

CEC's reflections on elections

Creating public enthusiasm for polls is important

CHIEF Election Commissioner A.T.M. Shamsul Huda has stated that the sooner the voter list is prepared and general elections are held the sooner the emergency will be lifted in the country. His views are those that the nation by and large shares. Indeed, the CEC's statement comes after a flurry of positive signals we have been getting from the government. A few days ago, Chief Adviser Fakhrudin Ahmed, during his visit to New York, reiterated at nearly every stage of his government's determination to hold the polls on schedule. There have even been hints that if the voter list is ready, elections might be held earlier than scheduled. An additional sign of how election fever might be taking hold of the country comes through the CEC's view that local bodies' polls will be held from January next year. Of course, the CEC expects that for that to happen, the emergency will need to be relaxed by the end of December.

So what are the ground realities today? By the Election Commission's estimates, 10 per cent work on the voter list has already been completed. We would like to think that it is a positive sign of things to be, that the remaining 90 per cent of the work on the electoral role will be completed in time for the elections. What is important here is that matters have reached a stage where extra caution is necessary in handling election-related issues. Of late, there has been a perceptible rise in public confidence about the EC's ability to do the job it has taken upon itself. This confidence can be maintained by making sure that all the technological aspects of the EC's work, such as producing ID cards for voters, are rigorously emphasised. And yet it is also true that the voter list is merely one aspect of the election plan. Of much more significance is the need to ensure a high degree of public enthusiasm and participation in the electoral process. One hardly needs any retelling that the credibility of an election ultimately depends on robust debate. Such an environment is what the EC will need to create apart from placing all the pieces of the electoral board together.

All said and done, though, the truth remains that the enthusiasm and excitement necessary for a meaningful election are somewhat impeded by the state of emergency now in force. But that ought not to be the case. As the CEC has suggested, a relaxation of the emergency before the local polls will help the process along. Much a similar atmosphere is called for where parliamentary elections are concerned. In the end, it is the local bodies' polls that will set the tone for a return to full-fledged democracy.

Rush for tickets

Alleviate plight of commuters

THE prevailing situation at both the bus and launch terminals in the city appears to be the same as in previous years. Apparently, advance ticket buyers are hard-put to find seats in buses and launches to be bound for southern part of the country from October 9 to 3. To add to the misery of the waterway passengers, operators of launches bound for Barisal, Chandpur and Khulna routes are charging double the fare fixed for a cabin.

Many bus owners are saying that this year the ticket crisis is severer compared to the previous years since old and unfit buses are kept off the roads through strong monitoring by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). Besides, road stretches have been damaged due to floods so that certain routes are being avoided. Be that as it may, what is not understandable as to how tickets are being whisked away on the inter-district bus services routes. We understand that limited number of tickets are being issued.

With highly focused media display of meetings held between the Bus/Truck Owners Association and the various agencies of the government we had hoped to see some tangible improvement in the handling of Eid rush for travelling. The transport owners had promised to ensure that the commuters would not be charged more than the fixed fares. Renewed dialogue is needed between the government agencies and the transport operators.

It is our observation that much of the problems are due to non-availability of adequate number of both road transports and launches. Given some thoughts and proper planning well in advance much of the sufferings of people could be avoided. We are however happy to see that Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has already agreed to increase trip frequencies to avoid overloading of passengers. We also recommend that similar arrangements be made by the Railway authorities.

Finally there should be continuous and effective monitoring of all bus and launch terminals for ensuring security and safety of passengers.

The monks' uprising

The tipping point seems to have come recently when, thanks to inflation, the communities on which monks depend for alms were suddenly rendered unable to afford to feed the customary two meals a day. The holy men took to the streets in anger. Their frustration seems to be almost universally shared.

GEORGE WEHRFRITZ and JOE COCHRANE

IT started, as revolutions often do, over issues of bread and butter. In mid-August, enraged by a doubling of the state-set fuel price, thousands of Burmese took to the streets. Then the unexpected happened: the country's exalted Buddhist monks joined the fray. Soon, cinnamon-robed marchers were leading columns of angry citizens, coalescing into what Trevor Wilson, Australia's former ambassador to Burma, calls "a symbiotic uprising." At first, the troops kept to their barracks. But then, last Wednesday, "they saw that [demonstrations] were building up rather than dying down," says Wilson -- and the

crackdown began.

