

Will losers reject election results?

Jalil on parole

His medical treatment should leave nothing to be desired

By the time this comment appears ailing Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil will have been receiving treatment in a Singapore hospital. We are relieved at the news of parole being granted for his treatment abroad at a rather critical phase of his health condition requiring dialysis leading to possibly kidney transplantation. He has had multiple health problems for a long time.

At long last, the government has acknowledged the anxiety of the medical specialists for his health and we hope and pray that he would return from Singapore in good health. Receiving healthcare, let alone life saving medical attention, is basic right of citizens including detainees. As a matter of fact, the weal and woe of prisoners in custody are the responsibility of the custodian and it is always better that authorities take decision for medical intervention at the right time whether in the country or outside it.

There are other high profile detainees like Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia whose health conditions have been subject matter of concern. Begum Zia's two sons have been treated in hospital. Medical team attending on Sheikh Hasina has advised for her treatment in the USA. The government may be required to take a policy decision on such issues.

At the other pole, there have been reports of high profile prisoners allegedly staying in hospitals for long without good reasons.

The air is rife with speculations about the health conditions of various politicians detained mostly on charges of corruption and abuse of power. In such a context, it would be in the fitness of things for the government to update the people on the health conditions of the ailing high profile prisoners.

There is little doubt that the jail houses are far too crammed with prisoners and its medical resources are also too thinly spread out, so that despite best efforts and intention, the authorities are hard put to provide specialised medicare to those who are in dire need for it. We cannot ignore the medicare needs of ordinary prisoners as well; so, an improvement and re-equipment of the jail hospitals is called for. But the government would do better to take the overall constraints into account, especially when the high profile detainees are mostly elderly people. Some policy adjustment in the jail code may be necessary to ensure that those who need critical medical support is given it.

Need we say, the judicial process will have to be completed, sooner than later?

Dowry fatalities

This stain on society must be obliterated

THE death of a young housewife, who struggled for long nine days before succumbing to the burn injuries inflicted on her allegedly by the members of her husband's family, is another example of ghastly violence that our women are exposed to. The victim's family had reportedly failed to meet her husband's demand for dowry.

Now, such dowry-related violence against women is taking place from time to time, despite all that has been said and done to eliminate this social vice. The law against dowry is stringent enough to act as a deterrent. But the reality of the wretched lives of young women, particularly among the less educated sections of society, is that they still have to justify their presence in the husband's family by bringing in money and other valuables from their parents' home. This is something that cannot coexist with the plan of giving women their rightful place in society. And nothing can be more difficult for a man of limited means to pay a hefty amount as dowry for his daughter's marriage. Yet, this evil practice has spread its tentacles deep into society, causing great misfortune to the innocent girls.

We have to realise that the efforts made so far to put an end to repression on women have not produced the desired results. Obviously, the law is not enough to deal with the situation. The women's rights groups and the conscientious in society have to come forward to create the social awareness to eliminate the deep-seated evil once and for all. Resistance against it must take the form of an organised movement led by the intellectuals, religious leaders and all those who can play a role in shaping public opinion.

It is perhaps time we asked ourselves whether the lives of women are less valuable than that of their male counterparts. Ghoulish crimes like acid throwing and killing for dowry should put society as a whole to shame. It's clearly not enough to demand trial of the killers but to make sure they are punished. Essentially, we have to ensure that no such killing takes place in future if we don't want the façade of our civility to be torn apart time and again by such barbaric acts.

Why I voted for Barack Obama

CHARLES LARSON

LAST month, in the Maryland state primary, I cast my vote for Senator Barack Obama, praying that he will be the next president of the United States. As a seventy-year-old white American, I have to confess that until as recently as a few months ago, I never thought that I would have the opportunity to vote for a black man for president of the United States.

It was an exhilarating experience to touch the electronic voting screen and cast my vote -- not only for Obama but for hopeful change, any change that will end the wretched years of George Bush's presidency.

