

Barring the convicted and corrupt from polls

Onus still on political parties to field clean candidates

Welcome the decision of the caretaker government to enact laws to bar the corrupt, the loan defaulters, criminals, and those convicted by the court from participating in the forthcoming elections.

For all too long our politics has been held hostage by these vile elements of the society, who have not only smeared the image of the country but also hindered national development. We believe that it will be redemption of the caretaker government's pledge to rid our politics of the dishonest, crooked and the shady elements, of ridding us not only of black money but excessive use of 'white' money also, and of muscle power, and thereby restore the confidence of the people in the polity of Bangladesh.

In this regard we would like to suggest that the proposed laws must be cast-iron that would on the one hand uphold the underlying principle of justice and fair play while on the other prevent these elements from exploiting any loophole to their advantage. Under no circumstances can we countenance a situation where these elements would stage a comeback and dictate the course of the affairs of the state.

The government ought also to look objectively at the current provision of minimum period of sentence, that of five years, that disqualifies a convicted person from participating in elections for a particular period of time. We feel that for those who have been convicted of serious crimes and corruption should be barred if he has been sentenced for a term of more than two years. And in grave cases of murder such persons may be barred for life.

In the case of loan defaulters the law must be more sensitive since many loanees default not out of their own volition but because of factors beyond their control. The state must therefore differentiate between willful defaulters and those, who despite their efforts, have failed to pay back the loan installments. We also suggest that the terms of rescheduling loans for the aspiring candidates should be more than mere tokenism.

However, all that we have stated above takes on a secondary importance to the central fact that onus lies on the political parties to refrain from, in any way, encouraging or nominating any person of dubious and questionable credentials to take part in any election. Unless a fundamental change is imbibed in the very culture and dynamics of the political parties to shun persons with culpable track records, the electoral atmosphere cannot be purged of nefarious elements. The two major parties should lead the way.

Dhaka College incident

Sanity expected of the students

WHAT happened in and around Dhaka College on Saturday should not have come to pass. In an unfortunate accident, a speeding microbus had hit a student while he was crossing the road in front of the college and in the process received grievous injury. We are sorry to hear that the student's legs were fractured and he needed hospitalisation for treatment. By all means, he must be given all sorts of medical and financial assistance by the government and the college authorities for his recovery and rehabilitation.

We take the occasion to mention that this is one of many accidents that occurred on the road that passes in front of Dhaka College, and it is deplorable that the relevant authorities have never felt the urgency of constructing speed breakers or enforcing speed limit on passing vehicles to ensure safety of the students. The road itself is narrow and partly occupied by vendors on the sidewalks, thereby needing better control and management of traffic during busy hours. It is common sense that roads in front of educational institutes are perceived as sensitive spots that require special vigilance to avoid accidents.

While we condemn the accident, we at the same time cannot condone the fact that a group of unruly students set fire to the microbus and then went on a car-wrecking frenzy on the road. We can well imagine how law and order can go out of hand when several hundred students take to the street to vent their anger. Such unruliness demonstrated by the students of the prestigious educational institute evoked resentment in the minds of the people, more so for the fact that they had taken law in their own hands. Their hysterical reaction and taking out their wrath on others, who had nothing to do with the unfortunate accident, crossed the boundaries of civility.

We often hear of road accidents near schools, colleges and universities and loss of lives of students. This must not be allowed to go on. We, therefore, urge the authorities to address the road safety issue near all the educational institutions in the country through implementing required measures.

Fixing the first war

Petraeus is apparently trying to emulate the strategy he used in Iraq's Anbar province, where intensive discussions brought many former insurgent leaders over to the US side against al Qaeda in Iraq. He and the new Pakistani government are discussing a plan of action that would, along similar lines, separate the "irreconcilables" (like Baitullah Mehsud) from the "reconcilables."

MICHAEL HIRSH

THEY seem an odd couple: the general who engineered President Bush's surge in Iraq, and the presidential candidate who has promised to undo it. But look again. Gen. David Petraeus's broad new agenda as the likely next commander of Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees US forces in the entire Middle East and Central Asia, seems to echo some of Barack Obama's views about the critical front in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Though he hasn't even been confirmed yet, NEWSWEEK has learned that the energetic Petraeus is already informally involved in talks with the new Pakistani government, including

its ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani, about counter-insurgency plans for the tribal regions, where Taliban and al Qaeda elements still hold sway. And in his discussions with the Pakistanis, Petraeus has indicated he would add up to two additional Coalition brigades to Afghanistan once he takes over CENTCOM, according to a senior diplomatic official in Washington who spoke on condition of anonymity owing to political sensitivities. Interestingly, that's close to what Obama has called for, as well.