Just what's happened since remains unclear, as foreign media have been banned from the country. But there are chilling signs of a crackdown similar to the one in 1988, after pro-democracy demonstrations paralysed Burma. In that episode, some 3,000 people were ultimately killed. Now human-rights groups and the few foreign journalists in Rangoon report mass arrests by truncheon-wielding riot troops and scattered shootings; a handful of protesters have been killed. Civilians are said to be acting as human shields to protect the monks, and vice versa. Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi -- Burma's long-detained pro-democracy leader and arguably the

nation's highest moral authority -- has reportedly been moved by her captors from house arrest to jail. What happens next will depend on "the resilience, the determination and the bravery of the people," said Britain's top diplomat in Burma, Mark Canning, in a telephone interview.

Whatever transpires, Burma's brutal military government, which has ruled the country since 1962, faces an existential crisis of its own making. The junta, which refused to honor the results of elections held in 1990 after Suu Kyi and her fellow democrats won by a landslide, has persistently staked its legitimacy on its self-declared mission to preserve national unity and defend Buddhist tradition. To

bolster its religious credentials, it has funded new monasteries (the country has an estimated 300,000 monks) and showered friendly Buddhist clergymen with lavish gifts. Leaders regularly visit religious sites where they burn incense, give alms (a crucial way to gain merit) or inaugurate new buildings. Burma's 74-year-old strongman, Gen. Than Shwe, made one such stop last November when, according to state media reports, he drove home nine jewel-encrusted stakes with a gold mallet to mark a new pagoda.

After China crushed the Tiananmen uprising in 1989, Beijing sought to win back public loyalty by dramatically improving living standards. Burma's government, in contrast, has talked reform but failed to deliver, and the economy of this resource-rich nation is now in tatters. Government handouts haven't blinded the monks to the everyday suffering many encounter. "This is about a whole host of economic

pressures, and the monks are a very interesting barometer," says Canning.

The tipping point seems to have come recently when, thanks to inflation, the communities on which monks depend for alms were suddenly rendered unable to afford to feed the customary two meals a day. The holy men took to the streets in anger. Their frustration seems to be almost universally shared. State propagandists claim the country has lately enjoyed double-digit growth, but outside analysts paint a much grimmer picture. Experts use proxies like energy use, fertilizer consumption and trade flows to approximate Burma's true growth figures. Each of these indicators has slackened of late; according to the Asian Development Bank, electricity usage plunged 32.4 percent from 2004 to 2005. "That's something you just don't get in an economy that's growing by 10 percent a year," says economist Sean Turnell of Burma Economic Watch at

Australia's Macquarie University. By his estimate, Burma has lately grown by only about 2 percent a year -- insufficient to keep pace with population growth -- and gains have been largely confined to oil and gas exports that do nothing to enrich average households.

Than and his cronies have profited most, of course, which hasn't helped their Buddhist credentials. A new report by Transparency International last week listed Burma among the world's most corrupt countries. Although he claims to live in Buddhist austerity, Than is believed to have millions stashed in Singaporean banks and in 2006 staged a lavish wedding for one of his daughters at which she received multimillion-dollar gifts (a video of the nuptials made it onto YouTube).

All of this infuriates ordinary Burmese, and the country is now fragmenting. According to veteran Burma watchers, top military leaders seem to fear being pushed aside by disgruntled subordinates.

And a similar power struggle is playing out in the religious establishment. Senior clergymen loyal to the junta have appeared on state TV in recent days urging monks not to join the demonstrations. But they've been widely ignored by abbots who are likely planning strategy by cell phone, says Aung Zaw, editor of an English-language Thai magazine with extensive contacts inside Burma. Many citizens now seem to be pushing for the junta's ouster with little thought of what comes next. "The young people are saying, 'Get the military out of power,'" says David Steinberg, a Burma expert at Georgetown University. "But if the government were to resign -- which is 99.9 percent not going to happen -- do you think you'd have democracy?"

To prevent more bloodshed or another coup, foreign governments, including Washington and Beijing, have urged restraint. China is keen to avoid the disintegration of what many see as its client state just months before the 2008 Summer Olympics. The situation is also sticky for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which welcomed Burma's membership back in 1997 but has since failed to moderate its behavior. Wilson, the former Australian ambassador, laments what he terms "missed opportunities" to engage Burma's leaders, especially by the United Nations. Indeed, even after the shooting started last week, China blocked a Security Council resolution condemning the crackdown, though Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon did send a special envoy to Burma to negotiate with the junta. Steinberg says diplomats must give the generals a "face-saving exit" of some sort; otherwise, he worries, they'll feel trapped and respond with the same ruthlessness they displayed in 1988. Even if the trap they're ensnared in is one of their own making.

