

Voter enrolment and upcoming elections

Election Commission needs to roll up its sleeves

THE good news is that fifty per cent of voter enrolment work at the field level has been completed in a period of five months. With six months remaining for all the field work to be wrapped up, it all appears feasible on the part of the Election Commission to move ahead with the scheduled general elections later this year. By June this year, therefore, the nation can look forward to a full-fledged enrolment of voters, a fact that cannot but please everyone. But then comes the not so good news, which is that a mere 25 per cent of voter enrolment where including photographs of voters is concerned has been completed in the last five months.

If only 25 per cent work on photograph-related voter enrolment has been done so far, the remaining 75 per cent of the work can be completed by October, the target date for a finalisation of the voter list, only through maximisation of efforts, although the field work will have been completed by June. There are, for instance, such follow-up measures as a publication of the draft list which again will call for (as such steps usually do) corrections to the list. Then, a final preparation and announcement of the voter list will be followed by the Election Commission finalising an election schedule. Apart from that, it is also burdened with the question of elections to the local bodies.

Given the road map the Election Commission has set for itself and given as well the time factor with all its constraints, it ought now to be its job to roll up its sleeves, put all its logistics in place and go into round the clock work in order to meet its target. With the general masses of people having by now become conditioned to the very real possibility of a new, upcoming electoral exercise, the EC should have its manpower utilise resources to the maximum, through even working on holidays. We understand that the progress of work is constantly being monitored. There should be a chance for all the gaps that remain to be filled in.

Daredevil bank locker break-in

Restore the eroded customer trust

THE incredible incident of robbery, emptying out lockers of ornaments valued at several crores of taka in Dhanmondi branch of Brac Bank has the smack of sensational Hollywood film script about it. After all, the underworld has become part of the global village -- thanks to some ineffective satellite TV channel movies.

The thugs had a style which makes us wary of all kinds of imagination/improvisations running riot with lure of wealth to grab it anyhow. Just think of the slow-motion deceptive nature of the heist staged with one-month-long drilling of a hole on the hotel floor just above the locker room of Brac Bank branch. The robbers made good with their tally of jewelry. Such an operation couldn't have been possible without the connivance of hotel staff and the bank insiders. Even so, we believe that the intensity of the secrecy surrounding the sequence of incidents is simply astounding. It either speaks of places brimming with thugs or that police intelligence has touched a new low.

The reports speak of the concerned bank officials spurning responsibility for the losses of locker customers arguing that they are not supposed to know what was in the safety boxes. But the fact is that physical protection of the locker is certainly bank's responsibility and with that naturally the articles contained in the locker. What is relevant is that there are two keys to a locker, one retained by the bank and the other given to the customer. To open the locker two keys are necessary, one won't do which upholds the principle that safe keeping of the valuables is the prime responsibility of the bank.

The customers pay a chunk of money for the locker service and wouldn't have at all resorted to it had they known that the bank wouldn't accept liability for any loss. We believe the access to the locker, confidential as it is, should nonetheless be subjected to inventorying at the time of registering and recording information about taking away of any article. The claim under the present circumstances may have to be settled by the court. The bank's rules cannot supersede the law of the land.

There should be a legal cover of the rights of the customers. The banks of their own should move in this direction to provide security to all forms of customer deposit.

We would draw attention to the fact that bank branches cannot be located, far less locker service maintained without fully securing the place of any kind of intrusion.

A bowl of rice, a dollop of lentils, some green chilli

GROUND REALITIES

The Bengali, having lived through calamities of a multifarious sort, with hardly any promise of a respite from such maladies in future, has developed a strange propensity of not asking for too much. Give him a bowl of rice with a dollop of lentils, throwing in perhaps a single green chilli for good measure. He will be content. But for a long time now, all this yearning for simple 'dal-bhaat' has regularly been undercut.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE will try to forget what Tapan Chowdhury said about the price of rice, of other things, last week. We will do all we can not to remember the bizarre moment when the entrepreneur-adviser told us that the government had really nothing to do about prices, that indeed it was all a fait accompli no one could roll back. But forgiveness? That is an entirely different proposition altogether.

For now, though, having observed the alacrity with which Tapan Chowdhury's governmental colleagues went on an offensive at damage control, through reassuring the nation that they did not agree with him, we will rest content.

