

## Men of dubious reputation back in politics?

### City, municipal polls will be a test case for EC

THE Election Commission is deeply worried about the way things are going in the run-up to the corporation and municipal polls. That is only natural, given that a number of those who have submitted nomination papers are individuals with a questionable past. And that is what the EC, reconstituted following the imposition of a state of emergency last year, was supposed to avoid. Its job, one it went into with gusto, was to clear the Augean stables of the accumulated mess of years and so make it possible for democracy to take new roots. That was the ideal before it. It still is. The difficulty is that despite all the scrutiny it has so far engaged in regarding candidates for the upcoming polls, it does not seem to have been able to prevent a good number of old faces, with unsavoury reputations to boot, from entering the electoral fray.

The Election Commission, as everyone is aware, has come forward with some sweeping electoral reforms as well as a code of conduct regarding campaigning. Naturally, therefore, it was expected that the class of people who could not be trusted to hold positions of public responsibility owing to their past would be kept at bay. Now, if those very people are coming back into the limelight, one can only question the methods the EC adopted, or the application of them, as it went about doing its job. The EC, and with it a lot of other people, are quite disappointed that those with alleged criminal records now in the running for the upcoming corporation and municipal polls have not yet been sentenced. That makes it possible for these individuals to take part in the elections. The simple legal explanation is that unless a person is sentenced or convicted, in other words proved guilty, he cannot be dissuaded from participating in election-related politics. The dilemma for the EC as also for the country is thus patent. What is equally clear is that the measures taken so far by the EC to prevent such an infiltration of the electoral system do not appear to have been adequate or foolproof.

At this stage, therefore, it would be foolhardy to suggest that the EC adopt tougher measures in scrutinising nomination papers. The redeeming bit here is that a fairly good number of candidates have been barred from the polls on technical grounds. As for those who are in it, despite the charges against them and until they are convicted, the best hope lies in carrying out more thorough investigations into their past. With global instances of post-election disqualification before us, we can hope that individuals with criminal records will be phased out of politics. Let the upcoming polls be a test case for the EC in what it has done and how much more it ought to have done.

## Another highway tragedy

### What will it take before we take notice?

ONCE again there has been another horrific accident on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, the country's main inter-city thoroughfare. This time it was two buses colliding head on, leaving, at last count, 22 dead, with many more fatally injured so that the grim toll is certain to rise higher.

We are shocked to learn that in the past year and a half there have been over 200 fatalities on this stretch of the highway alone, the 97 kms that run through Comilla district, and that safety experts and professionals have been arguing for years is particularly unsafe. No less shocking is the fact that the official figure for highway deaths per year in Bangladesh is above 4,000 and the actual figure is estimated by experts to be perhaps three times that.

Nevertheless, despite this horrendous loss of life to say nothing of the thousands who are injured, despite the fact that the mere act of riding the nation's highways is a high risk endeavour that no one is immune to, despite the cost to the nation in economic terms from having such perilous roads, the issue of highway safety has never caught the attention of any government.

The real shame here is that ameliorative or corrective measures would be relatively easy to enact. Certainly, in the long run we need to look into safer and broader roads with dividers and fencing and that this requires funding. But it is worth pointing out that there is also much that the government can do in the short-term to address the problem.

The first order of the day is to enact stringent laws for speeding and unsafe driving and then put in place personnel to enforce it. This is the tried and true method of road enforcement the world over, and would have the added benefit of raising revenue for other road safety measures as well.

The problem in Bangladesh is with ensuring that this kind of system works and is not used as a rent seeking mechanism by law enforcement. But it seems to us, that with the much vaunted drive against corruption, it wouldn't be out of place to look at reforms that would allow the police force, in this case, highway patrol, to be more functional and to contribute to the much-needed protection of life and limb.

# Who said anything about Shaista Khan?



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FINANCE Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam appears to be quite irritated about our worries. We, the people, have been getting into ever deeper tunnels of gloom where managing a decent living for our spouses, children and siblings is concerned. And we have found ourselves in that precarious position because of all the food that we cannot afford to buy any more, because of everything that is fast becoming memory owing to all those happy traders sinking their avaricious hands into our pockets and taking away all we have.

