

EC's talks with political parties

Pave the way for an accord on electoral reform

THE resumption of the dialogue between Election Commission and the political parties on February 24 should inject dynamism into the otherwise lacklustre atmospherics related to electoral preparations. The dialogue stalled for more than two months due to a legal dispute over the question of who should represent BNP is now being rightly pushed forward pending High Court judgement on the issue -- not taken the earlier decision to invite one faction of BNP and not both.

The second phase of talks scheduled from February 24 to 28 with 15 political parties, to the exclusion of BNP for the time being, is to clear the deck for the caretaker government to initiate a national dialogue next month with the political parties aiming to hold a credible parliamentary election in due time. However it must be kept in mind that BNP's absence in the dialogue process is a serious gap in the whole process.

The politicians' talks with the EC have before them the electoral reform agenda and that with the caretaker government are envisaged to produce a national consensus on reforming the political structure so that we do not revert back to pre-1/11 situation. Thus the dialogue is an important stepping stone to the second one.

The stakes are high for the political parties as well as for the government whose collective responsibility it is to steer clear of all controversies towards fulfilling the overarching national agenda for free, fair, fully participated and credible election by end-2008, if not before.

Our hope is that all political parties would cooperate unhesitatingly in avoiding any posture that could deter the progress of talks. Of course, the talks cannot be conclusive without taking the BNP on board; that is why we urge that the legal dispute over legitimate representation of BNP be resolved at the earliest -- one way or the other.

The overriding fact that all concerned must bear in mind is that the political parties, the electorate and the government, going by its oft-repeated commitments, are all eager to hold the election sooner than later. There should be no reason why such unwritten consensus cannot be sealed as an accord among all concerned to hold the election according to the road map.

Honouring the martyrs

It's never too late

THE decision to rename the villages of the seven Birshreshthas of the Liberation War of 1971 and three martyrs of the 1952 Language Movement after their names is indeed a highly commendable one. We are also happy to learn that the government has further decided to establish a library and a memorial museum in each of the villages through the local district councils. This is almost akin to paying off a debt that has been long due. Surely this laudable step will help keep the memory of their heroic deeds ever fresh in the minds of the present and future generations.

The history of the Language Movement of 1952 and that of the War of Liberation of Bangladesh of 1971 is full of vigour, courage and patriotism hardly seen in the contemporary world. Bengalis joined the war in 1971 with one single vow -- to rid Bangladesh of the enemy. In the process of the war they were prepared to lay down their lives and wouldn't stop until the goal was achieved. The authorities selected seven war heroes to be awarded the highest honour -- Birshreshtha -- for sacrificing their lives at a time when the country needed it most. Their supreme offering made a difference and helped us carry forward our fight for an independent country.

We strongly believe wider advocacy for perpetuating the legends of the national heroes need to be undertaken so that the young generation of today can learn to respect them. It is through such awareness building and motivational work that we can ensure better upkeep of the library and museum in future. Otherwise, soon, they might fall into ruins.

We would like to express once again our satisfaction at the timely and momentous decision taken to show utmost respect to our national heroes. We believe this is the least we could do for them.

Of crooked cops and prattling politicians



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE despicable act of robbery committed by a serving Assistant Commissioner of Chittagong Metropolitan Police has shamed and shattered many well-meaning hearts. This writer as a former law-enforcement practitioner feels especially distressed because experience has shown that the life styles of the overwhelming majority of our police personnel are no different from the ordinary law-abiding Bangladeshis.

This writer, like many other before and after him, has come across thousands of dutiful policemen, ungrudging sons of the peasants of Bangladesh ever ready to the call of duty. A considered view with a great deal of certitude is that like ordinary Bangladeshis most police personnel have reconciled to their fate and quietly wait for a better tomorrow. Like their countrymen they are admirably patient. So how come the criminal acts of some black sheep continue to smear the good deeds of scores of painstaking policemen? Is there any truth in the premonition that the bad hats in uniform have not been dealt with an iron hand? Have undesirable elements found their way into police department due to the so-called pressing factors?

Coming to the so-called pressing factors, it would be relevant to point out that the aforementioned criminal officer reportedly belongs to the

much maligned 24th BCS batch, whose hurried entry, truncated training and premature posting to field situation under unusual circumstances attracted widespread adverse publicity in the not-too-distant past.

It would be pertinent to recollect that 'The Daily Star' in its lead news of 23rd October 2005 reported that half-trained cops were scheduled to report to duty posts for alleged election related assignments and that the same would be realised by shortening the training period of police

officers of different ranks. It was reported then that 200 Assistant Superintendents of Police who were recruited through 24th BCS examination would complete their training after nine months only to meet administrative exigencies.

