

Honest and competent candidate for election

EC gets legal mandate to insist on it

WITH the Supreme Court rejecting the appeal against High Court ruling requiring candidates to submit eight items of personal information to the EC to qualify for nomination, HC's verdict now stands to be implemented. The civil society and the media's relentless campaign for clean, honest and competent candidates for the national elections is vindicated through a legal process.

Although during the BNP-led four-party coalition government intrusive attempts were made to subvert the original writ petition, the final outcome comes through as very positive by virtue of the Supreme Court ruling.

It is indeed worthwhile to note the types of information required to be submitted by candidates to the EC in affidavit form: candidate's educational qualification, any criminal case lying against him/her, any previous criminal case with or without conviction, profession, source of income, was an MP before (if so, his/her account of fulfilling commitments), any outstanding bank loan and status of repayment.

How crucial these information are towards making informed choices of public representatives is borne out by the dearth of honest, clean and competent MPs in the previous parliaments and the state of criminalisation of politics with money and muscle power.

It is a major step towards transparency of the electoral process at the very primary stage of candidate selection. The message is clear for the political parties to absorb and internalise: they have now to shun the practice of nomination selling that spawned criminality in the whole political structure. Instead, they must give their party tickets to carefully chosen candidates that meet the EC criteria.

Getting information, however, about candidates is a necessary condition but not by itself sufficient one. Unless the whole set of political and electoral reforms are put in place, the totality of impact on the type of election and the kind of government that the people want will remain elusive. Eleven months have gone by; yet, the political parties do not seem keen on reforming themselves, except to be focussed on the two leaders of the country. For the government's part, however, there is pressing need for allowing open politics for things to take shape and engine of the reform process to move forward.

Mental health concerns

Time to address these

IT is disquieting news that no less than 16 percent of the country's adult population is suffering from some kind of mental disease or disorder. It is the finding of the latest survey conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health. The study has also found that women are more vulnerable to mental disease than men.

It is a sad truth that mental diseases never quite receive the kind of attention and treatment that physical disorders usually do in our society. A huge number of people are not even aware of the fact that most of the mental problems can be cured through timely diagnosis and good treatment. The mental patients are often viewed as a burden and are not given their due in society. This is an attitude, which has to be changed before everything else, if we want to create the social milieu for mental patients to come out of their extremely unfortunate situations. Then, there is the need for developing the treatment facilities for such patients which at the moment are anything but adequate. Whatever facilities we have are basically confined to the cities and patients living in rural areas have little access to them.

The problem is clearly getting more and more acute as complexities of urban life are something that certain individuals cannot always cope with psychologically. Moreover, the factors contributing to healthy mental growth of children are being ignored in all modern settings. There are no open spaces, playgrounds, affordable recreation centres for majority of the people. Educational institutions that once happened to be centres for constructive guidance and counselling are becoming business like entities. There are far fewer doctors for mental patients than for other diseases. The ratio between psychiatrist and mental patient will have to be increased as the infrastructure for mental treatment expanded.

An offer it might refuse



FARRED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

THE National Intelligence Estimate on Iran has upended the Bush administration's policy toward that country. This could be a good thing, if it leads to some creative rethinking. Over the past two years the administration has made several intelligent moves in its effort to isolate Iran -- keeping the Europeans onboard, rallying the Arab states -- but it's been unwilling to make a simple choice. Do we want policy change

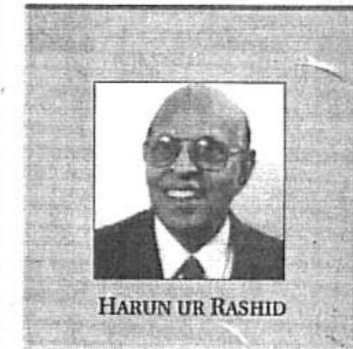
Instead of thundering that Iran is dangerous, President Bush should keep repeating, "We want to have relations with Iran, do business with you, visit your country and have Iranians visit us. We want Iran to join the World Trade Organisation and other such bodies. We want you to be a respected nation. But this cannot happen if you do not verifiably end your pursuit of nuclear weaponry and support for terrorism. We are ready to put all this on the table."

in Iran or regime change?