We will pray that in the times to be, this country will truly come by opportunities that will throw up men whose sense of responsibility will not be dulled by their sparks of insensitivity. Let there be no more men and women in office telling us that prices will go up whether or not we like it, that prices have been rising owing to our "increased" capacity to buy the things we need.

And let there not be, at the same

time, ministers or advisers who will admonish the media over their role in forcing the resignation of a member of the government, and tell us that such nefarious activities on the part of newsmen makes it difficult for government to function.

Life is not fair, death always stalks us in this much abused, much maligned country. When you have the price of coarse rice shooting up to Taka 33 a kilogram, or more, you know something of the nature of agony. And yet our collective expectation is that our government, this one or the one to be, will take that agony out of our lives and point out for us the path to a reasonably good future.

The Bengali, having lived through calamities of a multifarious sort, with hardly any promise of a respite from such maladies in future, has developed a strange propensity of not asking for too much. Give him a bowl of rice with a dollop of lentils, throwing in perhaps a single green chilli for good measure. He will be content.

But for a long time now, all this yearning for simple 'dal-bhaat' has regularly been undercut. The lentils have gone out of reach; and

even the chillis are fast turning into folklore. That leaves you with the rice, which you now say must be bought at stupendous prices if you must eat.

The implications are clear; if you cannot pay, you do not eat. Then what are governments for? Ronald Reagan in distant America once spoke of a government in Washington that would be as good as the American people. Expanded in interpretation, it was a statement that applied to all people inhabiting every spot on the globe.

But then, there was Bangabandhu before Reagan. His focus on the creation of a Shonar Bangla, back in the times when Pakistan served as the new coloniser in our lives, had for its underpinning a state of freedom where Bengalis would have two square meals a day, work hard, and then look forward to a panorama of fields bursting with paddy, ponds where the water would go round in ripples because of all the cheerful fish there, and songs punctuating the nation's pastoral landscape.

But even Bangabandhu knew, when the moment of reckoning

came with liberation, that the dream of a golden Bengal called for insistent sacrifice and consistent courage. Note that neither he nor his government told us that there was nothing to be done. The Father of the Nation only asked that we give him three years. We gave him three years.

If today you go into the archives, you will likely observe that in those last few months of Bangabandhu's government, there was promise in the fields, promise of rice and of other food-stuff. We made ready to discard the rusty begging bowl we had carried in our hands for long. We had come through the crisis of 1974, when Henry Kissinger and company would not send us food because we, as a sovereign people, wished to trade with Cuba.

But we will leap across all this question of what might have been. Go into some bits and pieces of global history. You will be amazed at how food, or the lack of it, has left powerful men reeling, even rolling in the mud. In 1964, Nikita Khrushchev was removed from office over the issue of what his enemies called poor agriculture in the Soviet Union.

Long ago, men and women died in Ireland because food was nowhere to be seen. Potatoes went missing and so did lives. But let us come back to Bangladesh, where food has always mattered in the articulation of politics. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani led quite a few bhokha michhils (hunger processions), even as the monsoon rains poured, in the early 1970s.

Seeing the plight of men and women in heightened degrees of emaciation, in 1974, a bitter poet exploded with his "bhaat de... noile ebar maanchitro khabo (give me rice... or else I will gorge on the map)." How many more references do you need to comprehend the misery of those who would like to eat and cannot because of those rocketing, spiralling prices? Men in government say they know where all the shadowy hoarders and profiteers of food stay huddled. Well, let those who govern go after these villains. Why must that besuch a hard job to do?

In the 1960s, we marched through the streets of this country, when it was not yet a country, demanding food, clothing and shelter. Onno chai bostro chai banchar moto banchte chai. That is what we belted out of our lungs even as we went forging dreams of a golden future. The goal was simple; we wished for ourselves a world where dignity mattered.

All these decades on, when you are startled by the outstretched hands of the poor at the railway stations and traffic lights and outside the mosques, you ask sadly why that food and that clothing are still elusive affairs.

Government, we keep quoting Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is always a thriving, throbbing affair. Is it really? And then we stumble on the reality. It is once more an American, this time Jimmy Carter, we go back to in order to find an explanation for our misery. There is a malaise abroad in the land, he told his people in 1980, and went on to lose the election.