It is prices we struggle against, for these prices have pushed us all into a corner. You cannot be certain that the high cost you pay for your rice today will not go even higher tomorrow. And you pray that some miracle will happen, that the Lord of the Universe will in the infinity of His wisdom cause these traders to pursue their business of selling and buying with the human face

As far as we can recall, the finance adviser has not in the past admonished traders about their wicked deeds, and has never told them that increasing prices is unrealistic and immoral. Are we now to suppose that it is far easier berating citizens over their legitimate worries than handling a bunch of traders in whom conscience has simply gone comatose? Mirza Azizul Islam reminds us that we do not inhabit the times of Shaista Khan. We never said we did. In this summer of our discontent, in this season of marketplace nightmares, lessons in history have been far from our thoughts. The finance adviser ought to have focused on these ground realities. He and the government he is part of would have done us all a huge favour if they had focused less on the fact of global price rises and more on the diminishing purchasing power of the citizens of this impoverished country.

morality expects them to wear.

But miracles are hard to come by any more. We understand that, for life is never a wish list. But what we do not comprehend is why government must treat us badly, why it should begin telling itself that citizens do not have to be consulted on matters that affect their welfare. Take the matter of the recent increase in the prices of fuel. When the budget was presented before the nation, the fear was that it would include a new tranche of fuel price rises. That did not happen and we were all happy. But then came the shock. The authorities, in a manner that can only be described as brazen and less than gentlemanly, informed us on an unsuspecting evening that, come next morning, we would have to cough up more wads of currency notes if we meant to keep our vehicles going. That was hitting below the belt. Or it was catching

a sleeping citizen unawares.

You do not expect government, any government, to shine a light in your eyes and terrify you with the glare. You are not deer on the highway. And government ought not to spot lesser beings in the form and shape of citizens. But that is what has been happening over the last three years, and especially in the last eighteen months. Our advisers tell us, in manner that borders on hauteur, that it does not matter whether or not some parties take part in election-related dialogue with the government. Oh yes, it does. And any administration that decides that ignoring politicians, or undermining them, is normal activity and will be taken lying down is simply tripping over itself.

And then, do not forget, there is the very serious question of public sensitivities, those that a government can ignore at grave

peril to its reputation. The finance adviser tells us that it will be unrealistic to expect a fall in the prices of food. If that is the way a government thinks, if that is how worried citizens are to be given short shrift, we need to raise a new question about those who presume to govern us: since when have etiquette and caring gone missing in the public pronouncements of our government functionaries? As far as we can recall, the finance adviser has not in the past admonished traders about their wicked deeds, and has never told them that increasing prices is unrealistic and immoral. Are we now to suppose that it is far easier berating citizens over their legitimate worries than handling a bunch of traders in whom conscience has simply gone comatose?

Mirza Azizul Islam reminds us that we do not inhabit the times of Shaista Khan. We never said we

did. In this summer of our discontent, in this season of marketplace nightmares, lessons in history have been far from our thoughts. The finance adviser ought to have focused on these ground realities. He and the government he is part of would have done us all a huge favour if they had focused less on the fact of global price rises and more on the diminishing purchasing power of the citizens of this impoverished country.

The food outlets opened a few months ago by the Bangladesh Rifles do not operate any more. Which leaves the poor in a situation where the hope they once entertained about coming by relatively cheaper rice simply vanishes into thin air. The government says not a word about this sudden disconnect in the lives of those struggling for bare survival. People in authority would have us know that they do

not expect the fuel price rises to fuel an enhancement in the prices of other commodities. What do they take us for? It is a matter of simple economics here.

