

## Voter registration quality assessed positively

*Let's not rest on laurels, take follow up measures in earnest*

It is a cheery piece of news that a survey sponsored by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has found the ongoing voter registration process in Bangladesh to be of international standard. The imperfections detected are 'negligible' and can be set right without difficulty. Admittedly though, it was a sample survey and not a national one, its coverage was not small either: 9,793 persons took part in it from as disparate places as Rajshahi City Corporation, Raozan Pourashava of Chittagong and Taherpur upazila of Sunamganj. The survey gave an idea of the trend and direction of things, which can be extrapolated for the entire operation.

All those associated with the process -- the army, the technicians and the teachers and, of course, the EC -- deserve our congratulations on completing by far the larger part of the operation successfully. It's a massive exercise undertaken for the first time in Bangladesh and a job well done so far. The fact that no 'act of fraudulence has been committed' reinforces the credibility of the exercise. The surveyors have discovered that most of the participants want the responsibility for voter list preparation to stay with the EC with political parties and NGOs having nothing to do with it.

The assessment by the independent monitoring group comes with a set of recommendations to perfect what has already been done and conduct the remainder of the operation in a fool-proof way. First, vigorous publicity of registration schedule and follow-up timetable for those who had been absent during the initial home visit of the enumerators is imperative. Second, it will be useful to involve union council members and ward commissioners in the publicity campaign to check on the missing voters and include them. Third, shifting dates in respect of delivery of voter identity cards should be avoided. Fourth, a permanent office needs to be set up for inclusion of legitimate voters and updating of registration all the year round. Last but not least, institutional arrangements will have to be made for replacement of damaged, lost and stolen ID cards.

We endorse the suggestions wholeheartedly, these being the crystallised opinions formed through monitoring the listing process and urge all concerned to implement them without fail.

## Worsening conditions in Sri Lanka

*The two sides must go back to negotiations*

CONDITIONS in Sri Lanka have in recent days taken a nosedive. With 52 guerrillas and 38 government soldiers dead in northern Jaffna, it is easy to understand how swiftly the country may be sliding back to full-scale hostilities between the government and the Tamil Tigers. The latest incident of violence has been a direct result of Colombo's bid to seize territory under the control of the LTTE and only underlines the ferocity and desperation with which the two sides are now locked in a battle of wills. But anyone who has some understanding of the long history of the conflict, which began in 1972, will also be aware of the tortuous and eventually fruitless negotiations undertaken to bring about peace in the country.

The peace process initiated a few years ago, with the Norwegian government trying to broker a deal, between the government and the guerrillas, at one point looked rather promising. Unfortunately, the election of Mahinda Rajapakse to the presidency turned things back to a point where the earlier encouraging signs of peace taking over simply fell flat. It was clear that hardliners in Colombo, especially among the military, were not happy with the proposed autonomy for the Tamils in the north and east of the country. The advances that had been made by the administration of Ranil Wickremesinghe, never accepted by Rajapakse or his predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga, thus came to naught. For their part, the Tamils under the elusive Velupillai Prabhakaran have remained unwilling to tone down their demands, aside from dropping, at least for now, the call for an independent state for Tamils in Sri Lanka. The consequences are only too obvious: matters have simply reached a point of no return.

And yet Sri Lankans must break out of the impasse. The armed conflict, having solved nothing, does not look about to come to an end any time soon. For both the government and the Tamils, the time is once more here to sit down to negotiations. The Norwegian government, disappointed though it is, could once more take up the not too cheering job of convincing the two warring sides to talk things over in Europe.

## Avoid perceptions becoming a reality



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

DELWAR Hussain -- leader of a faction of the BNP (pro-Khaleida, as commonly designated) -- has asked for the resignation of the CEC and the other two commissioners. He feels that the current EC has lost its credibility by sticking to its position regarding the leadership question of the party, having invited Saifur group to attend the political dialogue which the EC is holding with the major parties. Equally disconcerting is the fact that this faction of the party feels that the caretaker government is "making a blueprint for the upcoming election and working towards achieving the goal of holding the election in line with that blueprint."