Our malaise has been there, always. We have passed from youth to middle age in its sinister shadows. At our elections, we have consistently elected politicians who have offered us visions of a future resting on a dal-bhaat imagery. And we have consistently been disappointed.

Empty plates have largely been our fate, much like the vacant stare where dreams should have been every time we walk into the market place, knowing only too well that we are in the wrong place, and being wrong-footed all the time. Have you ever watched a poor villager, torn bag in hand, spending hours at a weekly haat not knowing what to buy because his low resources do not match the high prices those food sellers demand?

Go to ancient China for wisdom. Long years ago, Confucius spoke for all struggling men; and his words resonate in our souls, despite everything advisers may tell us about rising prices. "Coarse rice for food, water to drink, and the bended arm for a pillow -- happiness may be enjoyed even in these," said he.

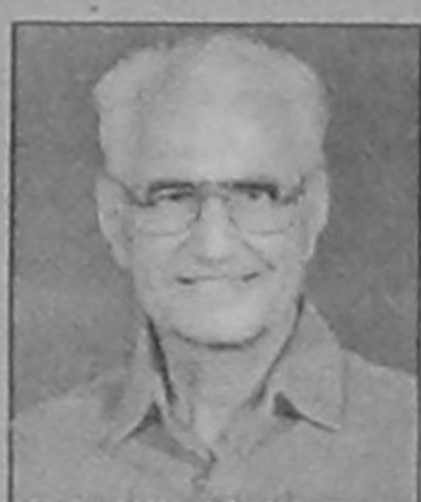
We rest our case.

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How decisive is Bhutto charisma?

PLAIN WORDS

Even so, the Bhutto legend has lived for 30 years of struggle after him. Can it now be transmitted to Asif Zardari and later to Bilawal, like any family heirloom? The modern and moderate Islam of Musharraf, laced with Benazir's pragmatism and realpolitik, is thin gruel to sustain a 1960s-originated charisma. Time will show whether PPP now has what it takes to challenge the so well entrenched army-led coalition of social and economic elites. Does it want to? Maybe PPP's new leadership, like Benazir herself, will happily be accepted as a junior partner in power with the army chief. If so, it will dissipate what remains of the Bhutto-Benazir charisma. Can it grow out of the narrow confines of a family?



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

NATIONAL elections are again scheduled for February 18. How will 40 years old PPP fare in them? Many think that love and admiration for Benazir Bhutto have been heightened by her tragic death. This may have strengthened the Bhutto mystique. Some say it should enable the PPP to win power, based mainly on its successes in Sindh and Punjab, while NWFP too will return a few deputies. Some others are less sanguine.

As for the Bhutto legend, it has had a remarkable record. Just three years old, PPP won a resounding victory in West Pakistan but with no presence in East Pakistan. Ruling generals had to make Zulfikar Ali Bhutto a Chief Martial Law Administrator, with untrammelled power. But seven years later, they deposed him. While retaining enough popular support to win the 1977 elections, he needlessly became ambitious to rig them for a two-thirds majority. But he had alienated powerful interests and, thus, could be overthrown.

Which powerful forces were these? A foreign journalist has put it pithily: Allah, army and America. By Allah was meant

those who claimed authority to interpret divine injunctions, the mullahs; army included the powerful coalition of the economic and social elite that has been sustaining the military's domination since early 1950s; and America supports this elite-cum-military rule. Let no one forget that this troika was what removed and hanged Bhutto senior, thus embellishing the Bhutto legend.

Bhutto died in Punjab and Sindh, with regionalists' help, kept the flame of resistance alive under Movement for Restoration of Democracy through the long and dark night of Zia Martial Law. Zia's repression was intense, and aimed at killing PPP. That PPP survived was due more to its jialas, the committed Bhuttoites, and not so much to Benazir's charisma.

The latter emerged through jialas' need for a symbol to love and cherish; they simply assumed high qualities of head and heart in a largely timid young girl under arrest or in refuge in London until 1986. Many democrats too needed a civilian leader in their endless struggle against military's despo-

tism. The combined efforts of these made Benazir a Joan of Arc.