The truck driver bringing vegetables all the way from Narsingdi to Dhaka will charge more for his ride in the night. That man at the wayside tea stall will buy kerosene at higher prices. Why should we then expect him to serve us tea at the old price? That one sudden step by government can lead to a chain of events, to ramifications of a most terrible kind, has been proved by the rise in bus fares. The poor commuter howls in distress. The equally poor ticket man shrugs in manifest despair. How much of that pain reaches the corridors of power is a question you can go on asking until the end of time. Power shields those who have it from contact with reality.

Mirza Azizul Islam now tells us his Shaista Khan comments were quoted out of context. But we all heard him, did we not? We know what he said; and we know too that the media did nothing to present the adviser in bad light. All that we expect is for men and women responsible for steering the country to newer pastures (we will not speak of shores here, for that would be asking for a little too much at this point) is that they respect those already suffering.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.  
E-mail: bahaansar@yahoo.co.uk

# Will G-8 address the core issues?



HARUN UR RASHID

AMONG all the problems besetting us at present, the most pressing are:

- The soaring price of oil
  - The global food crisis and
  - Global climate change
- Furthermore, the triple threat of inflation, slowing global economy and financial sector woes, continue to dampen the mood of investors worldwide.

Against this background, when the 34th G-8 summit convenes in Toyako, in Hokkaido, Japan, on July 7-9, the developing countries will be watching with keen interest and raised expectations.

US, UK, France, Italy, Japan, Canada, Germany and Russia make up the G-8. It will be the first G-8 summit for British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda. It is also the last for US President George W. Bush.

The heads of states/ governments of emerging powers, such as, Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa have been invited as well. Observers believe this welcome G-8 engagement

G-8 nations must consider the democratisation of IMF and World Bank, together with the UN. Many economists advocate for more equitably structured global institutions to reflect the present day realities of economic power of states. "There is a need for change, a strong case for a far-reaching re-examination of the institutional structure of the international world," Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues.

with the developing countries should be broadened and institutionalised to give these meetings greater global legitimacy.

### Tentative agenda of the meeting

It is reported that the main issues before the summit are:

- World economy
  - Climate change
  - Sustainable energy
  - Nuclear non-proliferation
- Whatever issues they may discuss, many observers believe that the core question before the G-8 summit is: How can the 1.3 billion people in the world living on less than \$1.85 a day be helped to become richer, healthier, and better fed and educated, without simultaneously degrading the environment?

### Current state of rich and poor nations

To put the power of G-8 in perspective against developing nations, it is noted that the G-8 industrialised countries constitute 60% of the world's Gross Domestic Product and use 70% of the world's resources. Although they have only 20% of the world's

## BOTTOM LINE

population, their citizens consume 86% of all goods in the world.

On the other hand, developing countries that constitute 80% of the world's population consume only 23% of the world's goods, although they possess 76% of the world's resources.

Twenty five years of aid to the poorest nations by international financial institutions has failed to make an impact on poverty. Income growth measured in terms of aggregate GDP alone does not necessarily reduce poverty. Nor does it automatically nurture human development, which entails freedom from oppression, freedom from ignorance, and freedom from violence.

The G-8 nations constitute the "core" of the world economy, and developing countries exist in the "periphery" of the global economy. This system is often called "neo-colonialism."

Many economists believe that those countries which practice neo-colonialism have power without responsibility, while it means exploitation without redress for those which suffer

because of that. During 2000-2004, it has been reported that there was a net transfer of financial resources of billions of dollars out of developing nations to rich nations, mostly G-8 countries.

The developing nations expect that poverty reduction will be the aim of G-8 nations, more so at a time of soaring prices of oil and food items. For example, in Bangladesh the private think-tank, CPD, says that the price hike and the weighted inflationary impact on prices of commodities have brought an additional 8.5% people to below the poverty level.

Inflation in an emerging power like India has reached 11.5%. Sri Lanka's inflation reportedly rose to 28.2% in June.

Everyone now agrees that it is inflation that poses the gravest risk to the economy of developing countries. The dilemma of policy makers in developing nations -- whether to cut interest rates to stimulate growth or to raise them to reduce inflation -- is shared by investors trying to decide what to do with their money.