Imagine, for a moment, what the world looks like to Iran. The country is surrounded by powerful states with nuclear weapons -- Israel, India, Pakistan, China and Russia. Across one of its borders stand some 170,000 American troops (in Iraq), across another are more than 50,000 Nato troops (in Afghanistan).

The United States has been bitterly opposed to the Iranian regime for three decades. The current American president has made clear time and again that he regards the Tehran government

Bali conference on climate change



HARUN UR RASHID

FACED with melting polar ice, frequent occurrence of cyclones and floods and worsening droughts, climate experts at a massive UN conference on December 3 began asking searching questions as to how quick action towards an international agreement that will limit the rise in global temperature can be negotiated.

A heightened sense of urgency surrounds the two-week (December 3-14) conference in the light of the report issued last month by the UN International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which described the potentially devastating effects of global warming in the strongest language.

The conference had a big boost when it learnt that Australia under the new prime minister ratified the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, leaving totally the US, the only developed country, not to be a party to the Kyoto Protocol. It will increase pressure on the US to seriously consider how to reduce greenhouse gases.

Why new treaty?

The purpose of the conference is to launch negotiations that will lead to a long term policy response to climate change beyond 2012

The issue of global warming is of great concern to Bangladesh because the rise in sea level may submerge many of its south coastal lands under water, uprooting millions of people. Higher sea levels may cause salinity to intrude surface and ground water supplies, disrupting availability of safe drinking water and damaging agricultural lands.

when the first phase of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol expires. The second period of the Protocol starts on 2013 where developing countries (such as China, India, South Korea, and Brazil) are exempted from any cut in emissions.

A meeting of the Kyoto parties in Austria in last August recommended emission cuts for rich nations of 25 to 40 percent by 2020 and green groups are keen for a similar figure to be mentioned in the future global agreement.

Against the background, developed countries are eager to make a compact with developing countries for emissions-cut in a new global treaty where China, Brazil, South Korea, and India agree to cut emissions in future.

Micro issues

The conference opened with delegates from nearly 190 countries including Bangladesh will have to deal the following micro-issues:

- Whether emission cuts would be mandatory or voluntary.
- Does economic growth conflict with reduction of greenhouse gases?
- How to balance economic growth within an environment-friendly system.
- Will poor countries be expected to forego economic growth to cut emissions?

BOTTOM LINE

- How to draw the US, the highest polluter (36%) of the world, into the pact to agree to mandatory cut of emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
- How to bring China, Brazil, South Korea and India to the pact?
- Whether to enforce per capita ceiling on pollution or to reduce emission of greenhouse gases on the basis of development.

Each one of the issues is complex and debatable for months together because many of the developing countries are not yet legally ready to undertake legally binding or semi-binding commitments for their economic development.

Other macro issues

Besides the micro-issues, there are several macro-issues that are linked with environment. Environment cannot be separated from other social and economic issues. It has to have holistic approach.

Some of the macro-issues are described below:

First, poverty reduction is another area which comes within the issues of environment. Poverty is the principal source of pollution in developing countries. Poor people destruct their nearby

forests for fuel. Poor people without proper sanitation, and hygiene, live in slums, and utilise all kinds of materials as fuel, some of them are highly toxic. Unless poverty reduction is addressed, degradation of environment in developing countries will continue.

Second, growth of population is another domain that needs to be considered for environment. The more people in the world, the more housing, the more electricity and the more utilisation of natural resources will be required. By 2050, there would be nearly 9 billion people in the world, 90% of which is expected to be born in poor countries (Bangladesh is likely to have 254 million people by that time).

Third, oil-export countries have always opposed the reduction of use of fossil fuels.

Financial interests of the oil-export countries are to be considered. Their alternative source of income needs to be explored so that these countries become on board for an international agreement for cutting emissions.

