

Controversy around city and municipal polls

Free and fair election to all elected bodies is the need of the hour

NEW controversies appear to be coming to the fore as the country prepares for the long awaited general elections by the end of the year. The major political parties have raised questions about the polls schedule for four city corporations and nine municipalities. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party has rejected the schedule while the Awami League has described the move by the Election Commission as conspiratorial and farcical. There is thus a complicated situation before the country. Of course, the parties have a right to interpret matters in light of the views they hold about the existing state of things. But their objections must be logical and fact based, rather than purely on suspicion.

Some of the fears likely working in them include their suspicion that by its new move, the Election Commission and by extension the government is being selective about holding elections. They feel that the corporation and municipal elections schedule is discriminatory in that a pick-and-choose policy seems to have been adopted when a whole tranche of local body polls have fallen due. There is too the claim that the constitution does not empower the caretaker government to hold any election other than that for parliament. Moreover, the parties suspect that some hidden agenda are at work to prevent them from playing their due role in politics in the coming weeks and months. Politicians think that the these polls, if held earlier than the national elections, will quite likely undercut the voting for a new parliament and in fact might be a move to supplant political parties with a new arrangement being put in place and making them irrelevant.

We at this newspaper, while taking such thoughts into consideration, nevertheless are of the opinion that the best way of tackling suspicions of so-called hidden agenda, should there be any, is for the parties to vigorously participate in the polls, ensure that they are free and fair, and thus thwart any move to influence the outcome. Not participating in the polls is not a solution. There are, in fact, a number of reasons why these polls need to go ahead. Firstly, since the imposition of the emergency, the nation has gradually been readying itself for election, especially general elections and it will not be wise now for such expectations to be belied by negative new developments. Secondly, city corporations and municipal bodies have been without elections for long, a condition that does not one any good. The parties must on their own initiate a strong debate on the necessity of such elections by recognising the great need for change people by and large have expected since the imposition of the emergency.

The bottom line should be clear to everyone. It is imperative for the nation to get back to good, democratic governance. That being the point, any decision by the parties to boycott the corporation and municipal polls can only create new uncertainty. We expect them to act with sagacity, make their presence felt at the polls and thus prepare the ground for free, fair and credible general elections at the end of the year. Democracy is not served by an abandonment of the field but by a resolute holding on to it.

Militants regrouping again?

The threat perception must be taken seriously

AN investigative report published in this daily suggests that the threat of a come back by some factions of extremist groups hovers over the head of the nation because of the rather relaxed attitude of the law enforcing agencies. Intelligence agencies are of the opinion that the current passivity of the militants is a possible lull before regrouping and mounting attacks on targets. It is feared that the arrested leaders are keeping in touch with their followers from inside the jails and might issue orders to launch attack through the network.

In order to contain proliferation of militancy in the country the government had taken a 12-point decision that included carrying out massive anti-militancy publicity campaign by the Ministry of Information focusing on suspected localities, elements and religious institutes. But one year later it appears that little has been done to implement those measures to create greater social awareness against militancy. As a result, we fear, militants in jail or those still at large might take the slackened attitude of the law enforcing agencies as an opportunity to carry out their design with an ulterior motive. There is the additional fear that militants in jail might brainwash other inmates to join their bandwagon.

Historically, obscurantist elements could never contribute to the welfare of the people or to the development of science and technology to take the nation forward. Having their faces turned backward, they have only brought unending suffering for the people and death and destruction on themselves. A nation, therefore, must employ resources at its disposal to eliminate militancy and create the environment for democratic rule to find root. We are worried at the possibility of beleaguered militant groups regrouping owing to the complacency on the part of the law enforcing agencies. It is crucial that they conduct periodic raids to flush out militants from their hideouts. Besides, motivational and awareness building programmes ought to be taken up to instill the non-violent spirit of Islam amongst the people throughout the country.

The convicted politicians



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE special courts set up at the MP hostel in Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban complex to try corruption and extortion cases filed against detained political bigwigs have so far convicted 108 persons, including a large number of politicians, and ordered confiscation of their properties worth around Tk 300 crore.

Most of the convicted politicians belong to two major political parties, BNP and Awami League, and one each from Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Oikya Jote, and a faction of Jatiya Party.