G-8 nations must consider the democratisation of IMF and

World Bank, together with the UN. Many economists advocate for more equitably structured global institutions to reflect the present day realities of economic power of states. "There is a need for change, a strong case for a far-reaching re-examination of the institutional structure of the international world," Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues.

Energy and global warming

It is reported that electricity generation comes from five sources coal, oil, gas, nuclear power and hydro-power.

Coal contributes 39%, oil 10%, gas 15%, nuclear power 16%, and hydro-power 19% to the total electricity generation in the world.

Global climate change is attributed to use of fossil fuels (coal, gas and oil) by industrialised and emerging powers. For example, it is reported that carbon emission per person in the US is 20.4, in China 3.84, India 1.20 and Bangladesh 0.25.

G-8 nations spend more money in space exploration than in research and development of alternative sources of energy, namely, (a) solar power (b) wind power, (c) geo-thermal power (d) tidal power and (e) hydro-power.

Currently only 9% of energy in Asia is produced from renewable energy sources, and most of that is from hydroelectric power. G-8 countries must work to transfer climate-friendly technologies to poorer nations, as they are very expensive.

Issues like poor housing, climate change, and rapid growth in urbanisation need to be tackled in developing countries, and the G-8 countries have a responsibility to address these burning issues.

There is a reflexive relationship between urban transformation and climate change. The most obvious linkages between cities and climate change are through sea-level rise and current patterns of geographical urban expansion; if sea level rise just one metre, many coastal cities will be under threat (it is reported 32% of Bangladesh, including Sundarbans, will be lost if there is a one metre rise).

Serious negotiations must be initiated by G-8 nations to help poorer countries to adapt to the effects of global warming, such as building seawalls to guard against rising oceans.

The leaders of G-8 must realise that in a sea of poverty there cannot be an island of affluence, and the joint statement after the summit may clearly state the commitment of the G-8 nations to set time-bound goals to address poverty and climate change.

Whether G-8 nations will do so depends on their ability to forget their self-interest and act together to reduce global inequality. People around the world no longer seem ready to tolerate inequality, poverty and the destruction of the environment.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# Presidential candidates snub Muslim Americans

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

Muslim Americans are chagrined to find that both Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain court their votes behind the scenes, but would not do so openly. They covet Muslim American votes, while distancing themselves from Muslim Americans! What they forget is that in toss-up states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida, Virginia and New Jersey, Muslim American votes can make the difference in November.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

RECENTLY, two Muslim American women wearing the traditional Muslim headscarves, hijab, were barred by campaign volunteers from sitting directly behind the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama, at a rally in Detroit. They did not want Muslim women wearing headscarves popping up in photographs behind Obama.

On his website and in his speeches Senator Obama aggressively denies internet rumors that he is a "closet Muslim," as though being a Muslim American is an indictment on one's character that disqualifies the person from

holding the office of US presidency. (Who is a "closet Muslim" anyway? Someone who prays in the closet?)

Republican presumptive nominee Senator John McCain said in a 2007 interview with Beliefnet.com that he would prefer a Christian president to a Muslim one. On February 26, Senator McCain appeared at a campaign rally with his "spiritual guide" Rev. Rod Parsley who, in his book Silent No More, called Islam an anti-Christ religion, adding that Prophet Muhammad "received revelations from demons and not from the true God," and that "Allah was a demon spirit."

McCain supporter, Iowa Republican Congressman Steve

King predicted: "If Obama is elected, al-Qaeda would be dancing in the streets in greater numbers than they did on September 11."

Although Senator Obama apologised to the two Muslim American women and Senator McCain disassociated himself from Congressman King's comments, the message to Muslim Americans was that Muslim American-bashing is fair game and carries with it no adverse political or litigatory consequences.

It is one thing to condemn terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda, which all Americans including Muslim Americans vigorously do; but it is quite differ-

ent to demonise US citizens who happen to be Muslims, because of their faith. This is more troubling coming from Senator Obama, whose message of inclusiveness presumably does not include Muslim Americans.