The question that should bother us is whether there was an unhealthy motive in the recruitment of more than usual number of officials in the penultimate year of a political government. Such premonition arises because the integrity of recruitment process of public services in the recent past was not above board. And now it has been seen that premature field exposure to a duty post without basic orientation has been dangerously unwholesome. The accusations of intake of partisan law enforcement officials have complicated an already fearfully polarised

attracting headlines of national newspapers was no surprise in the recent past. In fact many senior police officers made specific mentions of the pernicious political pressures being exerted on them with regard to appointments, transfer and postings of different ranks. Such officials had also complained about the entry of undesirable and unsuitable individuals and inappropriate posting violating the usual procedure and disregarding the chain of command. Reportedly, a district level commander lamented that the unbridled political meddling had made the subordinate officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station more powerful than him.

The police executives across the divide did not realize that the police as an official organ was expected to be the relief-provider. They ensured

the intake of undesirable persons in exchange of material favours without appreciating that appointees from a shady deal would turn into bitter and insensitive cops in no time.

Under circumstances as above, it is only natural that bitter individuals occupying positions of coercive power would behave abnormally. The minds and motivations of such individuals remained preoccupied with the compulsions of recouping their initial investment at the earliest. Quite naturally, the lure of the lucre took its toll.

public life. During the period between 1991 and 2006, that is, in the tenure of two political governments, bulk recruitments of managerial level officers were effected despite the reservation of senior professionals in the department. The demands of the so-called emerging political requirements had to be met. In the process half-baked and ill-trained officials were produced.

Disconcerting news about the unsavoury political influence on several layers of police hierarchy would be necessary in public interest.

There are definite reasons to be apprehensive as in the recent past police officers were tasked to survey ruling party candidate popularity. The unfortunate experience has been that most often appeals and entreaties for stopping blatant politicization of the police have fallen on deaf ears and the political establishment has displayed a 'carry on regardless' attitude. The paramount necessity of insulating the enforcement organ from political influence has not been taken note of.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately, there is no agreement among the different segments of the society as to what is expected or wanted from our police. In such a situation, our policemen indulge in doing things which they ought not to do or in

refraining from doing things they ought to do, to favor politicians in power and ask them to use their influence to obtain choice postings, to avoid being transferred, to mitigate disciplinary sentences or to earn advancement in rank. Thus a necessary basis has been provided for a mutually advantageous barter. This give-and-take between the police and the politicians has thrived because superintendence and control over the police rests in the political executive.

The acts of a few black sheep must not be allowed to smear the virtues of toiling policemen. The bad hats must be dealt with an iron hand at the very first instance of criminality. The unholy alliance between criminal policemen and corrupt politicians must be broken and the performance of both should be under continuous vigilance and constant scrutiny. The recruitment process of police functionaries have to be sanitized to prevent the entry of undesirable elements and drastic disciplinary actions relating to delinquent police officers must not be interfered with. These are not tall orders. We need them to bring sanity in our governance scenario.

The deviation of policemen in the form of criminal acts and other illegal activities are always deplorable as they shake the foundation of the society by eroding faith and trust in the rule of law. The most visible symbol of authority can never escape criticism for malfunctioning of any description. They cannot ignore public opinion. This needs to be constantly impressed upon the rank and file. At the same time it needs to be seriously examined at the earliest whether the bulk of our police force should continue to be ludicrously equated with the unskilled workers and whether police modernization schemes will remain an area of low priority.

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STRAIGHT LINE

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Iran, the region and the United States



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE regional security landscape and Tehran's security outlook has dramatically changed since 11 September 2001. In 2000, at the beginning of this decade, Iran had two sworn enemies on either flank -- the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the east and Saddam Hussein in Iraq on the west. After the terrorist attacks on the USA on 9/11, the dynamics started evolving first in Afghanistan and then later in Iraq. Soon after the attacks on New York and Washington came the American-led international coalition invasion in Afghanistan that overthrew the Taliban. Then, less than two years later came the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime.

These developments were seen by Tehran as a 'mixed blessing'. It brought unease with the deployment of US troops on either side of Iran and also a feeling of vulnerability that Tehran itself might be the next target. The consolidation of the US presence in Central Asia on a parallel track also helped to create a belief of encirclement within the Iranian psyche.

This atmosphere of uncertainty has led Iranian policy planners to seek pre-emptive protection through a dual pronged policy -- closer ties with the emerging energy giant Russia and energy hungry China on the one hand (for ensuring immediate security for its infrastructure and within the UN Security Council) and exhibiting a degree of willingness to conduct talks with the United States on a number of issues, including their nuclear programme and alleged support for organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, on the other. At the same time Iran has embarked on the strat-

egy of developing an indigenous military industry and relying on missiles to overcome any weakness in conventional capability. This approach has been best reflected in Iran's launching of a domestically built research rocket in February and unveiling of its first major space centre. Through such action, Iran is trying to demonstrate that it has similar technological capacity as 11 other countries (possessing sufficient space technology to be able to launch satellites into space).

