to an undercover officer in an airport men's room. He sat in the stall next to the officer who was monitoring the washroom, tapped his right foot to the left foot of his prey and then made hand motions under the partition between them to show that he was interested.

In another instance, an American football player, who stood to gain \$100 million or more, pleaded guilty to animal cruelty. He ran a dog fighting business which was perfectly alright, until the world came to know how brutally he treated his dogs. He shot, hanged and electrocuted those dogs which lost a fight.

As a matter of fact, every crime

is a moral crisis and seeks a closure in justice. That is when the power is taken away from the criminal and the balance is tweaked in favor of the victim. But that equation is often skewed in political propaganda as Goebbels embodied in his famous quote: "A lie repeated a thousand times becomes a truth." The camaraderie amongst the well-wishers of all those who will be jailed could turn into an enormous propaganda machine cranking out true lies, strengthened and accelerated by political network and unaccounted money.

Needless to say a crime isn't fully recompensed until there is an acceptance of guilt. But only the guilty knows best where the guilt pinches, his confession being more powerful than a thousand judgments. The opposite could create the smokescreen, swaying the hearts and minds of those who tend to believe in their leaders,

parents, brothers, sisters and friends. A thousand judgments will not change their opinion until it comes from the horse's mouth.

So the seminary can play a role to prepare the jailbirds to fess up their own misdeeds. And then they would face those who are close to them, people who are deceived by their looks and take them by the face value. They would need to unlearn the familiar world of greed and need, and unburden their souls of accumulated desires to find the truth that it was not the end doesn't justify the means.

"There must be more money," says the mother in "The Rocking Horse Winner" when the son asked why she was unhappy. The son wanted to know why they were poor, and the mother replied that his father didn't have any luck. The son asked again if money was luck to which the mother said that luck was what caused one to have money. Then she said that luck was better than money because "if you're rich, you may lose your money. But if you're lucky, you will always get more money."

Here lies the crux of knowledge, which should resonate in the seminary. The Class of 2007, if that is what all the people given jail terms for corruption this year are called, should learn

that one of the many surprises of life is that luck can run out before money. It will bring them an opportunity, many of them in the company of their children and spouses, to discuss amongst themselves that no matter how clever and calculating one is, luck always has the last laugh when it comes to life's eventualities.

And the eventualities are indeed stunning. Former ministers given rigorous imprisonment are being assigned new roles in prison. One former minister is working as a gardener, another as a librarian, and others might become cooks, clerks or assume even lesser roles. In so much as they will fit into these roles and live reconditioned lives, it will do wonders if they also learn to reorganise their minds.

It will also change the minds of those who are blind about them. Unassimilated truth is the mother of all contentions and it grows cantankerous in the seedbed of long-seething vengeance. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. But when one man blindly follows another, it is even worse. The whole world can erupt in the blink of an eye.

A seminary for the jailbirds may be one chance to avoid it.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

City in a time warp

Now, with his former livelihood in ashes and his college degree in Arabic languages all but useless, he makes ends meet the same way his father did nearly half a century ago -- as a boatman on the Tigris River. The boat itself is the very one that his father operated when Ritha was just a baby. Now it's Ritha who ferries passengers back and forth across the river, past the ruins of bridges that used to be heavy with traffic.

MELINDA LIU

BOOKS had always been Shalan Abdul Ritha's life. "There's a famous saying," he says. "The Egyptians write. The Lebanese print. And the Iraqis read." He used to sell hundreds of volumes each week at Baghdad's fabled Mutanabi Street bookmarket. Then the war began, and the dapper old man who were his most dependable customers no longer visited his shop. Sales dwindled to only a few dozen books a week. Still, Ritha kept the place open until March 5, when a massive suicide car bomb demolished the market, killing at least 20 people.

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Now it's Ritha who ferries passengers back and forth across the river, past the ruins of bridges that used to be heavy with traffic. Corpses drift with the current, many of them bound and blindfolded, and the sight of them horrifies the 43-year-old book lover. But every time insurgents blow up another bridge, his ferry business gets busier.

While security is returning to some areas of Baghdad, modern conveniences aren't necessarily following. The Iraqi capital is no longer the place described in the old guidebooks, a metropolis of casinos, culture, and Western-run hotel chains, although vestiges of that city can still be found. Instead, unceasing violence

has thrust Baghdad back to a more primitive era, forcing its people to take up pre-industrial occupations and rediscover almost forgotten technologies.

The collapse of municipal water services has revived the profession of well-digging, especially in the Green Zone, where foreign diplomats are reluctant to give up their flush toilets and showers.