Muslim Americans are waiting to hear Senator Obama and Senator McCain say that there is nothing wrong in being a Muslim American and that they are a welcome addition to the nation's religious diversity.

Despite warnings from African American Muslims, who constitute a plurality of Muslims in America, most immigrant Muslim groups endorsed George W. Bush in his 2000 campaign, only to find themselves penalised by the Bush administration as their communities were devastated by USA Patriot Act, the detention and deportation of Muslim immigrants and the security blanket that stifled them after September 11.

Muslim Americans are chagrined to find that both Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain court their votes behind the scenes, but would not do so openly. They covet Muslim American votes,

while distancing themselves from Muslim Americans! What they forget is that in toss-up states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida, Virginia and New Jersey, Muslim American votes can make the difference in November.

In the 1996 New Jersey Senatorial race, major party candidates Robert Torricelli and Dick Zimmer courted Muslim New Jerseyans. When in a speech before a Jewish audience Mr. Zimmer accused Mr. Torricelli of addressing a Muslim gathering that included Hamas supporters, Muslim New Jerseyans asked Mr. Zimmer to clarify his comments. Mr. Zimmer remained silent.

Traditionally, many Muslim Americans vote Republican. In this case, over 90% of New Jersey Muslims voted for Democrat Mr. Torricelli, turning a close race into a 10% romp for Mr. Torricelli.

Xenophobia is alive and well in America. Indian American, Piyush "Bobby" Jindal, a Rhodes Scholar and a rising star in the Republican Party, had to disavow repeatedly that he was a Muslim as he ran for the US Congress and the governorship of Louisiana. Jindal is

being touted as a Republican vice-presidential candidate. Recently, Senator John McCain invited Jindal to his home in Arizona.

Bobby Jindal will probably be introduced to the American people as a featured speaker in the Republican Party Convention in August; the same way Barack Obama was introduced to America as a featured speaker at the 2004 Democratic Party Convention, which launched Obama's presidential campaign. It is doubtful that Jindal would have been elected the youngest American governor (he was only 36) last October had he not converted to Catholicism from Hinduism.

After eight years of abuse by the Bush administration, Muslim Americans saw in Mr. Obama a refreshing champion of civil liberties, religious tolerance and diplomacy rather than war in foreign affairs, and decided to give the Democrats another look. However, if the Democrats continue to disrespect the Muslim Americans, who number 7 million, Muslim Americans may sit this one out.

Post 9/11, fear of Muslims has become a worldwide growth industry, and the condemnation of the Islamic faith has become acceptable in polite company. Ignorance of Islam and the Muslims is no longer an acceptable excuse. Information about the religion is available everywhere. There are over 55 Muslim-majority countries in the world, and at home and abroad many Americans have come in contact with Muslims, who number over 1.3 billion worldwide.

As a student of a Muslim-Christian school in Indonesia in his formative years, and as someone whose paternal grandfather was a Muslim, Mr. Obama is in a unique position to dispel some of the uglier rumors that circulate about Islam in the internet. Instead, he seems to be so petrified about the baseless internet rumours that he is a Muslim, that he does not want to be seen anywhere in the vicinity of Muslim Americans. Although Mr. Obama has visited numerous churches and synagogues, he has so far steadfastly refused to visit and be photographed in a mosque.

Muslim Americans are sophisticated enough to realise that the reason Barack Obama distances himself from Muslim Americans is not because he harbours secret prejudices towards them, but because so many Americans refuse to take Obama's word that he is a Christian, and deliberately mislabel him a "Muslim" in an attempt to destroy his presidential aspirations.

The real tragedy is that in secular America many still believe that it is possible to damage a candidate's electoral fortunes by misrepresenting his religious affiliation as something other than Christian.

Fear-mongering and alienating the world's Muslims are not going to help America. Muslims of the world are not going away. Republicans and Democrats should enlist the support of the Muslim Americans, and though demonstrated goodwill towards them get the world's moderate Muslims on America's side, isolate the extremists and promote America's interests in the Islamic world.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.