

# Political reform: Myth and reality

**There is no denying the fact that political parties need thorough reforms for practicing sustainable and meaningful democracy that would continue to provide people-oriented and accountable government. So far, no mentionable sign in that respect is visible. Without reform of the political parties, other reforms carried out, or in the process, will neither be useful nor permanent.**

G. M. QUADER

**P**OLITICAL reform means reform of political parties and all the political institutions connected with political practice for functioning and advancement of the political process.

The Jatiya Sangsad (JS), the Election Commission (EC), and the executive branch (EB) may be considered as political institutions. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Public Service Commission (PSC), University Grants Commission (UGC) etc., with their controlling and regulating authority of different activities concerning vital public interest may be considered political institutions.

In a democratic society the most important political institution is the political party, which is a group of people who share a common ideology and have similar views on national and international issues. This enables the people to select a person on the basis of his/her personal qualities, along with the appeal of the political party to which

he/she belongs after evaluating its programs and ideology.

The party that gets the most votes forms the government, which has lots of responsibilities and has to be bestowed with power and authority to fulfill its obligations.

It is said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. There has to be a system of checks and balances in respect of governance. The responsibility for creating this environment of accountability lies on the elected representatives who are not in government (known as opposition). In doing so they are also to ensure that the government is representing the people through its activities by reflecting their hopes and aspirations.

Political parties form the government and run it. They carry out the responsibility of the opposition to keep the government on track by ensuring accountability.

So, it is, in fact, the responsibility of the political parties to build and strengthen all the other supporting political institutions so that govern-

ance can function as smoothly and effectively as possible. For strengthening the political institutions any reform, if needed, falls within the responsibility of political parties. At the same time, sustainability of the effectiveness of political institution depends on them.

On the other hand, if the political parties do the opposite by serving their personal and party interests, the institutions could be used to create havoc for the nation. A few are given below.

During the last government it was widely believed that the EC was made partisan to the four-party alliance to frustrate the right of the people to choose their representatives as per their free will. The political stalemate created as a result is still hanging over our heads.

Rampant misuse of authority by the allegedly partisan PSC in appointing substandard candidates in different branches of administration, law enforcing agencies, judiciary etc., in line with partisan interest distorted the effectiveness of administration and made good

governance difficult, not only for the present but also for the next 20 to 30 years at least.

It is alleged that people with a record of corruption and criminal charges like hijacking, extortion, vandalism etc., got appointment as law enforcers during the last alliance government.

Persons responsible for this sort of appointment would surely receive dividends from the beneficiaries of irregularities in law enforcing, judiciary etc. But the people at large have to pass sleepless nights because of insecurity and non-receipt of justice and good governance.

How the ACC was made ineffective, allegedly in order to overlook corruption by the last government, is too well known to be mentioned in detail.

As a matter of fact, even if reform measures are taken to enhance effectiveness of all other political institutions excepting political parties, the same might be jeopardised if the political parties who will run the show afterwards do not continue with them.

So, reform should begin with the reform of political parties. Without that all other reforms could become meaningless and ineffective.

