

CEC's paradoxical stand on talks with the BNP

EC must see the reality, talk to both factions

THE Chief Election Commissioner has, as we understand, invited the two factions of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to tea today, separately of course. In light of the fact that earlier he ruled out the possibility of inviting both factions of the party to a dialogue, this is encouraging news. We, however, feel that the Election Commission should issue formal invitations to both factions to the dialogue it has initiated with the political parties. Given that the caretaker government itself has initiated a move to talk to the Delwar-led group as well as the pro-reform faction of the party, the stand adopted by ATM Shamsul Huda smacks of a paradox. The point is simple: if the government can go for a political dialogue with both groups, what prevents the Election Commission from doing the same to ensure smooth elections? Besides, it must be remembered that the roots of the present problem regarding the BNP lie in the earlier, obviously ill-considered move by the EC to invite the pro-reform faction of the BNP to the talks. It was that move which led to the present impasse; and the CEC cannot absolve himself or his colleagues over their role in the making of the crisis. It was a mistake which the CEC is yet to acknowledge.

The CEC is likely to be guided by the High Court's recent dismissal of a petition by Khaleda Zia loyalists. The Election Commission must know, or should be informed, that the HC verdict does not in any way preclude it from exchanging views with both groups. It is the political realities the CEC and his colleagues must not miss. And one big reality is that a very substantial number of people in the BNP, including former MPs and local level leaders, remain loyal to their detained chairperson and so are strongly behind the party secretary general appointed by her. In such a situation, for the CEC to focus on the Saifur Rahman-led faction and ignore the other one led by Delwar can only exacerbate the crisis and lead to a further questioning of the EC's credibility. The CEC argues that his inviting both factions to the talks would tantamount to encouraging divisiveness in the party. But by calling one side he has exactly done what he didn't want to do. Election Commission cannot take cover behind a thin veneer of legality. If it does, it will be accused, not without reason, of playing politics with the election agenda.

The job for the Election Commission, as we see it, is cut out. It must do everything to ensure that the country can have free, fair and transparent general elections at the end of this year. That means it has a moral responsibility to speak to all political forces, including the two factions of the BNP. It cannot alienate politicians more than it has already. It must go for damage control. It has to act from a high moral ground as an independent body and invite the BNP, all of it, to the talks on electoral reforms.

Dealing with traffic congestion

Convert the suggestions into an action plan

THE government has rightly decided to address traffic congestion in the city, which is worsening day by day, through implementing the recommendations of a committee constituted to examine the traffic issue in all its ramifications.

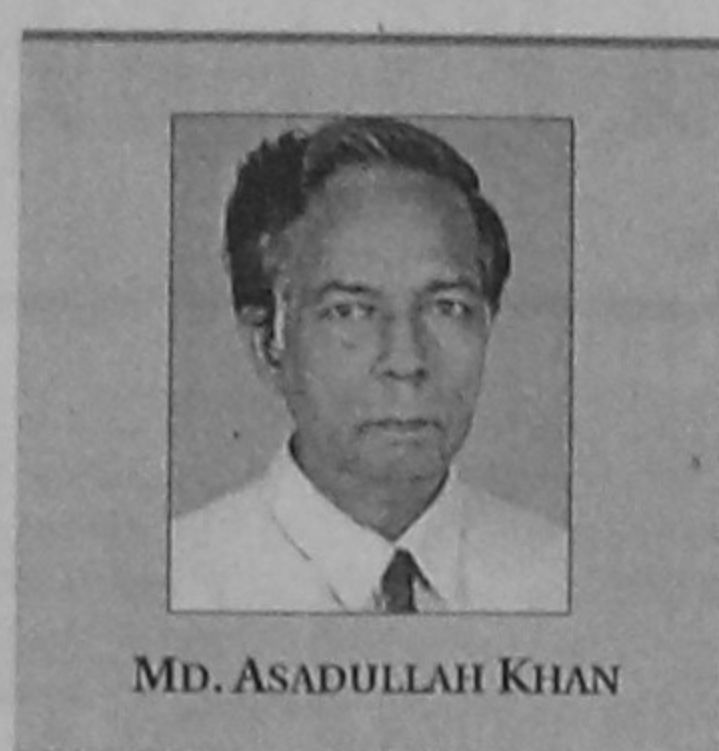
Obviously, structural deficiencies and mismanagement have landed the whole city in what may be termed a "traffic quagmire" which considerably slows down the pace of life. The government has directed the City Corporation not to allow the inter-district buses to enter the city which put further pressure on the precarious traffic situation. The decision to keep those big vehicles off the city roads, without causing any disruption, is certainly a positive one which should have been taken long back. Similarly, the government has, quite expectedly, instructed the CNG stations to install more supply lines for the benefit of the huge number of vehicles often stuck in long queues.