In the AL camp, former minister Mohammad Nasim, former state ministers Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya and Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, former chief whip Abul Hasnat Abdullah, former lawmaker and a cousin of AL chief Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Helal, former lawmakers H.B.M. Iqbal, Haji Mohammad Selim and Mokbul Hossain, Awami Swechasebak League general secretary Pankaj Devnath, and whip Mostafa

BY THE NUMBERS

If the caretaker government is really committed to restoring democracy, the convicted politicians must be barred from contesting election. Once they qualify, they will surely try their best to influence the electoral process by means of money, muscle and misuse of power to win. Then all the developments so far made to bring a meaningful change in the political landscape will boil down to a farce.

Rashedi Suja are among the convicts, and have been sentenced to imprisonment for amassing wealth illegally and concealing information from the ACC.

The special courts convicted BNP leaders and former ministers Barrister Nizamul Huda, Dr. Khondoker Mosharrar Hossain, Mirza Abbas, Barrister Aminul Haque and Shahjahan Siraj, former state ministers Lutfuzzaman Babar, Shahjahan Omar, Amanullah Aman, Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku and Ziaul Haque Zia, former deputy minister Abdus Salam Pintu, and former lawmakers Naser Rahman, Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan, Ali Asgar Lobi, Rashiduzzaman Milat and Manjurul Ahsan Munshi for amassing wealth illegally and concealing information about wealth.

A report published in the daily Jugantor on June 14 says that the government has blacklisted 15 former ministers and lawmakers of BNP for their involvement in massive corruption: 11 are in jail and 4 are absconding.

The list includes former minister for Health and Family Planning Dr. Khondoker Mosharrar Hossain, former Communication minister Barrister Nazmul Huda, former Works minister Mirza Abbas, former T&T Minister Barrister Aminul Haque, former state minister for Home Lutfuzzaman Babar, former state minister for Power and Energy Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku, and LGRD state minister Ziaul Haque Zia.

Former prime minister Khaleda Zia's political secretary Haris Chowdhury, former adviser for Trade and Commerce Barkatullah Bulu, former state minister Amanullah Aman, former deputy minister for Land Ruhul Quddus Talukder Dulu, former MPs Mosadek Ali Falu, Nasiruddin Ahamed Pintu and M.A.H. Selim are also included on the blacklist.

The government is also preparing another blacklist of the corrupt politicians in AL and Jamaat-e-Islam, and will send the lists to their respective parties. Besides

taking proper actions against these political bigwigs as per the law of land for their involvement in massive corruption, the government will request their respective parties not to nominate them for the election.

The government has initiated a move to relax some major provisions in the emergency power rules (EPR), especially Section 15, which concerns bail in corruption cases, and formed a committee headed by the law adviser for the purpose. It is a welcome development towards establishing of the inalienable right of a citizen.

At the same time, we are quite disheartened to know from a report carried by the Prothom Alo on June 15 that the government is also contemplating relaxation of some provisions of EPR in order to provide opportunities to the convicted politicians to contest the parliamentary election after filing an appeal to the higher court.

Former president H.M. Ershad was convicted by a lower court in Janata Tower case and was in jail

when he contested the 1996 parliamentary election. He filed an appeal to the higher court against the judgment and thus qualified for contesting the election. The higher court rejected his appeal in August 2000, and the seat won by Ershad was eventually declared void.

The Constitution in Article 66 (2) (d) states: "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of Parliament who has been on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude and sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release."

EPR also clearly states when a person will be disqualified for election, and there is no contradiction with the Constitution. According to the Constitution and EPR, there exists no scope for a person who is convicted for a criminal offence to contest the parliamentary election.

At least 60 percent of the people in Bangladesh have no faith in the politicians and find politics a sham. A study styled "Unbundling governance towards an annual report on governance in Bangladesh" by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), a local development research institute, revealed this unpleasant truth in a seminar held at LGED Bhaban.

A recent study by the Institute of Governance Studies of Brac

University revealed that politicians were the least trusted professionals in the country, followed by the police and local government representatives. The manifest truth is that most of the people in Bangladesh have already lost trust in politics, as political power has become the proverbial milch cow for the corrupt politicians.