Fourth, women, especially in developing countries, constitute the natural linkages with environment. Rural women's role in developing countries is important because rural women obtain their

daily needs from natural resources. They collect water from river or waterhole, use plants as medicine, and gather fuel woods from forests. Rural women are very good in resource management and they know how to use natural resources. Their survival is threatened when forests are denuded and water is polluted.

Fifth, more fundamental is the question as to whether global warming is a cyclical or due to human activities. Although overwhelming number of scientists including the members of the UN IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change), have concluded that human activities are responsible for global warming, some scientists still believe that global warming has nothing to do with human activities and in the past the earth has gone through such cycles of warmth and cold alternately.

Sixth, sustainable development is to be accepted before delegates make up their minds. Sustainable development means natural resources may be used in such a way to meet today's requirements without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future generations.

Seventh and finally, while some economists do not hesitate to use all available natural resources for economic growth, some environment-friendly economists hold the view human beings derive satisfaction not only from man-made or transformed goods but also directly from natural environments, such as parks, beaches, undisturbed forests, fauna and flora. One cannot say that economic growth is the only purpose of human beings on earth as the

old maxim says: "man does not live by bread alone."

The above issues are partly ethical and partly developmental. The degradation of environment should not be seen only through a narrow vision, but through a wider focus including the macro-issues connected with environment. The Bali conference needs to have hard look to the micro and macro issues of environment.

Few participants expect this round of talks in Bali to produce significant breakthrough. It will be session of brain-storming, loud thinking of concluding an agreement by 2009 because the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012.

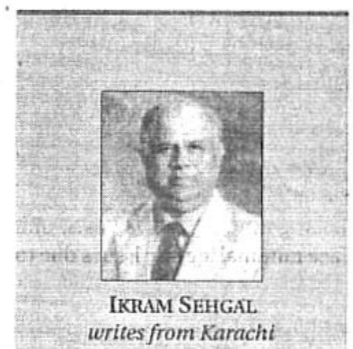
By far the biggest obstacle to forging a new accord is the United States. President Bush on November 28 made it clear this position clear: "We must do it in a way that does not undermine economic growth or prevent nations from delivering greater prosperity for their people."

Let us hope that delegates come up with sensible proposals to have a global framework on climate change.

The issue of global warming is of great concern to Bangladesh because the rise in sea level may submerge many of its south coastal lands under water, uprooting millions of people. Higher sea levels may cause salinity to intrude surface and ground water supplies, disrupting availability of safe drinking water and damaging agricultural lands. It is reported that pollution has led to disappearance of 18 species of birds and animals in Bangladesh. Out of 600 wild species, 70 species are included in the list of endangered ones.

Barister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

This will not stand!



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

WITH the PML(N) wisely deciding not to leave the field open to the PPP and PML(Q) in the Jan 8 elections, the electoral exercise has now some legitimacy. Heavens have not fallen with the presence of these national leaders, tainted or otherwise, in Pakistan. If Ms. Benazir can be given blanket amnesty for corruption then there is no earthly reason to deny Mian Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz, their God-given right, to compete for parliamentary seats. Heavens will also not fall if all of them can freely exercise their challenge before the electorate. This anomaly must be corrected.

A crude straw vote shows that in a free and fair poll (unless something drastic happens between now and Jan 8) the PML(N) gets about 60-65 of the 148 NA seats in Punjab. Mian Nawaz Sharif is well behind in Sindh, NWFP and in Balochistan, and would be lucky getting 10-12 seats of the balance 124 available.

Ms. Benazir's PPP has a solid majority in Sindh (at least 35-37 out of 61 NA seats) and will win a bloc of seats in (mostly southern) Punjab (25-30). In NWFP and Balochistan the PPP will be lucky to

get 4-5 seats, not more than 70-75 seats combined. This tally puts Mian Nawaz Sharif and Ms. Benazir about even.

The PML(Q) should manage 40-45 seats in the Punjab and about 15-18 NA seats in the other Provinces, 60-65 seats in all. The MQM will win 16 or 17 urban seats in Sindh. The MMA will be almost wiped out in the plains of NWFP.