Even more significantly, I am not alone. A strong wave is sweeping across the country, as old racial stereotypes are finally being broken down. Ditto gender stereotypes. People are equally committed to voting for Hillary Rodham Clinton -- especially women, who have also waited their entire lives for such a possibility. Thus, two strong tsunamis

are sweeping across the country and, fortunately, most Democrats say they will be happy with either of them as the presidential candidate for their party.

What they want is change, the opportunity to sweep up all the pieces of the breakage scattered everywhere by the Bush administration, and start afresh.

Rarely do people or countries have such an opportunity. Instead, they sink further and further into the morass of stagnation, defeatism, negativism -- all prohibiting the possibility of renewal. I remember the last time a similar opportunity captured the imaginations of so many American citizens, and it was a long time ago.

In 1961, when John F. Kennedy became president, many of us rallied to his call for thinking beyond ourselves and imagining what we could do for our country instead. Along with thousands of others, I joined the Peace Corps, a journey that took me to Africa -- to Nigeria -- and changed my life forever.



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THOSE veteran election-mongers have gotten their best three-piece and designer pajama-kurta (politician brand) washed and ironed to go to the Election Commission (EC). They have sniffed the hint of election in the air, like those seasonal migratory birds that can sniff winter in the air and know where to go when.

The veritable veterans know it is time to go to the EC. The ice is beginning to thaw in the frozen political North Pole, polemic is about to begin!

By all indications, we are slowly but surely moving towards the general election, scheduled to be held at the fag end of the year. We have been assured and reassured by the chief advisor, the army chief and the chief election commissioner (CEC) about holding of election in time and we see no reason why they should dilly-dally about it. The CEC has even declared, quite emphatically, that he does not want to go back on his pledge and then retire with the khatib of "National Betrayal." He made his point there.

Then, last Thursday, none other than the Law Advisor AF Hassan Arif said that emergency would be relaxed before the City

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

The obdurate question that keeps coming back to our mind is, what will happen if these political parties of questionable past and bleak future get rejected by the voters in the election? Will the losers accept the results with dignity, or will they accuse the EC of "managing" the elections? Worst, will they say, as they are saying now in many words, the election has been staged to put "the chosen candidates to power?"



Corporation election, and totally lifted before the national election. That, coming from the law adviser's mouth, should lift up the morale of the politicians and their supporters who are gearing up for the election.

This is also an occasion for some of the veteran corrupt politicians to feel elated at the prospect of managing party nomination (Qualification: money, muscle power, good record of beating the hell out of the opposition), contesting the

election, and coming back with renewed vigour to plunder.

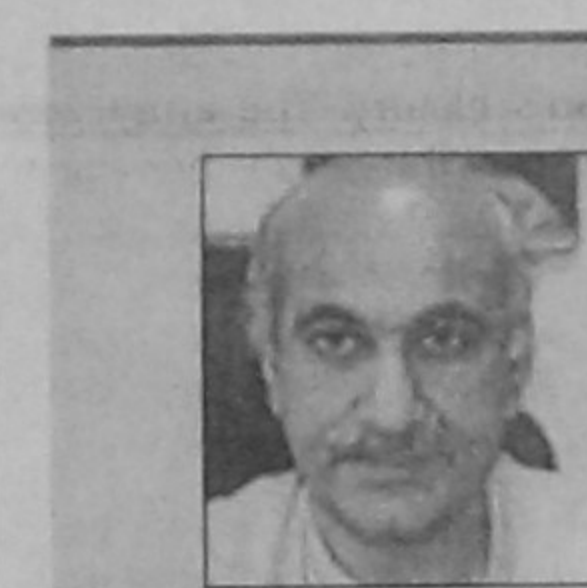
The progress achieved so far in preparing the voter list (4 crore done) and the ongoing dialogue between EC and the political parties are indicative enough that things are going as per the Roadmap. It is expected that by October the voter list preparation work will be completed. If so, then why some politicians have so much distrust on the EC? Even Awami League did not hesitate that

much to contest the 1970 election organised by the then Pakistani military junta!