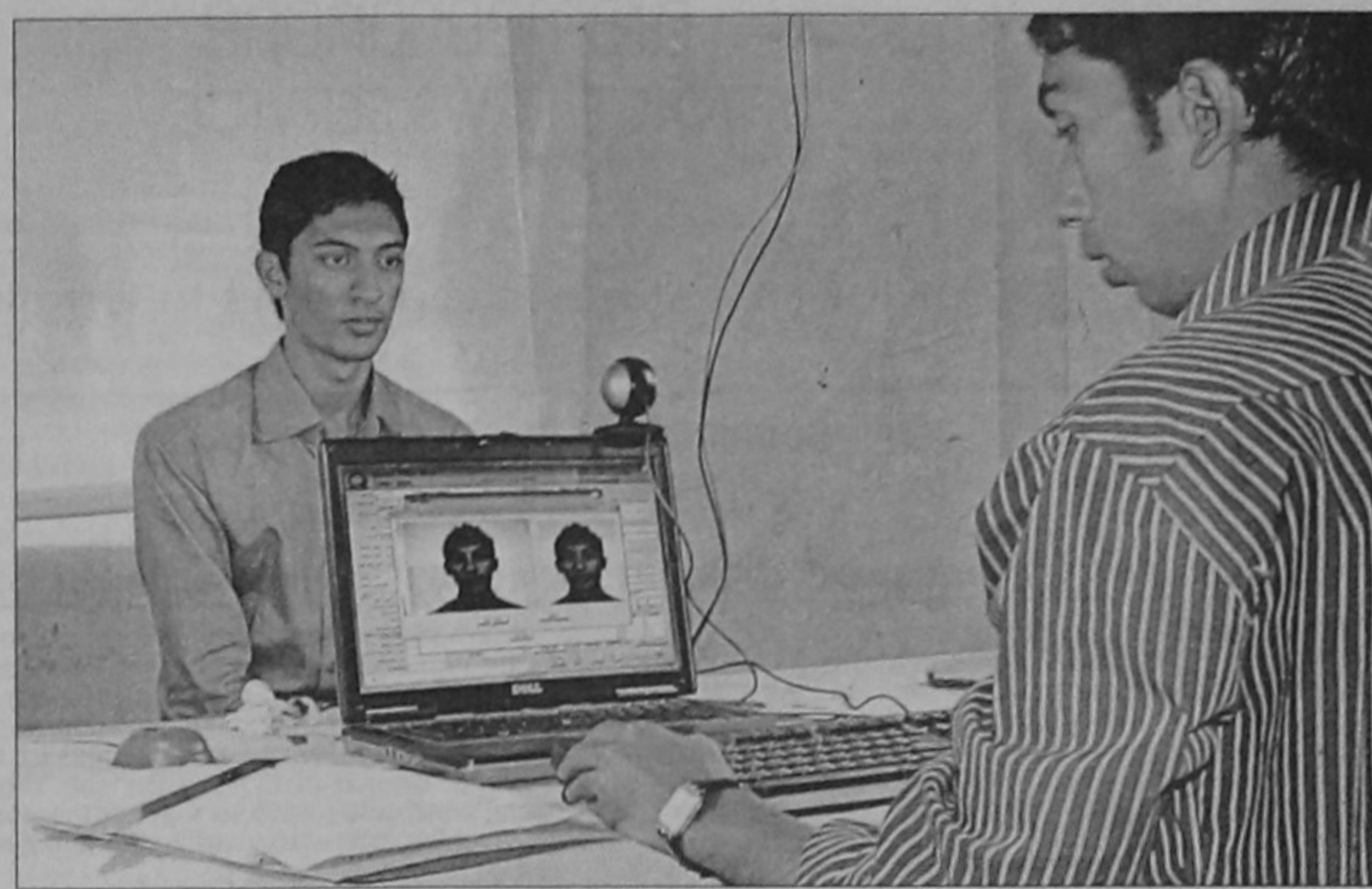
Reform of political parties is the most difficult task in the context of our country. We are not comparable to any other country of the world.

This country is unique because here all the political parties and political personalities themselves accepted the allegation that they were not capable of seeing national pride or interest over partisan interest. Introduction of the caretaker government (CTG) system is an example.

The system of non-partisan caretaker government was introduced for conducting free and fair elections. Political governments elected by the people hand over power to a selected non-political caretaker government after completion of their tenure. It is an accepted fact that political parties while in power do neither have the capability nor desire to conduct a free and fair election without manipulation.

Of course, introduction of the caretaker system was a pragmatic approach considering the realities. Political parties and the people by and large extended support to that concept considering the existing situation. But does not that confirm the negative character of our politics and political parties that they are incapable of sustaining democratic culture and ethics due to lack of sincerity and honesty?

The fifth parliament, on the first day of its first session, re-introduced parliamentary form of government in a unanimous decision of all parties in the parliament. Parliamentary system means that



National voter ID made, what next?

parliament would be the centre of all governmental activities. The Member of Parliament's (MP) role would be supreme and vital. MPs would form the government, administer, give guidance and make government accountable to people.