Long residence abroad made Benazir a pragmatic leader ready to cooperate with the troika of Allah, army and America on assumption that the road to Islamabad passed through Washington, and cooperate she did. She became the PM twice, and left a trail of accusations of corruption.

In 1999, arrived another strongman and made her a refugee again, only to return under another America-brokered deal with Gen. Pervez Musharraf in October last. But, in the meantime, she completed what her father had begun in 1973: to transform a radical party with a supposed left-of-centre program -- inferred from its rhetoric about roti-kapra-aur-makan -- into an America-loving rightwing party that believed in enlightened moderation, pragmatism and realpolitik. Who can accuse PPP of being a left-leaning party now?

The UK and US quickly readopted her as a reinforcement for Gen. Musharraf in his war

effort against Islamic extremism represented by al-Qaeda, Taliban and assorted Islamic militants. How will PPP behave if it wins in the February 18 elections? Despite Benazir's reiteration of roti-kapra-aur-makan slogan since her second arrival from exile, who expected any nationalisation of industries or land reforms or institution of social security (a reform consistent with capitalism) from the fourth PPP government? Washington and Musharraf needed PPP only to promote their agenda.

Why forget that no one is born with charisma? It is acquired when a leader presents a program that immediately clicks with his target audience at a given time. Take Quaid-i-Azam. This ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity was a failed politician in India, and by the early years of 1930s he had decided to settle down in UK and practice law. Then, he was persuaded to return.

He took up the cause of the Muslim community in 1937 in earnest when Congress had formed governments in more than

half of the Indian provinces and Muslims and their landlord leaders were apprehensive about their future under the Congress. He verbalised what the Muslim Leaguers wanted to hear, and instantly clicked. The rest is history.

Take Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was a second rank Awami League leader. That is, until the whole of East Pakistan became filled with anti-Ayub feelings, and he presented his six-point program. It worked like magic in East Pakistan.

In West Pakistan, Zulfy Bhutto was one of Ayub Khan's minister of not much consequence. The 1965 war and Altaf Gauhar's propaganda extravaganza burnished his image as a militant nationalist, with his thousand years war with India rhetoric. Soon he exploited the Tashkent Crisis and cashed in on anti-Ayub feelings: he formed PPP in 1967 on the roti-kapra-aur-makan slogan, and within three years PPP won big in West Pakistan (1970). But by 1977 he had become controversial in cities and invited an agitation of rare intensity against his party. The army could safely overthrow (and hang) him, despite his fairly wide acceptability in villages, largely because of his defiance of America on the nuclear program and his foreign policy.

Even so, the Bhutto legend has lived for 30 years of struggle after him. Can it now be transmitted to Asif Zardari and later to Bilawal, like any family heirloom? The modern and moderate Islam of Musharraf, laced with Benazir's pragmatism and realpolitik, is thin gruel to sustain a 1960s-originated charisma. Time will show whether

PPP now has what it takes to challenge the so well entrenched army-led coalition of social and economic elites. Does it want to?

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Factually, 160 million people are searching for requisite leadership. True, Nawaz Sharif has emerged as a leader of men, though mainly in Punjab. Will he grow further, as he may if he continues to support the lawyers' demands for a democracy free from the military's stranglehold, with a charisma of his own? Who knows how deep his new liberalism is? But the possibility is there -- more so if he can work with the new leadership thrown up by lawyers and judges.

But if a true regime change is required after so long to replace the military-led coalition of vested interests, a much larger coalition is needed. Unless PML-N closely cooperates with PPP, and the two together co-opt the leaders of the legal fraternity, it will be impossible to unhorse the military-backed politicians. That will cement the alliance of the middle class with the common people -- an irresistible force if it is aroused. But this will require concrete measures for better education, healthcare etc. Would this composite leadership have the imagination to unitedly work and take Pakistan by storm?

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I keep wondering...

I keep wondering about many of our third generation of otherwise bright boys and girls, who are either pursuing their higher studies at some of the American or European universities or, having completed their studies, are now working there. They often come home to meet their old parents or relations; they often discuss plans for the return journey even before they board the aircraft for the journey home;

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

WHEN we gained our independence over 36 years ago I was overjoyed. I still remember the day when the Pakistani forces surrendered to the victorious Indian army at the Ramna racecourse ground. The euphoria, and the ecstasy of the public, at least in the capital, as I had witnessed was unprecedented.