Seat adjustments will get Maulana Fazlur Rahman's JUI (F) faction of the MMA about 10-12 seats in southern NWFP and northern Balochistan, managing possibly 2-3 seats more if JI voters turn up to support JUI (F) candidates in the mountains of northern NWFP, traditionally a JI stronghold.

Resurgent after the 2002 debacle, the ANP should win 10-12 NA seats in NWFP and Balochistan, but nothing in Punjab or Sindh. 18 to 20 independents are expected to get elected. In a suspended parliament anyone who cobbles together a workable majority will be PM -- a PPP-PML(Q)-MQM government in the Centre and Punjab, a PPP-MQM-PML(Q) government in Sindh, a JUI(F) led Coalition in NWFP and a PML(Q) led Coalition in Balochistan.

Fantasy stops here, all credible information points to a free and fair

poll being very unlikely in the Punjab. This includes some selected seats in Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan.

The game plan is for the Pervaz Elahi's election machine to rig and bag as much as 90 NA (or even more) seats in the Punjab. Some of his collaborators are getting cold feet at the possible reaction, cautioning that this attempt at a "landslide" could well boomerang as it did in 1977 when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was going to win anyway but his minions went overboard.

The "gerrymandering" in the Punjab is meant to restrict PML (N) to about 25-27 NA seats and PPP to 18-20 seats. PPP's strong electoral base will prevent widespread rigging in rural Sindh giving it 35-37 NA seats or even more, a total of about 55-60 NA seats nationally.

The MQM and JUI(F) strongholds will remain intact, and will return the same number of seats as in a fair electoral exercise. In a strange move, Pervaz Elahi is supporting some strong Opposition PML(N) and PPP candidates against his own, possible angling for their support in a future "deal."

The rigged election will mean a PML(Q) government in the Centre (coalition with MQM and possibly PPP) and Punjab, PPP-MQM coal-

ition in Sindh, a PML(Q)-led coalition in Balochistan and a JUI (F)-led coalition in NWFP!

The calumny being planned by the Pervaz Elahi-clique to fulfill his cherished dream of becoming the Pakistani PM is a disaster-in-the-making for Pakistan. Contrary to widespread public perception the uniformed rank and file of the Pakistan Army has never been involved in ballot-stuffing etc. in any general elections in Pakistan.

As opposed to the wholesale manipulation in 2002, a handful of intelligence apparatchiks may still involve themselves in perpetuating electoral manipulation in 2008. Most of the electoral fraud will remain the handiwork of public officials and the police in Punjab.

In actual practice, whenever troops are requisitioned for maintaining peace they are required to stay 400 yards away from the polling stations. Inadvertently they give cover to the polling staff and police to do their dirty work.

In a double jeopardy, the man in uniform will be blamed for rigging and manipulating the 2008 elections. This is patently unfair! Loyalty is a two-way street, for having him elected as a "civilian" president; Musharraf owes the

Army loyalty in return. What better ways for him to express this loyalty than to ensure free and fair elections so that the Army's image and reputation is not sullied anymore.

The concerted international media campaign against Pervaz Musharraf and the Pakistan Army which started in early 2006, was side-tracked by the Hezbollah; holding up the Israelis in South Lebanon. One does not normally subscribe to conspiracy theories but this one had too much smoke for fire not to be present.

Those inimical to Pakistan spent tons of money and effort in a well-coordinated multi-directional multi-disciplinary effort. The Newsweek article declaring Pakistan "the most dangerous place on Earth" was the crowning piece. Then Musharraf went and put himself and the Army in the line of fire by launching his autobiography In the Line of Fire!

The courtiers around Pervaz Musharraf lurched from one political gaffe after another in their eagerness to ensure survival of their Patron, more importantly continuity of their own well-being and prosperity.

Pakistan (and the Pakistan Army) cannot afford the luxury of a rigged election, being used as a cudgel, to destroy our image further, the ensuing nightmare would be too high a price to pay for fulfilling Pervaz Elahi's dreams. The Army does not owe Mr. Elahi anything!