Donkey and horse carts are increasingly common on the capital's streets; the animals are cheaper than trucks and less likely to be held up in searches for hidden explosives. (A few years ago, after insurgents launched a rocket attack on the Palestine Hotel from a donkey cart, US military investigators were able to follow the singed and ornery critter home, where they detained its owner.)

On the lawns of mansions

whose former owners are dead or in exile, shepherds now pasture flocks of sheep and goats, a sight that might be idyllic if not for the inescapable din of a city at war.

Homemakers in particular are relearning bygone skills. One of the most visible signs is the return of the old-fashioned outdoor bread oven, the tanour. Before the war, many Baghdad families bought their daily bread from commercial bakeries.

Now they're looking for ways to economise -- and to avoid unnecessary trips along city streets that can turn into a battlefield without warning. Abu Ali, a 37-year-old cab driver, recently bought his pregnant wife a tanour. (He asked not to be identified more specifically for safety's sake.)

These days he worries about his wife leaving the house to buy bread: "Not long ago, armed men came by one of the neighbourhood bakeries, pulled a guy out of the queue, asked for his name and shot him then and there," the cab driver says. Besides, his gas-fired home tanour makes bread cheaper than store-bought.

In a pinch, his wife can even use firewood, which he scavenges from vacant lots or dumpsters he passes while driving his taxi.

Midwives are another basic necessity now back from oblivion. The 1980s and '90s were lean times for their profession, thanks to the rise of medical facilities in Baghdad. "Hospitals were everywhere, and pregnant women were keen to give birth in hospitals for fear of the lack of sanitary conditions [at home]," recalls a 58-year-old midwife who, for safety, asks to be identified only as Umm Ahmad -- "mother of Ahmad." She was trained by her grandmothers and delivered her first patient's baby in 1970.

These days, however, not even maternity wards are reliably safe from insurgents and death squads. "My job is flourishing again, after being forgotten for many long years," says Umm Ahmad. Before the 2003 invasion she was delivering only one or two babies a week. Now she gets one a day, and sometimes more.

The at-home birthing business is so hot that amateurs are

crowding in. Back in the Saddam era, midwives were required to have licenses from the Ministry of Health, and many of them had nursing-school diplomas. "We would give them lectures once a week, train them and give them gloves, scissors and other medical equipment," says Dr. Eman Atra, an obstetrician who worked with midwives before the war. "We would not issue a birth certificate for [deliveries by] non-registered midwives."

But now, she says, the profession is effectively unregulated: "I cannot control an unregistered midwife, or refuse to issue a birth certificate for the kids she helps deliver. I fear she might send someone to kill me." (Maternity wards are far from empty even now, partly because so many expectant mothers are choosing to have Caesarian sections. It's one way to cut the risk of going into labour at night, when curfews and trigger-happy security personnel can make the streets even more dangerous than usual.)

The time warp is especially noticeable in the Green Zone. More than 10,000 Iraqi civilians

live there among the high-priced shops that cater to American tastes and incomes, and it's troublesome and dangerous for the inhabitants to venture out into the city's unprotected "Red Zone" to buy fresh meat, local bread, and other basics of Iraqi cooking.

Vehicles and their occupants are subject to rigorous searches at checkpoints, and bombers often target the entryways, causing gridlock and lockdowns that stretch for hours.

Rather than face the risk and inconvenience, many Iraqis and foreign contractors do their food shopping from a middle-aged couple who live with their four children in a hut made of salvaged packing crates, not far from the heavily fortified US and British embassies.

Naish Hussein Ali is a shepherd, and his wife, Um Zina, bakes more than 400 loaves of bread a day, selling them for about 8 cents apiece. "I can't lie, business is better now than before the war," says Umm Zina, who rises long before dawn every morning to fire up her tanour.

Her brother's family keeps a

big flock of sheep, often letting them graze not far from Saddam Hussein's famous Crossed Swords Monument. Stragglers sometimes trot onto the road dangerously close to fast-moving oil tankers and military Humvees.

Although the clan herded sheep during Saddam's time, they didn't usually pasture their animals where the Green Zone now stands. Even then it was a heavily secured neighbourhood frequented by government VIPs.

The family's sheep and goats are valuable commodities today; one large fat-tailed sheep can fetch \$300. "Our customers are half Iraqis and half foreign security contractors -- mostly Nepalis who like to make goat curry," says Umm Zina's nephew Saddam Khudhier Abbas, 28.

He grins proudly at his mixed flock of sheep and scrawny goats in a parking lot, where he has brought them to show. They scratch their backsides against an armoured BMW, perfectly at home in the new Baghdad.

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