However, the decision to reduce the number of city bus routes to 40 from the existing 129 sounds rather unrealistic, considering the ever-increasing number of commuters dependent on bus service. This may lessen traffic congestion, but the trouble that it will cause to people in general must be considered with due sympathy. The question is: what is the government planning to do to offset the huge inconvenience that drastic reduction of bus routes will invariably cause to the commuters? Actually, the planners should think in terms of developing a mass transit system before going for any big adjustment or change.

There are too many loopholes in traffic management that should not be overlooked any longer. Most high-rise buildings in the city still don't have adequate parking spaces and the same is true about markets and offices in busy commercial areas. This problem has to be resolved immediately if we don't want the traffic situation to go further out of control. Bus drivers lack training and awareness of traffic rules and frequently use vacant roadside spaces as bus stops. The traffic managers have to ensure that no bus stop exists within 200 yards of any intersection. Finally, the existing bus stops have to be maintained properly to avoid chaos.

There is no doubt that something has to be done about Dhaka's disorderly traffic situation. But the decision makers have to pay due attention to the needs of the vast majority of commuters.

Choice of candidates crucial in the Parliamentary polls



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE forthcoming parliamentary election could turn out to be a poll that marks a turning point in Bangladesh politics. Exasperated with the performance of the democratic governments in 15 years, voters will have a chance of either putting things straight or catapulting the country into a crisis. The 2008 Parliamentary election may be an episode in the country's development into a mature democracy.

With the parliamentary election due in about eight months from now, we will hear much in the coming months about "the people." Every politician willing to contest in the forthcoming election will be wandering about the country telling the electorate how much his heart bleeds for them, how it is only for them that he works, and how it is only their interest he cares about.

Well, let's take a look at what people are like in the 37th year of our independence. Despite the flood of tears that has been shed by the elected representatives of the past governments, more than half of our people live in appalling poverty; their income does not go beyond one dollar a day. These people have no hope of rising above poverty line since most of

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them are illiterate and incapable of getting proper jobs either at home or abroad. These people, whom the politicians claim to love so much, have virtually no access to healthcare.

The crisis was created by greed and resolved through bluff, intrigue, and unsavoury deals. Shockingly, the politicians and bureaucrats had chosen a development plan to create islands of prosperity and oceans of deprivation. Never had their image taken such monumental battering. People willing to get elected as parliament members in the next national poll will have to survive this legacy of public distrust.

In the past 37 years, Bangladesh has survived some of the world's worst natural disasters, namely floods, droughts, and cyclone Sidr, and some of the world's stupidest politicians. If the persons trying to get elected in the next parliamentary polls try to cover up what the CTG has sought to uncover, then the country will witness the disaster drama repeated.

Now the electorate has to be very cautious and display utmost sensibility and discretion in electing their representatives to the parliament.

Former chief of the CTG and former chief justice of the Supreme Court, Muhammad Habibur Rahman, said in the

recent National Citizen's Dialogue: "We will elect such parliament members who will be role models, not only in politics but also on our way forward." Unhappily, there is a crisis of confidence prevailing between the groups running the administration of the country at the moment and those vying for power again.

The CTG has to use every possible means to see that a meaningful dialogue is held with the political leaders and professionals to resolve the present crisis for holding a free, fair and credible election as per the announced road-map charted out by the EC.

The pertinent point is that both AL and BNP have at least one thing in common. The destinies of both parties depend on two enigmatic women. So does Bangladesh's, it seems. But the election scenario has been clouded by spiralling prices of food items and pangs of hunger spreading across the country. With crippling food shortages gripping the country, hunger now stalks the country as never before since the liberation of the country in 1971. Our leaders must realise that hunger and democracy cannot go together.

The contestants in the forthcoming election will have to do some serious work about augmenting agricultural production

in their regions. At the same time, functionaries of the past alliance government must explain what prevented them from making investment in roads, electricity and agriculture, or even in the sort of agro-based industries that would have created jobs in rural Bangladesh through augmentation of food production and agricultural marketing.

People believe that if the members of parliament had raised this stupendous issue of "power" problem, either on the floor of the parliament or to the highest echelon of the government, things might have been otherwise, or the poor and innocent people would not have to die when they demanded power and water for irrigation.

If the people were literate, non-availability of basic requirements like electricity, irrigation water, fertiliser, seeds and pesticides would be the big issue in the forthcoming election. Sadly, Bangladesh is a poor country because poverty is a constituency that is carefully nurtured by politicians of every hue.