Pakistan Army is a "vital ground" for Pakistan so restoring its image must be the major objective. A free and fair electoral exercise will give democracy in Pakistan credibility; the Pakistan

Army needs to get back into the esteem of the Pakistani people.

Transferring the political minefield has been a spectacular debacle; let us not reinforce failure. When the Army sets out to do something that it is meant to do, the Army does it very well. When it tries to do something it cannot, it will always be a disaster. Their performance under adverse conditions in Swat has been nothing short of magnificent, just ask the inhabitants of Swat.

Nothing succeeds like success, build on this success and concentrate on the primary mission, securing the integrity and sovereignty of Pakistan.

This caretaker cabinet can hardly do much in 60 days, either to hold free and fair elections or to rig and manipulate one. However the perception of neutrality is important; Mohammadmian Soomro is unfortunately the symbol of partiality.

More importantly, confidence in an impartial Election Commission (EC) is lacking. Sincerity of Musharraf's intent can be ensured by free and fair elections but also by creating an environment where the public accepts it as free and fair.

Pervaz Musharraf should psyche himself into being a genuinely neutral president, the resultant power-sharing and a viable coalition can be the platform for a stable and effective governance in Pakistan.

We cannot afford a political crisis in crisis-ridden economic year 2008. Rigging and manipulation in elections 2008 is a non-starter. This will not stand!

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

Tehran has moved incrementally, allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency to conduct inspections for years (although not entirely to the IAEA's satisfaction) and been sensitive to pressures and inducements from the West.

But the West, meaning Washington, has been stingy in its offers of carrots, which have often been too little and come too late. One European diplomat, who is not authorised to speak on the record, notes that "Iran did in fact stop enrichment in 2003 and had expected to be rewarded for it, as we, the Europeans, had promised them. But our offer was pretty thin because of America's stand."

In 2005 the Americans finally came onboard and we made a good proposal. But by then the (Iranian) reformers had been discredited, it was three weeks before the election, and (hardliner Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad

became president."

In fact, one of the oddities of Iran is that it enjoys more open debate than any other Middle Eastern country (with the exception of Israel). In the last month alone, reformist former president Mohammed Khatami addressed a rally at which the crowd chanted "Death to the dictator," referring to the current president.

Ahmadinejad accused his opponents of treason and had the former nuclear negotiator, Hossein Mousavian, arrested. And prominent clerics in Iran criticised Ahmadinejad, a layman, for trying to challenge their authority. The Iranian system can be influenced because there are competing centers of power within it, each viewing Iran's interests somewhat differently.

What unites them all, however, is Iranian nationalism, and if the nuclear program is seen by Iranians through that prism, it will be unstoppable.

Washington's mistake has been to play into that interpretation. Western statesmen should stop declaring that Iran has no use for nuclear power, that it cannot be trusted to enrich uranium. This smacks of paternalism -- especially when coming from nations with large nuclear arsenals of their own -- and naturally evokes a defensive response.

Instead, Washington and London and Paris should emphasise the costs of continuing to enrich uranium -- more than \$10 billion to date, according to one estimate. And instead of thundering that Iran is dangerous, President Bush should keep repeating, "We want to have relations with Iran, do business with you, visit your country and have Iranians visit us. We want Iran to join the World Trade Organisation and other such bodies. We want you to be a respected nation. But this cannot happen if you do not verifiably

end your pursuit of nuclear weaponry and support for terrorism. We are ready to put all this on the table."

We know that Tehran's hardliners would reject this offer, but it could produce a feisty debate within the regime and outside. It would add to the feeling in the country that this government is mismanaging Iran's foreign policy. It would dramatically alter a stale negotiating dynamic between Iran and the West.

If Iran accepted, such an opening would, ironically, strengthen the private sector and civil society, and over time weaken the government's grip on the country. A smart policy could, in the long run, win us both policy change and regime change after all.

Farred Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.