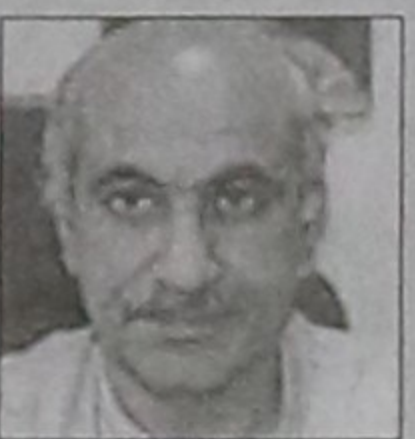
There is no denying that our politicians have miserably failed to meet the aspirations of the people, and that their irresponsible behaviour pushed the country to such a pass that a state of emergency had to be imposed. It is also sad that almost all the top leaders of the major parties are behind bars on charges of corruption.

The nation is now passing through a crucial period in the transition to a durable democracy. The people are eagerly awaiting the promised election, as the country desperately needs a fresh start with inclusive leadership.

If the caretaker government is really committed to restoring democracy, the convicted politicians must be barred from contesting election. Once they qualify, they will surely try their best to influence the electoral process by means of money, muscle and misuse of power to win. Then all the developments so far made to bring a meaningful change in the political landscape will boil down to a farce.

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

The fine art of doing nothing



M.J. AKBAR

SENSIBLE politicians are wary of big words: they never know when one will rebound and bite them, with painful consequences. The philosophy of power is one word too many in a phrase about politics. Politicians keep their nose to the ground, philosophy out of their thoughts, and their conscience in a safe deposit vault, so that, while it remains out of sight, it can always be taken out, brushed up and put on display when expedient.

And yet, everyone who exercises power does so on the basis of some logic, even if we cannot in justice extend its meaning to the expanse of a philosophy. You have to be not merely very brave, but also intellectually robust to be a disciple of Kautilya, or even of Machiavelli. Their treatises on governance are more comprehensive and demanding than their one-liner reputations might lead you to believe.

BYLINE

The danger of doing nothing is that it can become a habit. Witness how government has tackled rising prices. Measures against inflation should have been put in place in December last year. The government did nothing. By March this horse, inflation, had bolted. However hard the government slams the door now, the damage is done.

The only Indian prime minister who saw himself as a potential Kautilya, as early as in the 1930s, and had the intellectual bravado to pull it off in the 1950s, was Jawaharlal Nehru. Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Atal Behari Vajpayee had read enough to appreciate the nuances of a Kautilya, but they chose to stress different elements of the Arthashastra prescription, creating vastly different medicines for the national health.

No government of India has been as minimalist as the UPA regime. For over four years now it has survived on a simple basis: Do nothing, and nothing unfortunate will happen.

There are some good reasons for this.

The central motivation of the UPA coalition has been fear of failure. It wanted to survive in office above all else. It knew that the alliance was brittle, and so compromised on two basic elements of power. No action was ever taken on the corruption or misuse of ministers, for fear that it would break the

alliance. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh could not possibly have had two standards on corruption, a wink for allies like the DMK, and a taskmaster's discipline for Congress ministers. So when DMK ministers began raking in the loot like there was no tomorrow (and maybe for some of them there isn't) Congress ministers welcomed the signal. They got a free ride on a highway without tolls, and, being seasoned Congressmen, devised artful and even brilliant forms of bribery. I believe the fashionable thing to do now is to ignore silly old cash, and settle for benami equity in private sector companies.

Ministers with less imagination used power to get benefits for companies owned by relatives. Ritu Sarin of the Indian Express has done some superb investigation of how rules were bent and laws broken to favour a distillery owned by Home Minister Shivraj Patil's son Shaleesh. You only associated the Home Minister with starched clothes, white shoes, pomade, and

cluelessness, did you? Well, he had a distillery up his armpit.

What will happen? Nothing. Any action might cost Dr. Singh his job and his boss, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, her reputation. The Hindustan Times story on uranium might not have the drama of the Express investigation but it is, in a sense, even more damaging. It undermines the very basis of Dr. Singh's arguments in defence of the Indo-US nuclear deal, that India needs foreign uranium for its civil nuclear program.

As Neelesh Misra reports: "India has been sitting on massive, untapped reserves of uranium, hundreds of tons of which have been discovered over the past couple of years -- adding to the over 1 lakh tons already identified in Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu." That is enough for our requirements for at least 40 years. Why did the prime minister keep this a closely guarded secret for four years?

What will happen? Why, nothing of course. To do anything would mean that the prime minister would have to appear on national television and cough discreetly before declaring himself guilty of misleading the country.

