

Shubho Nababarsha

Let the New Year be a new springtime for us

THE advent of the Bangla New Year is once again an opportunity for us to celebrate the cultural heritage we as a nation are heir to. Baishakh is thus a season when we recall the spirit that has over a thousand years gone into the making of our identity as a people. Be it politics, be it culture, be it overall society, Baishakh has had a tremendous bearing on our consciousness as a people. As a free nation today, we remain fully aware of the import of the occasion and indeed rekindle in ourselves the feeling that every New Year is for us also a chance to branch out to the wider world outside our politico-cultural domain.

From such a perspective, Pahela Baishakh is not a time when narrow parochialism takes over our self-awareness as a people and pushes us into isolation. Bengalis, as has been proved over and over again, are a people for whom modernity is a given and a natural truth. On this day, we let the message flow forth from within our land and our nationhood that ours is a culture which only enriches the wider cultural sphere which the global population inhabits. Therefore, when we celebrate Baishakh, we are only making our own humble and yet substantive contribution to the growth and fostering of intellectual linkages among the international community. At home, the arrival of Pahela Baishakh is for us at once a reminder of our past and a preview of what our future can be. It will not do to forget that one of the inspiring ideas behind our struggle for political freedom was the timeless culture that came encapsulated in its observance. We as a nation have had to wade through mighty currents and crosscurrents to earn the right to have our cultural and social ethos restored in the days prior to the liberation of the country.

This morning, as we usher in the first dawn of another Baishakh, we will pray that the New Year brings for us a chance of a renewal. We will look forward to positive political changes in Bangladesh. We remain optimistic that a new spring, one where democracy and government based on the consent of the governed will redefine our priorities for the times ahead, will enrich our journey through the year 1415.

We wish our readers Shubho Nababarsha.

Power shutdown too frequent

Find some relief for the consumers

EVEN for a people accustomed to living with reduced power supply, especially in summer, the latest frequency of electricity outages in the country comes as something of a rude shock. That is because, for more than a year now, we had got used to fairly an even supply of electricity through what we understand to have been better load management. But quite obviously, the gap between power generation and distribution has yawned so much that there is little room for manoeuvring.

In an ideal situation, one would have expected that various localities would be notified about the load-shedding timings to give people a lead time for preparations. But obviously when power is shut down for quite a few times in a single night can the people be effectively forewarned of a coming outage.

Going back to power deficit issue, if we take Saturday as test case, the official power demand was 4,500 megawatt against power generation worth 3,500 megawatt making for a deficit of 1000 megawatt. A large part of the shortfall -- 800 megawatt -- could, however, have been avoided had the gas supply been normal to power plants. But the real power crunch is worse than the official figures suggest. The unofficial power demand being 5,900 megawatt, the deficit effectively for the day stood at 2,400 megawatt.

There is a silver lining around the cloud though. A thousand megawatt of power was set aside for irrigation during the boro season through providing special connections to farmers. With the boro crop harvested in a month's time, that 1000 megawatt of electricity will be freed up for use elsewhere.

Unless there is a radical improvement in gas supply, the hopes for adding to the power generation capacity will be dashed. For instance, new gas-fired power plants with nearly 1000 megawatt capacity are expected to be commissioned this year. What will be the fate of such projects if the gas supply situation does not improve in good time.

Political party registration



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

WHEN three Americans get together, they form a club, a business firm is formed when three Britishers get together, and when three Bangladeshis get together, they form a political party goes a comical saying. But this comical saying is quite real for Bangladesh, as the country has got the highest number of political parties in the world.

Though, neither the government nor the Election Commission (EC) has any accurate figures on the number of political parties in the country, the EC invited one hundred and fourteen political parties to discuss reforms to the voter list. The vast majority of the parties invited by the EC exist only in name.

The reconstituted EC initiated a commendable move for registration of political parties to bring them under a regulatory framework. The people felt encouraged by the EC's proposed electoral

BY THE NUMBERS
The reconstituted EC initiated a commendable move for registration of political parties to bring them under a regulatory framework. The people felt encouraged by the EC's proposed electoral reforms, particularly the move to register political parties with necessary reforms during the current interregnum so that democracy could be sustainable.

reforms, particularly the move to register political parties with necessary reforms during the current interregnum so that democracy could be sustainable.