Petraeus's quiet talks with the Pakistanis are unusual, given that he hasn't been confirmed yet. Rick DeBobes, staff director for the Senate Committee on Armed Services, said he was

surprised to hear about them. While he conceded that Petraeus is a likely shoo-in for confirmation -- Obama, for one, said even before the Senate hearings on Petraeus that he would vote for him -- DeBobes noted that the general isn't expected to take command until the fall, and "there's always the issue of the appearance of presumption of confirmation."

A senior US military official close to Petraeus told NEWSWEEK on Thursday that he was making no presumptions about his confirmation, and that all his meetings were related to his duties as commander of the multinational forces in Iraq.

"Gen Petraeus has made no comments or assessments about what might be needed in

Afghanistan, though he did talk to [outgoing US commander in Afghanistan Gen. Dan] McNeill before his confirmation hearings that he thought we might need more forces beyond those pledged by Nato," said the official, who would speak only if he were not identified. (A CENTCOM spokesman, Lt. Matthew Allen, said he could not immediately comment on Petraeus's talks and on current CENTCOM policy toward Central Asia.)

The discussions would seem to belie some press reports that the US-Pakistan relationship is foundering. True, the Pakistani military is incensed over the deaths of 11 of its soldiers last week in a US airstrike, and it is deeply annoyed that President Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, a US ally, has threatened to send troops across the border to chase Taliban footsoldiers.

Pakistani officials say they are mystified that US planes fired on what Islamabad described as a fixed command post known to

US forces in Gorah Parai, a tribal area close to the Afghan border. But the US and Pakistani militaries, in an effort to paper over the differences, have agreed to conduct a joint investigation of the incident.

"That is our hope, and we are working toward that," Lt. Col. Mark Wright, a Pentagon spokesman, told NEWSWEEK today. He said that an announcement was likely soon.

Pakistani frustration has been building for some time over indiscriminate covert US airstrikes inside their borders. "When you [US forces] act there's often more collateral damage than killing the bad guys," Mahmood Ali Durrani, the former Pakistani ambassador to Washington, told me in an interview last year. "We cannot afford that."

The Pakistani Army and intelligence services are also furious that they are routinely blamed for doing too little when they think most of the problem lies with Washington.

Durrani said the trail of US mistakes goes all the way back to the failure to encircle Tora Bora in the mountains of Afghanistan in December 2001. "You needed to stop them rather than drive them into Pakistan. That was Mistake No. 1. There should have been blocking force ... But you had to put boots on the ground, and you were not willing to do that ... The US used only special forces, and [because of bad information by the Afghan warlords] a lot of people got their revenge against X, Y, Z. Every time a marriage party was hit you lost more support. The second flaw was your eyes left the ball. You went to Iraq. There was a vacuum in Afghanistan. And they got a motivational area in Iraq. They got support in Iraq. Al Qaeda rejuvenated. And what Pakistan is getting now is the blowback from that rather than the other way around."

The biggest problem that Washington has right now is the serious gulf of mistrust between the Pakistani Army and the new

civilian government led by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani of the Pakistan People's Party (and the power behind him, Asif Ali Zardari, the controversial husband of the murdered Benazir Bhutto).

The PPP has not fully won the trust of the Army, which is dominated by Chief of Staff Ashfaq Kayani, a former subordinate to Pervez Musharraf, Bhutto's longtime adversary.

It is the Army that is still leading talks with militants in the tribal regions, but Gilani has insisted on additional conditions, mainly that the militant members of the Mehsud tribe not conduct cross-border attacks or other actions abroad.

The PPP-led government is also trying to find a way around dealing with Baitullah Mehsud, the notorious Islamic radical commander, by opening up talks with other members of the tribe.

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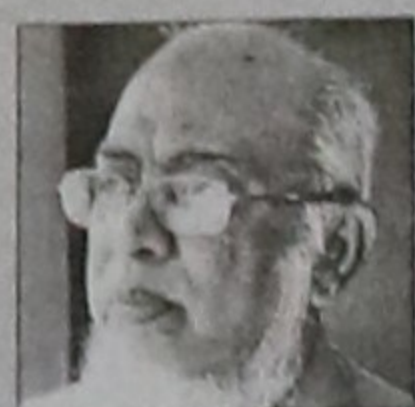
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A key question Petraeus will face is, with the US military stretched tight, how can he beef up the US-Nato presence in Afghanistan without jeopardising the success of his surge in Iraq? Already the general has begun to hint at a drawdown in Iraq, where smaller-size US units -- say, a company -- would work at the brigade level with the increasingly competent Iraqi Army. But we won't really know whether Petraeus can effect a winning strategy in both Iraq and Afghanistan until he assumes control of CENTCOM.