These politicians, having no better way to draw public attention, holler early now and then for an early election and handing over of power to the people's representatives. But why are they so sure that people this time would elect them to power once again after what they have seen in the last ten years?

Even LDP, which is kept alive through bottle-feeding, has

Looting the vote bank



M.J. AKBAR

JOBS, unfortunately, are flexible. In a perfect world I would take just one year off and be a farmer on the eve of a P.C. Chidambaram election budget -- after having taken good care to avoid committing suicide the moment I became a son of the soil. We poor farmers can never quite escape the cycle of famine and flood, can we? After years of drought, it never rains but pours.

Never mind that Finance Minister Chidambaram has not clarified how precisely he is going to find the money to pay for the waiver of Rs. 60,000 in what are mostly bad debts; he wants us to leave it to his intelligence, and he is undoubtedly an intelligent man.

We humble farmers are grateful for whatever comes our way. Never mind that the last finance minister to try something like this, V.P. Singh, who did this on a much smaller scale, left the banking industry in disarray. Who cares? Failed banks will only hurt the rich man's economy.

The Congress formula for a victory in a general election is rather clever. The first ploy is to create the conditions for a plague and take credit for a miracle cure. The second line of private thought is even more cynical. If this ruse works, then the Congress can laugh all the way to the vote bank in October and tax us all next February till our pipes squeak. And if the ruse does not work, it will be some other government's headache.

In the 19th century, American hustlers used to peddle "snake

oil" at fairs to gullible fellow countrymen. This Sonia Gandhi-Mamohan Singh-Chidambaram loan waiver is the biggest snake-oil sale in the history of finance.

Loan waivers have been tried before, but they were comparatively modest. This one is a circus of magnificent proportions. It is not the audacity of hope, but the audacity of recklessness. Only when you are certain that you have nothing to lose do you gamble everything on an IOU. Duryodhana tried it in the Mahabharata. The results were not particularly happy.

Make no mistake about it; you and I and every Indian is going to pay for this waiver, unless the government chooses to print money and further encourage inflation. Inflation is heating now and it could be a raging fever

in six months.

This column has been arguing for some time that a general election will be held this year. This budget is confirmation that the date will be around October. The government might have wanted to cash in quickly, and hold a May election, but that is not feasible for logistical reasons. The Election Commission needs time. Summer heat and monsoon rains make elections untenable till October.

To stretch the timetable beyond October would be foolish. Already, prices of essential goods are leaping up. A person I met this week in Jamshedpur put the matter simply. A hundred rupees used to fill much of a plastic bag with vegetables a year ago; today half the bag is empty.

Inflation, spurred by rising oil prices and disappearing food

become politically engaged. In huge numbers, younger people are voting for Obama in the primaries and caucuses across the nation. At a recent rally for him at American University, in Washington, D.C., where I teach, Senator Edward Kennedy (John F. Kennedy's surviving brother) endorsed Obama instead of Hillary Clinton.

Kennedy made it clear that the United States needs to heed the call of a younger generation, that those of his own generation have made a mess of things, and that it is time for the elders to relinquish power and try something different. It was a bold endorsement by Kennedy, who is old enough to be Obama's father. The cheering from students in the audience was electrifying. They were making their choice obvious with their voices, as they have begun to do with their ballots.

Even if Obama wins the nomination for the Democratic Party and becomes the country's next president, it is not going to be easy for him to revitalise the

country and convince Americans that our overwhelming problems can no longer be ignored.

For too many years, George Bush has deceived Americans into believing that they can undertake the most expensive war ever and not have to pay for it, that they can recklessly spend their own money as well as the country's and never have to worry about the day when the bills come due.

The overwhelming majority of Americans believe that the country is on the wrong track. They hunger for a leader who will not lie to them. They understand that the country is as polarised as it has ever been. They regard Congress as a body as ineffectual as the president.

Agreement on any issue con-

demanded announcement of the election date! That's uncanny, isn't it? As if election is the only magic bullet to solve all our woes and follies! No one talks about party manifesto in public!