In the revised draft of its proposed electoral law reforms the EC had relaxed some conditions for registration of the political parties. According to the relaxed conditions, a political party would be eligible for registration if it had polled at least one percent of the total votes cast in any general election since independence. It had been fixed at two percent earlier. A new political party would be eligible for registration if it had organisational committees in at least one-third of the districts and at least two hundred members in each upazila.

The EC had reiterated in the revised draft that political parties willing to be registered would have to include in their constitutions that they would not have student wings in the educational institutions, labour wings in the industries, or units in other countries.

At the time of partition of India in 1947, there was practically only one political party in East Pakistan, the Muslim League (ML). All India ML changed its name to Pakistan ML in December 1947. But the dissident members of the ML formed new political parties, such as Awami Muslim League, Nezame Islam, Khilafat-i-Rabbani, Krishak Samik Party etc.

Islamic political parties mushroomed in the country after the constitutional ban on them was lifted in 1976, allowing formation of political parties based on religion. Two Islamic parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Nezame Islam, contested in the 1979 parliamentary election after withdrawal of the ban.

But the number of Islamic parties that contested in the 1996 parliamentary election rose to eighteen, while the total number of participating parties in the first parliamentary election of the country held in 1973 was only fourteen. So far, thirty Islamic political parties and their different factions have contested in the

parliamentary elections since 1979.

In fact, there was a boom in political parties, especially of Islamic parties, after lifting of the ban in 1976. Twenty-nine political parties contested in the 1979 parliamentary election, of which eighteen parties failed to secure any seat while nine parties polled only 0.01% votes each.

The EC allocated election symbols to ninety political parties, but only seventy-six contested in the 1991 parliamentary election. Of the parties, sixty-three not only failed to secure any seat but also polled less than one percent votes. Most of these parties polled no votes outside the party leaders, their friends and family members.

The highest number of political parties eighty-one contested in the 1996 parliamentary election, but seventy-five failed to secure any seat. The number of contesting political parties decreased to fifty-four in the 2001 parliamentary election.

Despite the floating of so many

political parties over the years, voters are essentially grouped under two major parties AL and BNP the other major parties being Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami-Bangladesh.

With the gradual evolution of democracy, the process of government has more and more been spelt in terms of opinion rather than force. Therefore, a multiplicity of political parties is necessary in a democracy, but not such a vast number without definite aims and objectives as we have today in Bangladesh.

USA and UK are the two traditional abodes of the bi-party system, while the multiparty system is a characteristic feature of democracies in Europe. For instance, France has today about fifteen political parties, Germany fourteen, Italy twenty, Switzerland twenty, Greece seventeen, Belgium twenty-one, Norway seventeen, Poland ten, and Sweden sixteen, Hungary eleven and Portugal eight.

Among Asian countries, India has twelve political parties, Indonesia four, Japan eleven, South Korea six, Pakistan four, Lebanon eight, Nepal four, Thailand three, Philippines seven, Taiwan nine, Syria two and Malaysia sixteen.

As there are no official criteria for formation of a political party, we have seen a vast outgrowth of political parties in the country over the years. Most of these parties have failed to emerge as responsi-

ble, accountable and transparent organisations to turn social thought into political action. Consensus on common national agenda has also become hard to achieve because of the existence of so many political parties with different ideologies.

The EC has now relaxed further the rules for registration of political parties. But the relaxation should not go so far as to allow a vast number of such parties to be registered, which will exist only in name or to serve selfish and narrow interests.

The EC had moved to make registration mandatory for all parties. But the major parties opposed it, forcing the EC to make it optional before the 2001 parliamentary election. The parties that are still opposing it should realise that the proposed reforms are not urged by the EC only but also by the whole nation.

Bringing the political parties under a regulatory framework is the first crucial step. The political system in the country needs reforms to conform to the democratic dictum. Implementation of the EC's proposed reforms will make politics free from the caprice of parties and persons, and the political landscape of the country will be drastically changed for durable democracy.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Vindicating King's martyrdom



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

FORTY years ago, on April 4, Martin Luther King, the apostle of non-violence with regard to the US's once oppressive race relations, met a violent death completing, however, his mission of crafting an America where, one day, a presidential hopeful like Barack Obama would emerge by breaking the racial barrier.

King's dream of racial equality found apt expression in his famous August 1963 speech considered one of the most powerful orations of its kind in human history. But then, in later years, King had marched beyond his undying commitment to civil rights, and the issue of poverty (not just among the blacks) as well as the angst of the Vietnam War acquired greater priority in his activism.