That is the belief Mr. Hussain holds, and whatever rationale his view is based upon, and even if one were not to agree with his opinion, that he feels the EC has attained a partisan character by its conduct vis a vis the BNP, and that it is no longer capable of holding a free, fair and impartial election, is definitely a cause for concern. It is the first time that a major political party has formally taken such a stand since the EC was reconstituted.

For an impartial observer, such a perception openly expressed by a major political party has serious portents that might put the prospect of holding the much awaited election in jeopardy. If

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The EC cannot lose sight of the fact that it has a very onerous responsibility brought upon by the changed circumstances of January 2007. While for any Election Commission holding of elections is the only major responsibility, for Mr. Huda and his team the next election is not just any election. He is supposed to give the country a fair election but with the rider that all the necessary electoral reforms should have been put in place before the election is held. And there is no need to remind him of what he has himself seen as his bounden duty, a responsibility that can only cast them in his own words as "national betrayer" if left unfulfilled.

that apprehension were to come to pass, then one feels that the EC has a good deal to answer for it.

The EC has taken the ruling of the High Court Division on a BNP faction writ regarding the first invitation letter of the EC sent to Major (Retd) Hafiz, Secretary General (of the Saifur faction) BNP, in support of its position regarding the EC stance on the BNP leadership. The EC's choice of the addressee of its first invitation letter is also based on flawed rationale. And one cannot be faulted for thinking that the EC has been, wittingly or unwittingly, involved in the BNP's intra-party feud. The EC's explanation for inviting Major Hafiz for the first round of talks is as unconvincing as is its move to invite the same faction again for the next round of dialogue -- since the court ruling is in no way redemption of the EC position on the leadership issue of the BNP.

And the recent court ruling does in no way validate the EC stance that Major Hafiz is the lawful SG of the BNP. In fact, the court has not adjudicated on the leadership question of the BNP, rather very wisely, skirted the issue by ruling that it was a matter internal to the party and not for the court to pass judgment upon.

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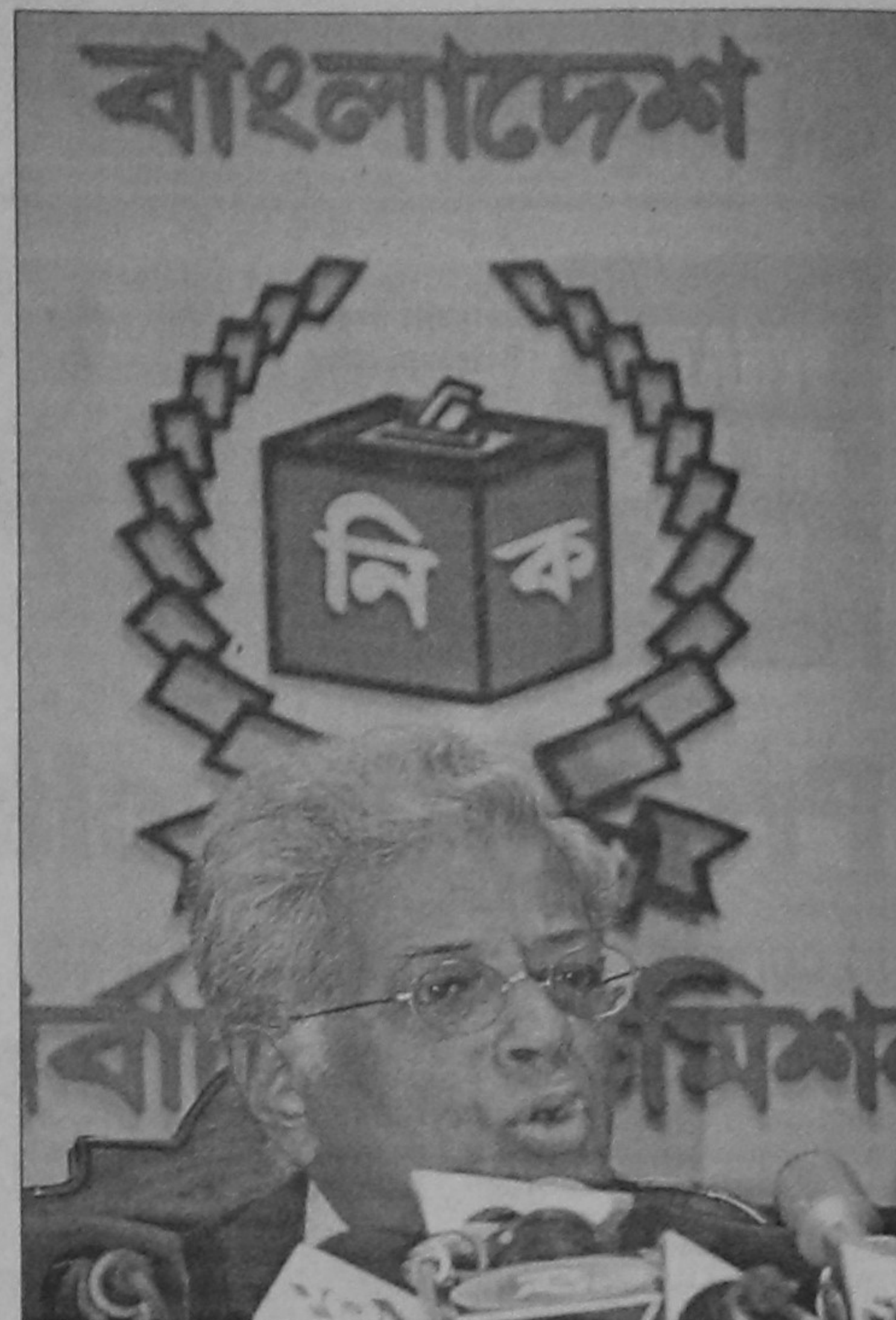
And that is why the EC-political party dialogue to thrash out the details for bringing in appropriate amendments to the Representation of the People's Order 1972 is so important. The BNP issue has unfortunately stunted the dialogue process, and that is what causes concern to all those that would like to see an election that would embark Bangladesh politics on a new road and hopefully a new phase of political development.