The continuation of such an

ing more inflexible in Lebanon and for Hamas to be more aggressive in the Gaza Strip in Palestine.

The Gulf countries have received such Iranian attention with mixed feelings of concern. At the same time, they have been careful to retain the option to turn to the United States as the foremost element in their defence posture. Iran has tried to counter this trend of thought by repeatedly calling for a regional security system based on the active contribution of regional states and free from foreign influence. GCC

Security Council that controls major foreign policy and military decisions. Then come important members of the political and religious hierarchies and the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations (created in June 2006 by Ayatullah Ali Khamenei). All these elements act as an effective balance in the equation with the rather mercurial President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The prospect of an Iran eventually armed with long distance capacity missiles and probable nuclear warheads has been a source of major concern for both regional Arab oil producing countries as well as the consumers of this commodity -- the USA and the European Union.

The equation has also become that much more complex with Iran seeking an indigenous nuclear capability to reaffirm its regional leadership role. Iran has seen both India and then Pakistan achieving such a status and do not feel that it should be denied such an opportunity. Iran has also repeatedly tried to support its claim by pointing out that its effort is civilian in nature and that it is a party to all international agreements on the control of weapons of mass destruction.

Nevertheless, Israel, important sections of the political leaderships in the USA and in Europe continue to believe that a nuclear-Iran would intimidate its neighbours, challenge a US-based regional security system and possibly at a later date be a clandestine provider of nuclear weapons/technology to terrorist organisations. They are also carefully monitoring Tehran's building of a broad infrastructure of influence in Iraq, its growing close relations with major

Iranian model of Velayet-e-Faqih (guardianship of the jurist) with direct clerical control of the government.

Washington, quite understandably is wary of Iran's overtures in Iraq. It might want Iran's involvement in helping to settle the dust in Iraq but is not willing to acknowledge Iran as an important stakeholder in the region.

The USA and its partners in Europe have steadfastly tried to contain Iran through growing forms of economic sanctions and hints that armed confrontations (limited military strikes) had not been ruled out. This was the situation till the end of the third quarter of last year. The belligerent vocabulary has however slightly reduced in recent weeks.

US President George Bush, during his recent visit to the region aimed at lobbying Arab support to contain Iran repeatedly reminded Iran that it must play a more responsible role for the stability of the region. There was however no upping the ante over possible military strikes. This was probably the result of the steadfast support received by Iran from Russia and China. The revelation by a recent

members have however been particularly careful not to get involved too much in political rhetoric. They have maintained straightforward cultural, religious and commercial ties with Iran without too much of an overt friendliness.

Their attitude in this regard has been partially the result of President Ahmadinejad's controversial foreign policy rhetoric. Recent statements by the Gulf Arab leaderships have also indicated their desire to see a relative détente between Iran and the United States along with reduced tensions with Israel. They believe that this would go a long way in promoting greater regional stability.

It would be important to identify here Iran's regional-strategic goals. They seek to expand Iran's economic and cultural ties with neighbouring States (except Israel), enlarge its sphere of influence and resist US military and political presence and policies. The driving force behind such a policy is largely due to the interaction of some of its interest groups, personalities and institutions. The most important among them is the Supreme National

Security Council that controls major foreign policy and military decisions. Then come important members of the political and religious hierarchies and the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations (created in June 2006 by Ayatullah Ali Khamenei). All these elements act as an effective balance in the equation with the rather mercurial President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

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US intelligence estimate that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons programme in place, also appears to have indirectly forced the USA to reduce its threatening posture in a presidential election year. This has led some analysts in the USA to suggest that Washington should now try out a more constructive engagement with Tehran to consolidate gains in Iraq and stabilise the situation in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and Afghanistan.

President George W. Bush reaffirmed the strengthening of its long-standing security commitments in the Gulf but also realised that the Gulf states are determined to avoid further conflict in the region. The Gulf leadership has listened to Bush about the dangers of a resurgent Iran and agreed to further modernise their arsenal. At the same time, the Gulf states also indirectly indicated the need to establish better ties of understanding by themselves with Iran.

The US must have taken note of the invitation extended to the Iranian President to attend a summit of the GCC States in Doha, Qatar, in December 2007, a few weeks before Bush's visit to the area. Such an unprecedented gesture could not have been considered even five years ago. The Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa has also openly questioned the validity of Iran being isolated and punished now that it is evident that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons. This approach by the Arab world has also probably been evoked from questions about the efficacy of Bush's visit to the area. Arab analysts have noted that the value of the visit was limited given the fact that 2008 is Bush's last year in office and also because there is no incumbent President or Vice President running for office in the next US presidential election.