Of non-elected government, of restored morality



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

GROUND REALITIES

There is a clear need to bring those who gave leadership to it to task. Much a similar exercise is called for in the case of those police officials who once turned a blind eye to the doings of militant Islamists in Bagmara but have, over these past months, kept pretending that they had nothing to do with the rise of these elements. The children of Saifur Rahman are being dealt with under the law. But who nets the acquiescent or cooperative government officials who facilitated their corrupt doings?

plumbing that a caretaker administration will be asked to do once an elected body of politicians makes its way out of office. There ought not to be any room for misunderstanding here.

The truth, a pretty unpalatable one, is that it is a sign of a nation's creeping anaemic political health when it becomes necessary for the constitution to guarantee the entry and prevalence of an interim, non-elected government for a period of time prior to the emergence, through elections, of a new administration comprising politicians.

Obviously, it is a system that cannot go on forever. And there are reasons why we express that kind of sentiment here. There is, at one level, the pretty abnormal, even bizarre, condition cropping up when an elected government makes way for one that is not elected. At another level, it is the economic aspects that come up with all the changes that must be made for the three months prior to general elections.

There are, then, the moral issues involved. Despite the fact that a non-elected caretaker administration has been given a constitutional basis to operate on, to what extent does such an arrangement

fulfill the criteria that a proper, electorally approved government does?

Perhaps the chief adviser was reflecting on such issues of legitimate concern. Perhaps he was not. But what he certainly worries over, like the rest of us, is the longevity of the government he these days provides leadership to. The worries cannot be missed, for he has said, and keeps saying at every opportunity, that general elections will take place by December of next year.

A sense emerges that he feels he needs to reassure the country that things are on course. That is a particular dilemma that non-elected governments generally fall prey to. Popular faith in the pronouncements of governments is what is important. Credibility is all. The history of martial law regimes, in Bangladesh as also elsewhere, has not exactly been edifying.

Too many promises of a return to elected government have been jettisoned too many times. That, you might suggest, is what martial law regimes do, and keep doing, until they can create the conditions that will facilitate their continuation in power in some quasi-constitutional form.

It has happened this way in

Bangladesh, first under General Ziaur Rahman and then under General H.M. Ershad. The good thing, though, is that Fakhrudin Ahmed does not lead that kind of a regime. Which is why he is on stronger ground than one who leads a government that lacks legitimacy. And that is the difference between this government and the military governments (as also the Moshtaque aberration) that came earlier in this country.

The simple truth is that Fakhrudin Ahmed has his worries. There are other truths as well, all of which converge on the idea that his government is, unlike any earlier caretaker government, well-positioned to retrieve the country from the deep pit it has been pushed into, especially over the past five years of elected, indiscriminately irresponsible governance.

It's work in such areas as a reconstitution of the Election Commission and the Public Service Commission ought to be considered a reflection of how institutions should be working. Its confidence in the Anti-Corruption Commission in turn raises the level of confidence across the country about some very real efforts being

cooperative government officials who facilitated their corrupt doings? You can spot some of them in important places these days. Will, indeed can, the ACC call these bureaucrats to account for going along with the bad elements in the bad old days?

Does the administration remember that some bureaucrats need, in the interest of the republic, to be put through a rigorous investigation over the role they may have played when they converged, in all secrecy, at the office of a former Board of Investment chief in the queen days of the Iajuddin interim government, and then ran for cover when the media swooped on them?

Of course the chief adviser is right. A non-elected government is not the path to the future. But a non-elected government, in the extraordinary, incredible circumstances we live through, does hold the authority to point out the path to the future. It does that through reminding itself and the nation it governs that a moral basis is what ultimately defines the functionality of a state.

That moral basis was undercut in the last five years of elected civilian rule. And for a new elected dispensation to govern well, govern purposefully, a restoration of morality is clearly in order. The non-elected government that Fakhrudin Ahmed presides over can, if it does not stumble, if it does not speak in too many voices, if it keeps the heights in view, recreate the ambience for a new moral order in the nation's politics.

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Climate change challenge for the poor

Each inhabitant of our planet has an equal right to the atmosphere, but the industrialised countries have grossly exceeded their fair share. Annual per capita carbon-dioxide emissions are around 20 tons in the United States, 8.5 tons in the European Union and only 1 ton in India. If all countries had the same per capita emissions as India, climate change would not have occurred.