It is a regrettable matter that the EC in the past had not acquitted itself well to the expectation of the people. The last CEC and his actions before he was removed had done everything to

bring a most important democratic institution of the country to the nadir of disrepute. And most because of his actions that appeared to be following a particular plan to fulfill the ulterior objective of a particular party that caused its credibility to slide to the rock bottom. He had cared a fig for the law or for the moral ground that such institutions are based upon and are supposed to uphold.

It is not for the EC to get involved either in party matters or to play a part in the resolution of a political party's internal discord. It must go by the law of the land and by its moral dictates. It would not be wrong to suggest that insofar as its handling of the BNP invitation for dialogue is concerned the EC has been able to conform to neither. In all fairness, both the factions should have been invited for the sake of taking forward the reform issues. No further delay can be brooked in finalising the reforms, since an election will be credible without the election taking place under not only an amended people's representative order, but also an improved set of provisions related to elections and participation therein.

Neither a botched election nor an election that is not participatory will do for us. And that is



possible only if those that are responsible for ensuring the right conditions and appropriate environment for a free and fair election go about their business with transparency and freedom of action. Anything that militates against that must be resisted by the EC.

And even more importantly, the EC must avoid giving the impression that its actions are motivated by considerations other than the one that is obligated by the need to hold a free

and fair election. All other issues must be secondary if at all. The moral high ground that an institution like the EC stands upon must not be lost by actions deemed by many as less than transparent. It cannot have its credibility questioned. There is no doubt that a negative perception about EC intentions exist among certain quarters. It must do everything to prove that perception wrong.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## A walk of shame



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

It was a gruesome parade on the political catwalk when a former finance minister, who is the acting chairperson of one of the two factions of his party, was recently dragged in and out of a press conference. His disheveled clothes and incoherent speech suggested that he was gravely ill, and the microphone slipped out of his hand again and again while he couldn't even lift his head to face the audience. The rude reality of life is that what goes around also comes around. At times leaders exploit the party. At times the party exploits them.

No matter what, it was a pathetic show done in bad taste. Yes, leaders have their demonstration effect. Their presence inspires the party workers, shows unity and dispels misgivings, which might be created by a rival faction. Perhaps it was necessary for this particular faction to showcase its leader in

a time of crisis when things are fluid. Perhaps, it was necessary to show it to the country that the faction still had its hierarchy so that nobody could question its strength of discipline.