The obdurate question that keeps coming back to our mind is, what will happen if these political parties of questionable past and bleak future get rejected by the voters in the election? Will the losers accept the results with dignity, or will they accuse the EC of "managing" the elections? Worst, will they say, as they are saying now in many words, the election has been staged to put "the chosen candidates to power?"

Evidence? BNP secretary general Khandaker Delwar Hossain said on Friday last that a scheme was on to destroy BNP, and that his party would not take part in any "managed election." Now, that is tough word, old chap, and you better come up with proof that the coming election would be a "managed" one. But, will you say the same thing if BNP comes out victorious with maximum seats in its bag?

Such words are tantamount to accusing the EC of partaking in some sort of conspiratorial scheme and, therefore, should not be taken lightly. It tells aplenty the decades-old mindset of the politicians of this country, who remain fixed on elections and becoming ministers. For them the road ends there.

Food for thought. Once elections are held and once emergency is withdrawn and once politicians find "earth under their feet," is there any guarantee that they will not take off the

mask of civility they are wearing now and expose their true face -- the lean and hungry face -- once again?

Why do I say this? Politics and anarchy are synonymous in this country. And, to be candid, anarchy is in the blood of some politicians and they have come this far in politics through resorting to anarchy. They pass off anarchy as "biplab" -- revolution. And, don't forget, they do biplab for the people, to safeguard the rights of the janata!

Whenever they sense defeat in an election, they go out on the streets shouting slogans, demanding cancellation of election results and setting vehicles on fire. Awami League did it, BNP did it, others want to do it. These people cannot take defeat gracefully, and they never try to find out why people did not go to cast their vote for them.

Bottom line. These so-called public representatives, in reality, do not represent the common people. They live far away from them, in body and in mind. They are actually party representatives. They survive as long as the party survives. Individually most of them have no standing among the people. As a result, when they get defeated in an election it often means the end of their career.

This time around, if a party gets rejected by the people in the coming election, its survival issue will be put on the anvil. Therefore, parties will come up with all sorts of trickery under the sun to remain in the rat race.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

BYLINE

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stocks, is hitting people around the globe. America is talking of the four-dollar gas price. Prices are rising at 15% in the Middle East. Food surplus countries are curbing exports.

The Congress has begun to wind down the election clock. PCC posts have been filled in Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Rahul Gandhi has made a PR call on the prime minister, "demanding" jobs for the rural poor; when Rahul Gandhi makes a "demand" can elections be far behind?

He is starting a nationwide tour that will begin in Orissa. Rahul Gandhi will not waste his time running around the country unless this is the first salvo of an election campaign.

Congressmen, and women, will know whom to salute if they do well in October. If they don't do well, they can always blame the weather.

The second slogan of the party will be electricity to every village -- through the famous nuclear deal with the United States. They will go ahead with the deal by April, and the Left can go hang itself by that time.

The real allies of the Congress

outside government are no longer the MPs of the Left, but the Senators of America and the bureaucrats of the Bush administration. They will pass the deal by July, and the Great Electricity Con will begin, with Doordarshan naturally blaring the trumpets loudest.

The government will make every effort to hide the truth, that electricity has actually very little to do with the deal. After spending more than a hundred billion dollars at a minimum, there will be a maximum of four percent growth in energy output by 2020 -- that is another thirteen years later.

No one will mention that this electricity will be at twice the price of other forms of power. Why disturb the voter with facts?

The inconvenient truth is that the finance minister is not taking money for the loan waiver from his personal pocket. He is doing so from the public pocket, which the Congress has decided to pick. India's banks have been handed over to the Vote Bank.

A populist budget is no substitute for good governance.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.



fronting the country appears to be impossible with our current leaders. But of all the candidates who have been running in either party, Obama appears willing to negotiate, to listen, to ask Americans for

sacrifice. Fortunately, deep down inside, most Americans know what must be done to restore our credibility to ourselves and the rest of the world.

If he is elected, Barack Obama

will provide those opportunities; but then all Americans will need to face reality and look beyond themselves.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, D.C.