In April 1967, a year before his assassination, King, in a speech at Riverside Church in New York, eloquently expounded his position on Vietnam and moved to break his silence and speak from his heart.

As he pointed out: "We were taking young black men who had been crippled by our society, and sending them 8000 miles away to

PERSPECTIVES
As for Obama, he is imperfect like all human beings, but it does not detract from his status as the most interesting and promising candidate to have been thrown up by the American electoral system in many decades in an America envisioned by Martin Luther King. A thoughtful, intelligent young man, half-Kansan, half-Kenyan and all American, realistically vying for the White House, an idea King would have relished.

guarantee liberties in South East Asia, which they had not found in the ghettos of South West Georgia and East Harlem. So, we have repeatedly been faced with the cruel irony of watching negroes and white boys on the TV screen as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same school. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realise they would never live on the same block in Detroit."

Comparable sentiments had also been expressed two decades earlier by actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson, who was scathingly criticised and ostracised for questioning whether it made any sense to expect black Americans to take part in any war against the Soviet Union while they were deprived of basic human rights in their homeland. A possible backlash prevented King from claiming Robeson as a crucial political forebear, although the latter certainly would have agreed with King's characterisation of "my government" as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."

Torn by myriad contradictions prevailing in the society, he

asked: "What do the Vietnamese peasants think as we test our latest weapons on them, just as Germans tested out new medicines and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe." Months later, in a sermon at his Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, King acknowledged: "We've committed more war crimes than almost any nation in the world," and raised the prospect of divine retribution.

To a considerable extent, on account of King's contribution to its up-bringing, the American nation has come a long way from the days when its race relations resembled South African apartheid. The prospect of an Obama presidency is a reflection of this change. At the same time, there are multiple other respect in which similar changes are still true. As a consequence, King's critique of his nation's role in Vietnam remains broadly applicable in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last month, the Democratic presidential hopeful found himself in the eye of the storm triggered by a controversial assertion of the former clergyman of his local church, the Reverend

Jeremiah Wright, who had commented shortly after nine-eleven that: "America's chickens are coming home to roost," and also suggested that "damn" ought to be substituted as the crucial verb in Irving Berlin's hymn "God bless America."

Obama was obviously obliged to distance himself from such comments, and he did it in a manner that only enhanced his stature among impartial observers. "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community," Obama said of the man who happened to have solemnised his marriage and baptised his children. "He contains within him the contradictions the good and the bad of the community that he has served diligently for so many years," he added.

He also pointed out that the anger and bitterness still persisting were not baseless, that slavery was America's "original sin," and the brutal legacy of slavery and apartheid lingered on. "The anger," he said, "is real. It is powerful, and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races."

Much the same argument can



be applied to embrace the indignation and exasperation that dominate the rest of the world's attitude to the US, and there have been indications during the campaign that Obama is aware of the challenges posed by the nation's deeply flawed assumptions and behaviour in the international arena. During the campaign, Obama said that he didn't want to end just the war in Iraq, he wanted to end the mindset that got US into the war in the first place.

The comment by Gary Younge in the Guardian, on the 40th anniversary of King's martyrdom, succinctly encapsulate the man in the following words: "Forty years after King's death, the ability of

America to both mythologise the man and marginalise his meaning is all too cruelly apparent... Had he lived he would most certainly have been loathed. For America to love him, he first had to die."

As for Obama, he is imperfect like all human beings, but it does not detract from his status as the most interesting and promising candidate to have been thrown up by the American electoral system in many decades in an America envisioned by Martin Luther King. A thoughtful, intelligent young man, half-Kansan, half-Kenyan and all American, realistically vying for the White House, an idea King would have relished.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISIS.

Indian communists at a crossroads



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

After the triennial congresses of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), where are they headed? The CPs' (CP) highest decision-making bodies met at a crucial juncture, when their support to the United Progressive Alliance is critical to the government's survival, and when they're expected to formulate new strategies.

They creditably maintained their tradition of open, democratic debate, and discussed hundreds of amendments to their resolutions. Indeed, the CPI put its draft on its website and invited comments even from non-members.

This only confirms the proposition that nearly two decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Indian CPs continue to be uniquely relevant as a political current of relatively high integrity, which commands great moral authority, and speaks for the underprivileged in ways that no other mainstream parties do.