But what has it achieved? Josef Stalin was a short man, but he was always pictured on a raised dais to enhance his diminutive frame. The paintings of Napoleon Bonaparte show him mounted on a horse to give the impression that he was not after all so much of a little man. Leaders are always made larger than life for obvious reasons. They must rise above the rest of the flock to command loyalty and respect.

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## CROSS TALK

**In that consideration, how has it helped the faction to show a leader who was slurred in speech and faltering in steps? I am not talking about right and wrong. Everything is fair in love and war, and politics is both since battles are waged in the name of love, love of country and love of people. But how does it strengthen the party when the party diminishes its leader? How does it help to pull him from his sickbed and present him as a symbol of unity when he's falling apart? The party stalwart looked like a puppet when others pulled the strings.**

since battles are waged in the name of love, love of country and love of people. But how does it strengthen the party when the party diminishes its leader? How does it help to pull him from his sickbed and present him as a symbol of unity when he's falling apart? The party stalwart looked like a puppet when others pulled the strings.

There was an inescapable element of cruelty in the whole thing. It is not easy to tell if the leader was brought into that meeting against his will. It is not even easy to tell if the leader was in a state of mind to make that judgment call. What is easy is that the man wasn't physically fit for his cameo role on that day, that the leading actor of the party was treated like a theater prop. It would have been more dignified if he were put in a wheelchair or carried on a

stretcher.

It is said that if one rides on a tiger, one must either ride it to the end or dismount at the risk of being devoured by the beast. It may be true in politics as well, especially when that politics is run by blind fury or misguided passions. So there was a level of desperation when a man in his home attire, was whisked into the limelight by other men who held him by the arms like a fixture ready to be installed in a new location.

That, to some extent, is politics, when invasion of privacy is name of the game. When politicians are ill, when good or bad things happen in their lives, when they fail or succeed, their scandals, tragedies, valiance and cowardice are all part of the public spectacle. What they say become headline banners. What they do begets primetime cover-

age. Politics makes news as much as news makes politics. Still nothing justifies what we saw in that press conference when the senior-most leader of a political group was stumbling like a nervous prisoner walking to the gallows.

If anything, it was an indication of something very alarming, that in the dog-eat-dog world of political contest, the instinct for rivalry subsumes everything, that there is no consideration for others when the only thing that matters is zapping of the enemy. I don't know if anybody has noted the irony of it, that those who wanted reforms in the party couldn't break the mould of old politics. They couldn't hold a press conference without their leader, even though he looked terribly sick!

I am sure his followers and admirers have their own reasons as to why it happened. I am sure in their characteristic eloquence, they should be able to argue that the party is much bigger than the individual and the country is much bigger than the party. But one didn't get the sense of this sublime sentiment out of that ridiculous thing. Instead it appeared as a grotesque ritual in some primitive ceremony where the leader walks in trance under the influence of tribal magic!

Which showed the unmistakable sign that our politics is far from healing. It is not about embarrassing a particular individual. It is not about embarrassing the party either. But it is all about showing disrespect to the people for the same reason sloppy hospitality offends guests. If the purpose of a press conference is to reach out to the nation, it must follow certain etiquette. It must look decent and relevant for the viewers, who are baffled as to whether it was at all necessary to haul out a half-conscious man!

Since then it has left a bad taste in the mouth. What kind of politics is taking shape, which neither respects the leaders nor the people, but forever evolves in the hands of self-seeking middlemen? Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman have been assassinated. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have been thrown in jail. But politics still revolves around the futile axis where everything is changing, yet everything is constant.

Our politics is stagnant. Whether dead leaders, sick leaders or fallen logs, it doesn't matter so long as politics remains a profound means to a preposterous end. We shall go in circles from shame to shame.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## Let good apples drive out the bad

**At any cost, the nation has to get rid of the colluding forces once for all. One should not miss the present opportunity. The forthcoming dialogue between the government and the political parties must ensure that the good apples drive out the bad.**

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

AFTER the British left the sub-continent more than half a century ago, there were high hopes among Hindus and Muslims alike since two nations were created: Hindu majority India and Muslim majority Pakistan. All the hopes shattered within weeks of August 14/15 1947, when a few million people left their ancestral homes and property behind because of the fear of an ethno-religious cleansing and took shelter in new lands (Indian Muslims to Pakistan and Pakistani Hindus to India).