But, the system was introduced by clipping the MP's right to decide independently, making the parliament virtually a rubber-stamp parliament. That has given rise to dictatorial rule by the prime minister (PM), without any accountability, thus breeding pervasive corruption. The reason given for this was that

MPs were not reliable enough and could be bought and sold, causing vulnerability of the government. The parliamentary system is based on MPs, but it was made ineffective by the assumption that MPs were dishonest. At the same time, is not it pointing fingers to the ability of our voters of electing suitable MPs, thereby raising the suspicion that people by and large are not fit enough to practice democracy?

Political parties, while in power, used and misused facilities, and opposed and boycotted parliament while out of power. Never was any

initiative taken to address the said contradiction of the system.

There is no denying the fact that political parties need thorough reforms for practicing sustainable and meaningful democracy that would continue to provide people-oriented and accountable government. So far, no mentionable sign in that respect is visible. Without reform of the political parties, other reforms carried out, or in the process, will neither be useful nor permanent.

G. M. Quader is a former Member of Parliament.

# Quota system for civil service

**The image of the PSC has to be restored, and it is hoped that the present administration will do the needful so that those seeking jobs in civil service can have total confidence in the system and in the institution.**

NURUL HUDA

**T**HIS piece is intended mainly to endorse the views of Kamal Uddin Ahmed expressed in his article under the heading "Quota system for civil service" published in the Daily Star on July 18, and also to add some of my own views on the subject.

It is ridiculous that merit gets a share of only 45% of those recruited for the civil service through competitive examinations, conducted by the Public Service Commission (PSC). It is not understandable how, in today's society, 55% of jobs in civil service are still kept reserved for candidates under different categories of quotas. There is a provision of 10% quota for women, who constitute half of the country's population.

The working paper on quota system for civil service recruitment, prepared by the chairperson of the Regulatory Reforms Commission Dr. Akbar Ali Khan and former secretary Kazi Raquibuddin Ahmed, recommended raising women's quota to 15%. I am opposed to this idea as, with the passage of time, females have been performing well in different fields of education. I am not quite sure whether women themselves would fully support the proposal as, in some cases, their performance is even better than their male counterparts.

Professor Kamaluddin Ahmed, however, wanted to justify his arguments for retaining 10% quota for women. He has, at the same time, given some statistics of advancement of female education in recent years. The article said that nearly half of the students of Dhaka University were females, and in 2007 more than 26% of the teachers were women. These statistics give us the impression that even the abolition of women's quota will not stand in way of their advancement in different fields.

There have been movements by students in favour of recruitment in the civil service on the basis of merit

Merit, as we understand, gets the top priority in recruitment in civil service in most countries of the world. I really do not find any logic or reason behind ignoring merit in recruitment.

We understand from discussions with relevant people that there is a dearth of qualified people in civil administration. The shortage of qualified people in the civil service can be attributed to brain drain on the one hand and lucrative job offers by some private companies on the other.