Dr. Singh learnt what little he knows of politics from P.V. Narasimha Rao, a prime minister who perfected the art of doing nothing, and flaunted indecision as a decision. The epitome of this model was reached on December 6, 1992 when, in an unparalleled display of comatose indifference Rao did nothing while the Babri mosque was being destroyed through the day.

Singh was finance minister then, and arguably the most important minister after Rao. What did Dr. Singh do? So much of nothing that you could write a book on silence out of it. But here is the surprise. The government got away with it. Rao manipulated the still dominant government audiovisual media from the evening of December 6, sold a lie, and the Congress won a handsome victory in the Assembly elections held a year later.

Moral of the story? If you do nothing successfully enough, you can always drift back to power.

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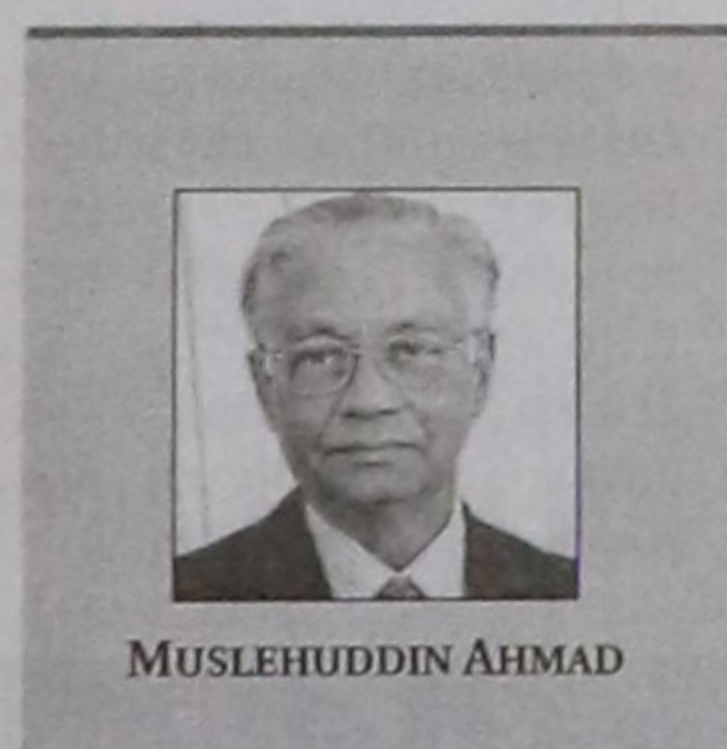
December last year. The government did nothing. By March this horse, inflation, had bolted. However hard the government slams the door now, the damage is done.

Narasimha Rao could legitimately claim some redemption in his record. He did do something in one area, the economy. He might not have done what he did were it not for the financial emergency he inherited; and he certainly could have done more, as Dr. Singh would attest. But economic reforms will stand against his name. The record of the last four years, in contrast, is marked by only one significant departure from the norm: the Indo-US nuclear deal. That deal seems to have been sacrificed to survival. The Dr. Singh years add up to a fragile zero. Perhaps the prime minister is beginning to understand this. Those who saw him on television asking ministers to stop going abroad in order to save Indians from the whirlwind of rising prices were not overly impressed.

His mien was never very colourful, although he could be brisk. If he began as a gray man, he has deepened towards an ashy pallor. The price of power was visible in his eyes. You might imagine that if you do nothing, nothing will happen to you. Your eyes betray you.

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New America with Obama in the White House



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CONSCIENCE AND SOCIETY

Dialogue may indeed strengthen America's position politically, as America can be a good friend, as it has long been, if it sheds its superpower ego, gives up its bad habit of interfering in the internal affairs of others, and abandons Bush's misguided foreign policy.

Mundo newspaper published on June 14, that it would take US "100 years to repair the damage" caused by President Bush. "We live in a dictatorship. We have a fascist government... which controls the media."

Gore Vidal said Barack Obama was "intelligent" and it would be a "novelty" to have an intelligent person in the White House. He is absolutely right; it would make a world of difference with an intelligent and honest man in the White House.

Barack Obama's entry into the White House

It's not only author Gore Vidal, but also the majority of Americans who appear convinced that they will see Obama go to the White House. With Barack Obama in the Oval Office, one should normally expect complete stoppage of all these unwise acts of Bush/Cheney. This would lead to

the beginning of a New America. New America means an America with new vision, totally new approach to the world, new foreign policy, new non-discriminatory social and religious structure, and policies thereof.