I knew the parents of some friends, who had made such a

one-way journey to then East Pakistan from West Bengal with one box of belongings. It happened to the Hindus, too, who fled from East Pakistan to West Bengal.

Over the last half a century, South Asia has crossed many more milestones. One such achievement is the sustained democratic rule enjoyed by India since 1947. In recent years, however, democracy has been an "on again, off again" game in three other nations of the region: Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

In recent times, the South Asia region witnessed some optimistic developments as far as the democratic movement is

concerned. Once again, Pakistan and Nepal, after experiencing major human tragedies on route to democracy, have newly elected governments.

Bangladesh is waiting in the wings, to return to a political government before the year 2008 ends. I am sure the present non-political government will have renewed commitment and resolve to bring the nation back to the democratic track after witnessing the successes of those two nations.

Many commentators and politicians alike are in doubt that the government, in the end, will be able to free the nation from the clutches of the politicians, their cronies in bureau-

cracy, and some unscrupulous business houses. Although it is true that some of the corrupt politicians, government officials and businessmen and women have been punished under the emergency rule, many remain untouched and unaccounted for. Let us illustrate further, one by one, those who may have been waiting in the wings for a come back.

First, let us take politics into consideration. It seems the EC has wasted enough time in trying to keep the warring factions of two BNP groups united. Who are they? They are the same old characters who were ministers and MPs during the BNP-Jamaat coalition regime between 2001 and 2006.

Certainly, the EC can no longer wait for these factions to become united and then take part in the dialogue under a single umbrella. Having seeing

this waiting game, some people feel uneasy about the ultimate outcome of the long running emergency rule.

The EC, disappointed with the snail's pace in the unification process, has recently said that the warring factions of the BNP may jeopardise the time frame for the next election.

Second, on the subject of bureaucracy and overall public service, it puzzles the civil society that the cadres of political parties who have made public service not to serve the public, but to service their masters over the last fifteen years, have remained intact (only a handful of corrupt officials and one PSC member have been given jail terms so far).

There has not been seen any attempt to screen out or identify the public servants who had been cadres of political parties before joining. Under all the

governments in the past, there were lists made for appointing 64 DCs on party lines. This is also a process the incumbent wants to adopt, however, for an opposite outcome.

The government wants to ensure that the district administration has been made free of all sorts of political influence or bias before the next election.

The list can also be extended to various cadres of the BCS, including police, who had been appointed in the last fifteen years. At a minimum, the nation expects the CTG to begin a genuine reform in public service. To make the reform process fair, one would like to see the PSC arrange in-service comprehensive tests on a regular basis for promotion, particularly for those recruited between 1991 and 2006 or have less than 15 years of service, irrespective of the positions

they hold at present. This will ensure that inefficient officers will be driven out by the efficient ones.

Third, taking business houses into consideration, if the last fifteen months are a guide, it will not be an exaggeration to state that the CTG had little success in dismantling or reducing the role of business syndicates in the market place. In the recent past, it was clear that the syndicates could make a government a hostage at a time of crisis.

The unscrupulous behaviour was at its peak when, for example, the supply of rice was manipulated at the will of the syndicates. Those business houses must be brought to their senses by means of rewards and punishments in accordance with the existing laws against unscrupulous business syndicates.

In conclusion, for creating an inclusive democratic environment it is true that the politicians, bureaucrats, and private businesses need to work closely. It was a misfortune in this part of the world over a long period of time that these forces had been colluding in discharging their duties and responsibilities in order to preserve and strengthen authority and self-interest. This resulted in keeping the colonial rule alive and well even after the foreign power had left more than 60 years ago. At any cost, the nation has to get rid of the colluding forces once for all. One should not miss the present opportunity. The forthcoming dialogue between the government and the political parties must ensure that the good apples drive out the bad.

Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.