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The brouhaha over a trifle



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE caretaker government's dialogue with political stakeholders is tapering towards a denouement, with an odd few still opting out of it. The BNP, with a bruised image and wobbly organisation, has preferred to reject both the dialogue and the election unless its supremo is unconditionally freed from her incarceration.

The party supremo herself demanded her indicted sons' release from detention, and their treatment abroad, as a precondition for her participation. A positive response from the authorities, if any, is awaited.

In the meantime, the caretaker government itself has caused fresh controversy by declaring the polls schedule for four municipal corporations and nine

municipalities. It also plans to hold upazilla elections in October. The decision to hold local body elections before the parliamentary election has flummoxed all and sundry.

The BNP and several other political outfits indicated their unwillingness to participate in local bodies poll on the plea that the caretaker government was not mandated to hold such election.

The government is, however, well armed with the arguments in favour of its action. It argues that this election is after all an apolitical exercise, and in no way affects the national election in December.

The arguments do not placate the anxiety of the political parties, which have been seized afresh with crisis of confidence. To some of them it smacks of

PERSPECTIVES

The BNP and its garrulous secretary general may be doing well in scoring extra political mileage or garnering lost support, but at what cost? The impending transition to a democratic order through an election with the participation of all political forces is much more crucial than being penny wise pound foolish. It is more important to seize the opportunity than to get bogged down in meaningless debate with regard to the priority accorded to this or that election.

intrigue at the behest of foreign powers.

True, the election for local bodies is fought without political labels. But at the end of the day, the contestants are all political -- supported by party men at grass-roots level. If this election is left free for all, observers reckon that the charlatans, opportunists and elements out to grab the chance will occupy this vital space of national politics and eventually pollute it, something neither the public nor the establishment will relish in the long run.

Equally untenable is the argument that the caretaker government is hot mandated to hold the local body elections. By now none should be in doubt that the present government has been doing many things it is not mandated to do, and with popular support.

It's because we are passing through unusual times that the challenges have to be met with extraordinary means. Interestingly, the party, which catalysed this unusual situation by planning a scripted election on January 22, 2007, is most vocal in opposing the government's effort of transferring power to the government elected on a level playing ground.

Had there been no behind the scene intrigue by the BNP-Jamaat dispensation to prolong power perpetually, there wouldn't have been a situation which demanded the additional burden of all these extra-constitutional steps.

The nation is at a crossroads today, where it is willy-nilly redefining itself. Any metamorphosis is painful, and we are experiencing that with the socio-political problems deepening and the economic outlook turning bleak.



Let people be priority no. 1.

There isn't any reason for despair, but the country can't afford to undergo fresh controversies over trifles. The interim government is grappling with all the piled up problems left behind by a failed government run by the BNP-led alliance. It is neither capable, nor designed, to address all the problems facing the country.

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all political forces is much more crucial than being penny wise pound foolish. It is more important to seize the opportunity than to get bogged down in meaningless debate with regard to the priority accorded to this or that election.

Enough wounds have already been inflicted on the country's body politic. Now lets make it a healing time. It's good that the AL has decided in favour of participation in municipal polls, and the authorities have also agreed to partially relax the emergency during the election.

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The electric vehicle solution



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Today's phenomenal petroleum prices make small electric vehicles (EVs) super-attractive. Insofar as we permit (limited) private transport, battery-operated cars/2-wheelers are especially relevant. They cost only one-tenth as much to run as petrol-driven vehicles. I've used an EV -- Indian-made Reva, the world's largest-selling purely electric car -- for more than three years. It's almost as easy to drive/maintain as a bicycle.

Third, transport expenses are rising, necessitating cuts in spending on other necessities.

The crisis will worsen as private vehicles proliferate, driven by middle-class consumerism, and by policies which subsidise them. The region's private vehicle production is rising much faster than GDP, typically by 10% plus. India's car output has doubled over 5 years.

Automobile emissions of suspended particulate matter (SPM), and nitrogen and sulphur oxides, account for 60% plus of the urban air-pollution load. Fine particulates contain some 40 carcinogens. The health damage runs into billions of dollars.