No more 9/11, no more Guantanamo Bay, no more Bin Laden-phobia, no more Islamophobia, no more undressing of airline passengers, total withdrawal from Iraq in about 6-9 months, return of all American forces back home through replacement of US and other forces by acceptable Muslim and other forces under UN command.

Palestinian state

If Bush fails on his promise to establish an independent Palestinian state before he leaves the White House, then Barack Obama should do so within a reasonable time, say within a year

or two: a Palestinian state within 1967 borders with small border adjustments. East Jerusalem should be the capital. Obama should clarify his statement that undivided Jerusalem would be the capital of Israel, as this appears to have come up in the press through misinterpretation. He might have meant Jerusalem that Israel held before 1967.

Israel's capital

East Jerusalem with Noble Sanctuary was always a separate entity, different from the rest of Jerusalem, and it is certainly not a part of Jerusalem that Israel got when the UN voted Israel into a state. Israel unlawfully annexed East Jerusalem. So Barack Obama, who may be the next president, could have never meant the unlawfully annexed part as Israel's Jerusalem, which is not recognised by the UN.

Obama also could not have

meant to donate the entire East Jerusalem, which is a disputed territory as per UN resolution, to Israel. So, there appears to be a serious mistake in the interpretation of Barack Obama's statement in this regard. He may like to clarify his position at an appropriate moment.

What is possible, and should change the whole picture, is Israel keeping the Western (Wailing) Wall within its capital in West Jerusalem. Jews must be allowed unhindered access to their prayer place through the Dung Gate.

I myself visited the Western Wall through the Dung Gate, and it is possible to have this Jewish prayer place separate from the rest of East Jerusalem. Israel must not try to keep East Jerusalem under its command by force; it will be absolutely ungovernable by Israel.

If Israel is interested in living in peace, it must agree to Palestinians having East Jerusalem as their capital. This may allow land accommodation in other areas and will quickly bring peace in the region.

Dialogue the only way

Obama spoke of "dialogue" with enemies, which is the only way to bring justice and peace in the

world. One has to find out with an open mind why so many wars are being fought even in this world of today, and why America is directly involved in practically all these wars. The fault lies with the incumbent in the White House. This position has to change, and this is where the Barack Obama's word "change" comes in.

Obama's change

When Barack Obama speaks of "change" he should really mean it, regardless of what the Israelis or American-Israelis say and do. Today, America's enmity with a great part of the world lies in its blind support for Israel, which has been in occupation of the greater part of Palestine against the will of the international community. Nobody is asking America to abandon Israel, but America has to strike a balance, otherwise it will continue to lose heavily in terms of its friendship with the Middle East and Muslim and many non-Muslim countries around the world.

Senator McCain

Senator McCain is undoubtedly a very wise politician, but he suffers from political fatigue, and is not a great orator either. Unfortunately, McCain is still supporting Bush's Middle East policy, particularly

Iraq policy, which has been a disaster for the American administration and also for its friends like Britain and Australia.

The chief executives of both Britain and Australia lost their jobs. The recent polls show that Bush's policy has been rejected by the Americans, but McCain wants to pursue it with a bit of twist which will not work.

McCain's latest twist in the form of "League of Democracy" is another version of Bush's export of democracy to Iraq. This League of Democracy may revive the cold war in another form, with stronger opposition as both Russia and China are going to be bracketed together against it. This may also lead to the end of America's superpower status.

Hillary up for vice-president

Hillary Clinton has suspended her bid for the White House and endorsed Barack Obama. Her assertion that "we together will be making history" leads to the assumption that she is ready to be the vice-presidential running mate. If selected, she will add considerable electoral strength to the Democratic bid for the White House, and Obama needs that in his fight against a heavyweight like

Senator McCain. Democrats may have the White House for over a decade

Obama-Hillary could hold the White House for two terms and then Clinton would be the favourite to capture the Oval Office herself for one or two terms, thus practically monopolising the Oval Office for over a decade for the Democrats. If this happens, then they together can really make history and America could then make its position better in the rest of the world in about a decade, and may not need 100 years as predicted by Gore Vidal.

New America

Obama has the vision that accommodation can be achieved through real dialogue with "enemies." A military solution is outdated and dialogue is the only way out. Dialogue may indeed strengthen America's position politically, as America can be a good friend, as it has long been, if it sheds its superpower ego, gives up its bad habit of interfering in the internal affairs of others, and abandons Bush's misguided foreign policy.

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