The CPs exert a healthy influence on politics. If they didn't exist, we'd have to invent them!

Yet, their congresses made no breakthrough on a strategy through which to stem membership erosion, draw in young cadres, and extend their influence.

The CPs failed to formulate coherent alternatives to the UPA's neo-liberal orientation. The CPM's West Bengal unit remains obsessed with industrialisation at any cost, on terms laid down by private capital, as in the case of Tata's car factory.

The CPM has no principled quarrel with SEZs as a means of industrialisation, involving massive tax-breaks and displacement, which bleeds the exchequer and yet produces very few jobs in relation to the livelihoods destroyed.

Its reservations are largely confined to the number of SEZs, and their contribution to attracting advanced technology and promoting exports. West Bengal enacted its SEZ law in 2003, two years before the Centre.

As West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee put it, there's a "mad rush" in India to set up 400 zones: "There should be some restriction on (their number) ... There should be some ceiling on allotting land ... 50 percent ... should be earmarked for industry, another 25 percent for related infrastructure ... SEZs are not for real estate business..."

However, the SEZs approved so far are located in only 53 of India's

600-plus districts. Just 20 urban districts account for 71 percent of them, and 82% of their land-area.

Two-thirds are in information technology. These can be easily converted into high-value real estate. Thus, most SEZs might be land scams, with their worth mainly in property rather than productive investment.

The CPs also lack an ideologically consistent policy on organised retail, which is extremely predatory upon poor hawkers, vegetable vendors and petty shopkeepers. In Kerala, they oppose it, irrespective of ownership. In West Bengal, they only oppose multinational chains. But domestic ones are no less destructive.

The CPs are disillusioned with the UPA's neo-liberalism. They're right to demand course correction, especially measures to redress agrarian distress and control prices. But they must ask why, despite their leverage over the UPA, they failed to stop/reverse some policies.

Again, they're right in saying that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is the UPA's only significant pro-people

achievement. But they cannot claim much credit for this. Nor have they held the UPA to its promises to unorganised workers.

How did the CPs deal with differences over Nandigram, Singur, etc? The CPM's political-organisational report mildly reprimanded Mr Bhattacharjee. The Left governments' "weaknesses," it said, have a countrywide "negative impact." So "it's important that the entire party has a unified understanding" of its state government's policies.

Nevertheless, the CPM's governmental wing got the party to agree that, in the states where it rules, people cannot "wait indefinitely" for solutions until big national-level changes happen.

This means that neo-liberal "pragmatism" will prevail in the states although nationally, the CPM will oppose US imperialism and Right-wing agendas.

The CPs have blocked the India-US nuclear deal. But they failed to prevent India's drift into a "strategic partnership" with the US, or resist pressures on independent foreign policy.

The key to their failure, whether

on economic or political-strategic issues, lies in lack of mass mobilisation, which they've subordinated to parliamentary preoccupations. Wherever the CPs have taken to the streets, or joined grassroots movements, they have had far greater success.

The CPs rightly see communism as the greatest danger facing India. They yearn for an alternative non-Congress non-BJP Third Force. But they admit it's nowhere in sight. They say they want to create it. To do so, they have joined hands with the regional parties of the United National Progressive Alliance in a campaign centred on rising prices.

However, the UNPA's core is disintegrating. Barring the Telugu Desam (TDP), all its constituents are making overtures to other parties the AIADMK to the BJP, the Samajwadi Party (SP) to the Congress.

In its anti-price rise campaign, then, the Left will effectively join hands with the SP and TDP. The SP recently cut sharp deals with the BJP in UP, including helping Mr. Advani in the Babri demolition

suit. The TDP is tainted by its long association with the BJP.

The Left's approach to organisational problems has turned conservative. The CPI has made very few changes in its decision-making structures, barring the induction of Mr. S. Sudhakar Reddy as General Secretary AB Bardhan's deputy.

The CPM has experienced a full generational change. With the retirement of H.S. Surjeet and Jyoti Basu, none of the nine founding members sits on its politburo, which now has no members from the North either.

The induction of three new members into the CPM politburo Mohammed Amin, Nirupam Sen and Kodyeri Balakrishnan sends the wrong message.

Although a trade unionist, Mr. Amin opposes strikes except as a weapon of last resort. Mr. Sen is staunchly neo-liberal. Mr. Balakrishnan's entry will aggravate factionalism in Kerala.

None of this augurs well for the CPs.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.