Electric vehicles allow you to breathe safely.

Yet, thanks to automobilisation, 57% of Indian cities record SPM levels exceeding one-and-a-half times the permissible standard. India's top 10 "hotspots" include small cities like Raipur, Kanpur and Alwar.

The entry of the Tatas' Nano will make things worse. It's unlikely the Nano can meet, without a hefty price rise, Euro-IV emission norms by 2010. In any case, its sheer numbers, and those of other models on the way, will cause more pollution and congestion. Yet, shamefully, India has lowered excise duties on small cars.

This policy direction must be urgently reversed. We must promote public transport, and discourage private vehicles, which waste resources, and use road-space iniquitously.

In our cities, cars and two-wheelers hog 60% to 80% of road-space, but only deliver 15% to 20% of passenger trips. Buses occupy under 20% of road-space, yet generate up to 60% of trips.

Cars demand high maintenance. They usually occupy prime space -- even when unused. Studies show that if owners were made to pay the economic rent for parking, many would stop using cars. At Mumbai's Nariman Point, the true annual market price of

parking-space for a car would exceed its cost 10 times over!

Runaway private transport growth must be curbed through higher taxation -- current rates are unacceptably low -- stiff parking fees, Singapore-style bans on odd and even numbered cars, carpools, and pedestrians-only zones.

Above all, we must promote efficient, affordable, non-polluting public transport, and bicycles. If Paris can have 200 km of bicycle paths, so can Delhi, Karachi or Dhaka.

Bus Rapid Transit, with dedicated bus-lanes, is worthy, and is pursued in many European cities. Delhi's BRT was poorly planned and implemented, without public education. It was all but sabotaged by an elite-driven media campaign. But the BRT principle is sound.

Electricity-powered public transport is important to any rational urban system because it's non-polluting and noiseless. It includes Metrorail, trams and trolley-buses drawing power from overhead lines.

We shouldn't unthinkingly promote Metros. They cost 10 times more than BRTs and require heavy use (like hourly 40,000 passenger-trips per line) to pay for themselves. Most cities don't have that commuting pattern.

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I've used an EV -- Indian-made Reva, the world's largest-selling purely electric car -- for more than three years. It's almost as easy to drive/maintain as a bicycle.

EVs are extremely simple machines, without fuel injection/mixing, electric synchronisation, gearbox transmission, and pollution and noise control. Their battery-driven motor sits atop the axle and transmits power directly. The gear-free driving is pure pleasure. I've had only one problem with the Reva: a shock-absorber change.

EVs do have a carbon footprint -- from manufacture, to consumption of materials, to final waste disposal. But 80 percent of the life-cycle pollution from petrol/diesel vehicles is caused during their running. Here, EVs score decisively.

Admittedly, EVs have a limited range, typically 60 to 130 km, depending on battery design. They need frequent recharging: typically, two to six hours a day, for three to five days a week.

EVs aren't spacious "family vehicles." Most seat two adults and two children. (The Reva can pull four adults in cramped conditions.) With some planning of trips, and proper charging, one can comfortably negotiate a city with an EV.

Personally, I've never been stuck with a dead battery even while driving all the way to the international airport from

Central Delhi and back.

Driving an EV transforms one's experience of roads as sites of tension, cut-throat competition, mauling of abuse and display of rage.

There is, then, a strong case for public support for EVs. Besides launching trolley-buses and reviving/strengthening trams, this can take three forms. First, governments should offer EVs price subsidies and rebates in VAT, road taxes, free parking facilities, etc.

Many European Union governments do so. EVs enjoy free parking in London, besides 100% depreciation in the first year. They pay no congestion charge (GBP 8 a day) in Central London.

Besides price subsidies, France mandates that one-fifth of all new cars in public fleets must be electric. In Italy, EVs enjoy a 30% price rebate, free parking and road-tax exemptions. In Japan, EVs get handsome tax support, besides ¥20 billion funding for battery development.

No wonder more Revas are running in London than in Bangalore, where they're made. The Delhi government has just announced a 29.5% rebate on EVs. This must be emulated.

Second, Southern governments must initiate collaborative programmes for developing new-design lightweight, high-power batteries (e.g. lithium-ion) for EVs to replace lead-acid batteries, whose design is 100 years old.

Third, governments must create an infrastructure: free charging-points in city centres and car-parks, which will greatly enhance the range of EVs and make them competitive with petrol-driven cars.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.