I keep wondering as to what happened since that day. As I look around, I find that we are, as a nation, confused and totally direction-less, except for the fact that from time to time I hear of

great optimism from a handful of eminent members of the civil society and intellectuals-cum-politicians.

They talk of corruption and the need to punish those involved, but, frankly, I am more concerned about the all-round moral and ethical degradation that has taken place. Even the parents of today teach their children the art of "money making" instead of "character building." While passing by a college I see young boys and girls standing right in the middle of the road having tea and gossiping, and if you happen to honk they seem to be extremely annoyed,

and often curse you.

I keep wondering about many of our third generation of otherwise bright boys and girls, who are either pursuing their higher studies at some of the American or European universities or, having completed their studies, are now working there. They often come home to meet their old parents or relations; they often discuss plans for the return journey even before they board the aircraft for the journey home; whereas it has been my experience that many of the Europeans and the Americans who come to this country as venerable "consultants," given the opportunity,

they would not like to leave since they find that there are so many "opportunities and challenges" to meet. The attitude of the Bengalis happens to be quite the opposite. This is mostly due to the fact that Bengalis as a race have never been outgoing and adventurous in their lives and living. Their narrow vision and fixed notions continue to haunt them no matter what, although it is also true that this is also due to the influence and spread of multiculturalism driven by factors of economic compulsions; yet, surely, we could have done better.

I keep wondering as to what it is that makes us the way we are. I find that we are a nation that is always ready to accept anything and everything as "fait accompli." It may sound rather cruel, but the truth is that most of us have negative work culture and do suffer from a deep-set inertia. Begging and receiving handouts

have become a culture with many of us, not just the poor alone.

I keep wondering as to what makes us such easy prey to temptations, and to look for the easy way out. It looks as though each one of us is ready to reach the top even before we begin the race. I believe that this could be attributed to two factors. First and foremost, jealousy, and the other, lack of confidence in our own selves, which is driven by a sense of insecurity.

I keep wondering as to why no one to this day ever mustered the courage and the honesty to even analyse the shortcomings and the various inherent flaws in our War of Liberation, both pre and post-war times, as though we are apprehensive that something unpalatable for many of us who stand glorified today may emerge. For example, of late, we are hearing passing remarks on the authenticity of the number of

people killed or women raped during the nine-month occupation of the country by the Pak army and the actual 13-day war. That is why it is my belief that our independence has turned into an end in itself rather than a means to an end.

Innumerable other "controversies" exist. It is a shame that we are still squabbling over who did what during the War of Liberation. With absolute humility and malice towards none I continue to have this feeling that independence came too early, no matter how heightened the sufferings of the people might have been.

We are yet to understand and appreciate the value and essence of independence and, therefore, we continue to use and abuse it. I keep wondering as to what it is with us that we continue to talk about democracy at crossroads, at seminars and workshops; hundreds of intellectual discus-

sions and round table talk shows have taken place and yet, time after time, we end up working against, and vandalising, the very essence of democracy and democratic practices. To top it all, there are those, beginning from the era of Ayub Khan in the then Pakistan, who continue to come up with "new and revised versions" of democracy.

Being a student of history to this day, I have known no other brand of democracy that has worked any better than that advocated by that famous president of USA, Abraham Lincoln, as propounded in his famous Gettysburg address.

I keep wondering as to why this country has been continually limping since its birth, despite the fact that we have amongst us economists, engineers, historians, planners, and a host of qualified people in many other fields of knowledge, and who are as good as they come anywhere in

the world. To my thinking, I believe this is largely due to the fact that each one of them is busy basking in the glory of his individual world. There is no conscious effort on their part to disseminate or evenly spread that storehouse of knowledge and information in a concerted and coordinated way through the length and breadth of the society.

I keep wondering about another yet aspect of our nature. I am convinced that we, as a nation, have a serious dearth of patriotic people. Not only that, most of us have little or no concept of "nation" or "nationalism." I have often felt that we are nothing more than a congregation of people locked in a delta. Let us face it, most of us are incapable of any collective thinking for collective good.

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