CHANDRASHEKHAR DASGUPTA

IN the recent months, torrential rains and floods have taken a heavy toll of lives and rendered homeless tens of thousands of families in rural India. This is not climate change but the onset of a benign monsoon, the answer to the prayers of a billion Indians.

However, human suffering on such a scale raises an important question for all those concerned about climate change: If a developing country is so vulnerable even to normal seasonal variations, how will it cope with the impacts of climate change -- floods and droughts, sea level rise, changes in rainfall patterns, cyclones or typhoons?

Most people in developing countries eke out a living as subsistence farmers. They are far more vulnerable to changes in temperature and rainfall patterns than city dwellers engaged in industry or commerce. Unlike farmers in countries well endowed with financial and technological resources, peasants in developing countries will be seriously jeopardised if the present generation in developing countries fails to achieve rapid growth. For poorer countries, sustainable development is synonymous with accelerated development.

Yet, affluent countries press the poor to accept a very different approach. They urge the developing countries to strike a "balance" between development and climate-change mitigation. Their argument is that the industrialised countries are unable, or unwilling, to reduce their own greenhouse-gas emissions on the scale required for limiting climate change within

a certain range. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, developing countries should curb their rising greenhouse-gas emissions, even at the cost of slowing down development.

The proposal fails to meet the tests of efficiency as well as equity. By slowing development, the proposal would undermine the efforts of poorer countries to build up a capacity to adapt to climate change. It would increase the vulnerability of developing countries to the impacts of climate change. It is thus a deeply flawed response to climate change.

Nor would it bring new benefits in respect of mitigation. No one questions the desirability of moderating emissions originating in developing countries. The real question is, who pays for it? Under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the countries listed in Annex II -- broadly corresponding to members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development -- are required to meet the incremental costs of mitigation measures in developing countries. The proposal fails to meet the tests of efficiency as well as equity.

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countries. In the process, it increases the vulnerability of future generations in developing countries.

This brings us to the question of equity. Climate change is caused not by emissions of greenhouse gases as such but by excessively high emissions of these gases. Indeed, the presence of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is essential for life on our planet. Human activities have generated greenhouse-gas emissions at least since the discovery of fire, but these did not interfere with the climate system until recent centuries. It was only after the advent of the Industrial Revolution that the ever-increasing combustion of hydrocarbon fuels -- coal, petroleum and natural gas -- caused emissions and atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations to exceed limits compatible with a stable climate. The industrialised countries are responsible, historically and currently, for the excessive atmospheric greenhouse-gas concentrations.

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Apart from being responsible for climate change, the industrialised countries also possess the financial and technological resources required for a global response. Their capabilities are much greater than those of developing countries.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is based on the principle of equity, reflecting the "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" of the industrialised and developing countries. The former are required to stabilize and reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions. The latter are exempt, from this requirement, and the convention specifically states that "per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low and ... the share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and development needs." Most OECD countries also have a commitment under the convention to transfer financial resources and technology to developing countries to cover the incremental costs of mitigation measures implemented by the latter.

This does not mean that the developing countries have no mitigation commitments under the UN Framework Convention or its Kyoto Protocol. Both accords incorporate a set of common commitments applicable to industrialised as well as developing countries. These include an obligation to "formulate and implement ... programs containing measures to mitigate climate change."

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measures yielding mitigation co-benefits, though they are primarily designed to promote national development priorities.

Developing countries are not required to take measures involving incremental costs, unless the industrialised countries meet these additional costs.

Any future agreement on cli-

mate change must fully conform to the framework convention, which correctly reflects the relationship between climate change and sustainable development. This relationship may be summed up in three propositions:

For poorer countries, sustainable development means accelerated development. Slower-growth rates would condemn future generations in these countries to face the impacts of global warming without significant adaptive capabilities.

• To make their fair contribution to climate-change mitigation, developing countries should adopt all feasible measures delivering mitigation co-benefits at no additional cost. There is considerable scope for win-win initiatives involving no diversion of resources from development priorities. Developing countries should also seek opportunities for implementing more ambitious mitigation measures if industrialised countries are prepared to meet the additional costs.

• In view of their responsibility for causing climate change as well as their financial and technological capabilities, industrialised countries should sharply reduce their own emissions and provide necessary financial and technological support for mitigation measures in developing countries.

Ambassador Chandras