It is a complex equation but the Iran question in terms of regional interests will have to be addressed sooner than later by the next US President in 2009. One can only hope that this is done with care and that it is a constructive engagement.

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Let's have our indigenous version of pluralism

S M AKTARUZZAMAN

Civilised society is now 'architected' upon market economy and democracy, human rights based liberal ideology, enlightened civil society and free press, pluralism being the pivotal force to all. Pluralism is a pervasive and comprehensive concept of recognising, interacting and stabilising with diverse opinions and dogmas. It entails that every thing has got its inherent phenotypes of meaning, understanding and implication. Open market economy principally rests on pluralism, the grand total of price mechanism and rationality of customers and producers. It holds that a market has pluralistic customers and suppliers, and the price and production of any goods depends on its demand and supply. The core driving force of the open economy is the multifarious competition among the consumers and producers for the price and value.

This competition is threatened by loyalty and monopoly. Loyal consumers select a product based on their affinity towards that not on its value or price, and ultimately impede the development and growth of new products. On the other hand, monopoly creates a major share and control over the market, price and choice of the customers, and from the entry of new entrepreneur. The government of market economy thus ensures that rules of plurality properly operate, without measurable interference on the price mechanism.

Secondly, the democratic state system centrally stands on the pluralistic political values, manifestos and cultures; and formally constructs power representation through fair, rational and competitive multi-party electoral processes. The voter, as the democracy essentialises should have proper capacity to understand the concept and reality of pluralism, and to critically evaluate the activ-

ities of the political parties and institutions to select their political power. It is the loyalty to the political parties which thwarts the transparency, accountability and positive growth of democracy. Loyal supporters condense, affiliate and skew their supports towards their party with maneuvered arguments without recognising the national interest.

Democracy has very intimate relationship with human rights principles. Though human right is argued by some cultural relativists to be western and imperialistic, but it has been found to change the world from inquisitive and feudal regimes, and to offer peace and development in multicultural and globalised societies. The Declaration of Universal Human Rights tends to ensure equal rights of all human beings irrespective of cast, class, religion and nationality. It inherently upholds the concept of pluralism; it ensures safeguarding the interest of religious, political, ethnic, racial and cul-

tural minorities. Enlightened civil society and free press construct the circulatory and nervous system of a democratic society. Civil society is an organic, flexible and participative concept that volunteers in generating thoughts and ideas for the society and keeps pressure on the government for ensuring human rights and development. The civil society should be of diverse origin and interest and enlightened with knowledge. According to Kulkarni, an Indian philosopher, knowledge is plural, it has no hierarchy, brand or jurisdictional limitations.

Globalisation and information technology have made the knowledge immensely plural, fluid and accessible. Though some scientists identify the press as the part of the civil society, but free press itself is an independent determinant of democratic society. The well known American journalist Walter Cronkite asserted that "freedom of the press is not just important to

democracy, it is democracy"; democracy cannot be built without free media. Only strong, pluralistic and independent media can protect societies from the gangrene of corruption, inefficiency and impunity by creating and maintaining an atmosphere of transparency and accountability. But, the monopolistic media, if happens as an individual or industrial entity might be counterproductive. It could create so-called "Fourth Estate." Indeed, some journalists are often criticised for forgetting their role of a watchdog and not that of the mastery of society. Such tendencies do not only problematise administrative authorities but also embarrass and misguide intellectuals and society.

Pluralism is not a single word. We should understand the full spectrum of pluralism. According to the Harvard School of Pluralism, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity; diver-

sity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies. Secondly, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious and political difference and proximity without removal of our mutual ignorance and darkness.

Thirdly, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. The transversal paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. Lastly, pluralism is based on dialogue. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and

listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the "table" will agree with one another. But it welcomes the acceptance of better formulation and argument. Because, intelligent are those who accept the truth when revealed.

Bangladesh has stepped into the gateway of democracy, and market economy long before. We have multifarious print and electronic media which update us with latest information and news, and we have different civil societies and think tanks. We can claim that Bangladesh has the infrastructure of development and civilisation. We have to activate and lubricate these mechanisms by cultivating pluralism. Very reductively, some progressive schools misunderstand, and some sporadic terrorist incidents insinuate our dominant Muslim based society as extremist and fundamentalist. I will not examine their observation, rather

argue that Islam as a religion, according to the scripture, rests on optimum pluralism.

Laith Kubba, Director of the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue in London conducted a comprehensive study on the discourse of Islam and liberal democracy, and demonstrated that Islam taught us principles of freedom, human dignity, equality, democracy and the rule of law of its own scriptural and prophetic genera. He also argued that Islam though not exactly identical but is very much compatible with the cognate principles of liberal democracy and pluralism. So, leaving aside the jolting around the religious and political poignancies, we should concertedly expedite our effort to develop and culture our indigenous version of pluralism to have a peaceful civilised society.

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