Our politicians and bureaucrats so long talked about alleviating poverty and the state of development that, according to them, swept across the country. It is the impact of that development spree (!) that has now sent rice price

shooting up to Tk. 35 per kg and lentil price to Tk. 70 per kg, to name only two most essential items.

Frankly speaking, poverty alleviation programs leaked so profusely that some unofficial surveys assessed that no more than 40 paisa of every taka actually reached the people it was meant for. Could the alliance government tell us how everything from water to electricity to agricultural production went so horrendously wrong?

Let us recall a joke that fits in here so perfectly: "When God created this sub-continent it was as a wealthy and prosperous land. The other nations protested about this favouritism. So God, in his infinite wisdom, willed the type of governments we have had in this region to balance matters. We have been cursed since then."

With the country reeling under the trauma of bomb blasts, clashes and shortages of everything other than human misery, with government measures providing little succour, the prospect of a catastrophic situation looms large. A general election should be a time when the attention of ordinary people is drawn to the mistakes and broken promises of the past. At the same time, it is also a time for the nation to listen to its conscience. What is needed now is bold political leadership.

The people are concerned about criminals entering the parliament, and hope that parties will field candidates who are persons of probity and excellence. They are hoping that the reconstituted EC will make every possible effort to enforce a code of conduct, like the Representation of the People Act now in force in India, with the agreement of the

political parties.

The EC, through enforcement of such act after scrutinising the related papers and the background of the prospective candidate, will ban a convicted criminal and black money holder from contesting the election. It must be recognised that cleansing the country's tainted polity is the primary task of the EC.

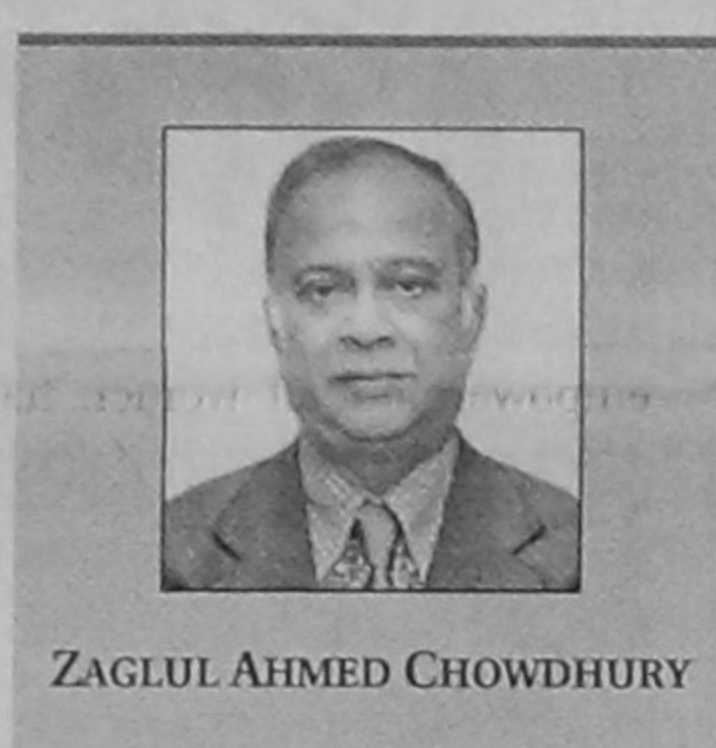
Surely, the nexus of crime and politics is not reflected merely in electoral battles. For instance, the criminalisation of politics can be directly linked to politicisation of criminal investigation. It is an open secret that in many cases members of the parliament, political workers and party loyalists having criminal records escape punishment in the law courts due to some lacunae in the law or lapses in the police investigation methods, inept police action, or manipulation of evidence. Unless the EC can be very tough in dealing with such people, things will be messy as usual.

Presumably, with the EC now manned by men of strong morality, integrity, dedication and commitment, and with the introduction of voter ID cards, things might be better in the coming days. With the parliamentary polls eight months away, there is still time for the parties to discover the virtues of rectitude and to ostracise the criminals.

If every party simply makes apparent its stand on a handful of crucial social and economic issues, the electorate will be better equipped to make its choice and save itself and the nation from further catastrophic situations.

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Nepal elections: Surprise winner!



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE stunning showing by the ultra-left Maoists in Nepal's historic elections may have surprised many, but their resounding success is being seen as a kind of logical development for changes towards a "New Nepal" that attracted the ordinary voters. A variety of promises, highlighted by drastic economic and social reforms along with a tough anti-monarchy stance, helped them win the hearts of the masses in a country where the throne ruled for long and conventional political parties failed to deliver when they were at the helm. The final result has not been announced, but indications are clear that the once dreaded radicals will be in the driving seat in changing political dynamics.

Nepal held the much-awaited landmark elections on April 10, belying fears of large-scale violence. The polling has by and large been smooth barring sporadic incidents of violence, which is not unusual in the elections in this part of the world. The casting of

MATTERS AROUND US
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votes has been more than 60 percent, which is also commendable. Their performance -- the hitherto underground organisation that has contested a conventional election for the first time -- is an area of immense interest for many for obvious reasons. The favourites -- the Nepali Congress led by prime minister G.P. Koirala and Communist party of Nepal headed by Madhav Kumar Nepal -- cut sorry figures in face of remarkable success by the Maoists.

Nepal last held elections in 1999, but the balloting this time has special significance as the country has elected a constituent assembly that will frame a new constitution against a background when the polls had appeared uncertain a few months ago. The elections were scheduled in November last but were called off as a sequel to growing differences between the seven-party alliance government and the Maoists. Later, the agreement between the government and the radicals on the fresh election date raised prospects that the country, convulsed by political mayhem in not too distant a past, was moving in

line with the new "Road map" aimed at turning the picturesque land into a nation of political and economic stability. The Nepalese pin great hopes on a new era for their nation following this election.

A major factor in the polls is the fate of the 240-year-old monarchy. All major parties involved in the polls earlier helped the parliament pass a proposal asking the government to initiate legal preparations to declare the country a Republic, a key demand of the radical leftists. The decision by the parliament had come as a great relief, as the country was witnessing disconcerting developments centering this issue as some favoured the powerful throne to continue in the line of Britain and Thailand, but the Maoists are opposed tooth and nail to existence of the monarchy in any form.

Now that the polls have taken place, and the radicals have done very well, it is certain that Nepal is now set to abolish the monarchy. The parliament had decided in favour of doing away with the throne, but the final nail in the

coffin of the monarchy will be driven in by the constituent assembly. All major parties that have taken part in the polls have pledged to abolish the monarchy, which now is now only a matter of time. The constituent assembly is expected to take the final decision in this regard in its first session.

With the just-concluded polls, Nepal is undoubtedly entering a new era. In 1990, the country introduced Westminster type democracy, ending effective monarchy, but was later robbed off this system. However, some politicians were also to blame for the situation as they failed to live up to people's expectations because of their corruption and abuse of power. King Gyanendra exploited this situation to grab absolute authority. His repressive rule turned the masses against him and, consequently, Nepal reverted to representative rule. The parties, including the Maoists, which were involved in the successful anti-King agitation promised to draft a new constitution for the country. It is against this background that the polls acquired great importance.

In the post-elections scenario, matters appear largely positive, but some issues may arise when the results are fully announced. The Maoists, after more than a decade's insurgency, came out from the mountains and jungles and emerged as a force to reckon. Indeed, it is a great achievement for the ultras, who are still considered as a "terrorist" outfit by the United States. However, former US president Jimmy Carter, who was present during the polling as an international observer, said America should reassess its policy towards the Maoists following the public support reflected in the elections.

Prime Minister G.P. Koirala earlier rejected a proposal from Maoist supremo Pushpa Kumar Dalai, popularly known as "Prachanda," to induct his former guerrillas in the army. The government decision not to accept the Maoist army in the Nepal army has clearly infuriated the radicals, and this has caused a souring of the ties of two sides. But in the post-election developments, the radicals are likely to call the shots more effectively, and their cadres would find now a better chance of being incorporated in the 90,000 strong army, although this will remain a contentious issue.

However, there could be some problems as Nepal's army has had centuries old links with the royal family, and swore personal loyalty to the monarch until the caretaker government stripped the king of his position as the head of the

army in May, 2006.

The established political parties and the Maoists with their new democratic character will now evidently be vying for political supremacy, but in a conventional manner. The results have raised hope that the radicals will not go underground again -- that might have taken place if they had not done well in the polls.

Promises of revolutionary land reforms, abolition of monarchy -- seen by many as source of poverty -- narrowing down of the caste-ridden system, removal of the economic disparities are some of the main reasons for the unexpected good showing of the radicals. The promise of "New Nepal" may be an illusion to many, nevertheless, it gave fresh dream of a sound political and economic system to the impoverished nation. While a clear picture of the post-election scenario is yet to emerge, there is little doubt that the country is on the anvil of drastic changes.

The bottom line is that a new phase is being ushered in to Nepal, and it is the bounden duty of all key players to seize the new opportunity to turn their country into a land of political and economic stability. The "Road Map" to new Nepal will meet with success if all concerned apply their wisdom in carrying forward the bright prospects being opened up by the much-cherished elections.

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Hillary, Republicans blast Obama for the "bitter" comment

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Obama's gaffe energised a demoralised Clinton campaign, which started firing on all cylinders. Hillary blasted Obama, calling his remarks "elitist," "demeaning" and "out of touch" with mainstream American values, and reminding super delegates why Obama is "unelectable." Obama's comments were "not reflective of the values and beliefs of Americans," Hillary said.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

HILLARY Clinton and the Republicans are ecstatic! For once, they can attack Barack Obama for something he has said, without appearing racist.

Explaining why he is not doing better in Pennsylvania among rural whites, at a closed-door fundraiser in San Francisco on April 6, Obama said: "You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they feel

through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

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and "out of touch" with mainstream American values, and reminding super delegates why Obama is "unelectable." Obama's comments were "not reflective of the values and beliefs of Americans," Hillary said.

A populist Hillary explained: "It's being reported that my opponent said that the people of Pennsylvania who face hard times are bitter. Well that's not my experience. As I travel around Pennsylvania, I meet people who are resilient, optimistic, positive, who are rolling up their sleeves. Pennsylvanians don't need a presi-

dent who looks down on them. They need a president who stands up for them, who fights hard for your future, your jobs, your families."

Listening to Hillary's top attack dog, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, omnipresent on all TV shows firing away at Obama's naiveté and ineptitude, one is left wondering how he belongs to the same party. They must think Obama is really bad for Israel!

McCain's campaign also criticised the comments: "It shows an elitism and condescension towards hardworking Americans that is nothing short of breathtaking. It is hard to imagine someone running for president who is more out of touch with average Americans."

"This is good for us on several levels," said a spokesman for the Republican Party. "Barack Obama's elitism allows him to believe that the American traditions that have contributed to the

identity and greatness of this country are actually just frustrations and bitterness," said a McCain spokesman. Republican House candidates are challenging their Democratic opponents to renounce or embrace Obama's remarks.

Obama at first dug in. Later, he conceded that he "didn't say it as well as I should have," telling Winston-Salem (N.C.) Journal that "obviously, if I worded things in a way that made people offended, I deeply regret that... The underlying truth of what I said remains, which is simply that people who have seen their way of life upended because of economic distress are frustrated, and rightfully so."

But he stood by his argument that Americans are disillusioned with a do-nothing government, and so they understandably turn to values like religion.

An Obama spokesman released a statement saying: "We won't be lectured on being out of touch by

Senator Clinton, who believes lobbyists represent real people and is awash in their money, and who can't tell a straight story about her lengthy record of supporting trade deals like Nafta and China that have devastated communities in Pennsylvania and Indiana."

"She won't change the broken Washington system that all too often leaves American workers behind, but Barack Obama will," he said.

But, this gaffe will hurt Obama. Americans do not like politicians telling them what ails them. Former president Jimmy Carter told Americans in July 1979 that they had succumbed to a "national malaise." With Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan pounding Carter's "malaise presidency," that was the beginning of the end of the Carter presidency.

The timing of the gaffe, ten days before the Pennsylvania primary on April 22, could not have been worse. Besides sex, little drives the news and opinion industry more

than race, religion, culture and class. It hurts Obama, especially with the former Reagan Democrats, the culturally conservative, and blue-collar workers, who could be a promising voter group for him. It also antagonises people who were concerned about his pastor but might have given him the benefit of the doubt after his eloquent speech on race.

Obama must understand that some people actually use guns to hunt. And some people cling to religion not because they are bitter but because they believe in it, and because faith in God gives them purpose and comfort.

Of course, as expected, Hillary overplayed her cards. Attempting to endear herself with the gun owners, she said that when she was little, her father taught her how to shoot a gun. The Obama campaign blasted her hypocrisy for feigning support for gun rights when she is anti-gun and has opposed every pro-gun legislation!

Obama must be aware of his weaknesses. Because he has an African father, Hillary and the Republicans will attempt to paint Obama "foreign." The US presidency has been the exclusive domain of the Anglo-Saxons. Michael Dukakis (1988) of Greek ancestry and John Kerry (2004) of French heritage were also painted as foreign. When Obama goes into rationalising why Americans turn to religion or gun, he opens himself up to charges that he does not really understand Americans.

When Hillary Clinton said Obama's comments were "not reflective of the values and beliefs of Americans," she used the words "Americans" in three different contexts in one stump speech on April 12, she was reminding voters that however enchanted they may be with Barack Obama, he is not a true blue American, like say, a Clinton!

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