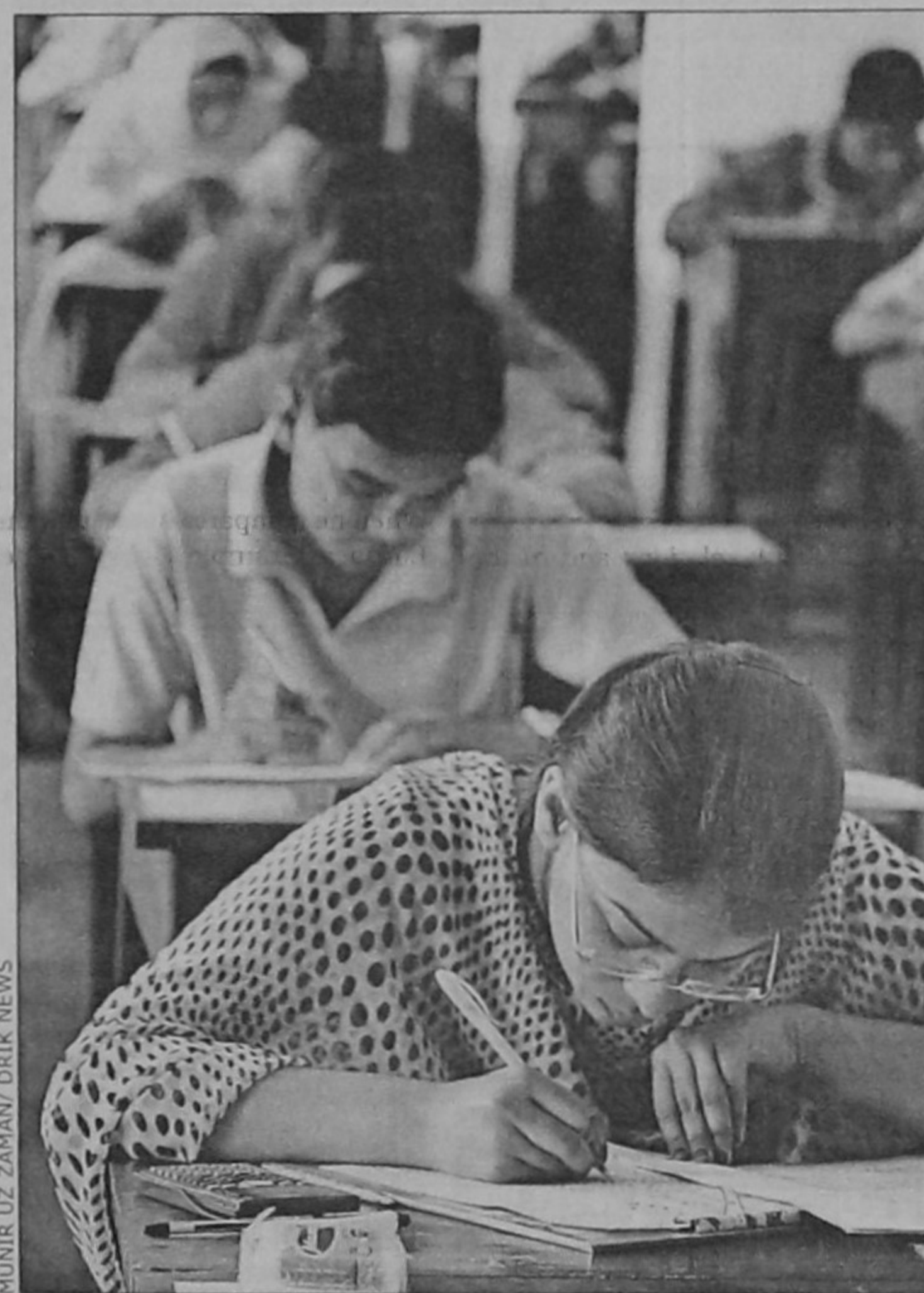
Some people, even after qualifying for the administrative cadre, opt for jobs in banks, financial institutions and private companies as they are offered lucrative pay packages.

The suggestion for reduction of quota for freedom fighters' children is, indeed, a good idea because the writer has rightly said that the freedom fighters did not fight to obtain special privileges/rewards from the state. The quota for freedom fighters remained unfulfilled during the past decades due to non-availability of qualified candidates, it may be pointed out.

Civil servants everywhere in the world are recruited through public examinations, free from any sort of political or external influences. Merit gets the highest consideration regarding recruitment and promotion in civil service. I find no reason why it should not be followed in our country too.

The quota system was introduced by an executive order prior to the adoption of the constitution on September 5, 1972, taking into consideration different socio-economic factors that no longer exist.

The quota system needs to be updated through necessary reforms for improvement of the recruitment process, so that quality people can be attracted to civil service. If the civil service is not properly equipped with quality people, it would be difficult for us to compete with other countries across the table for negotiation on issues of bilateral



We can prove our merit but will we get the job?

or multilateral interests.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Establishment Ministry discussed the issue on April 5, 2005 and proposed reduction in the quota system. Accordingly, the above mentioned working paper on quota system was prepared.

The working paper on the quota system argued in favour of revision and rationalisation of the system, suiting the changed situation. It is known to us that the PSC could hardly work independently during the last couple of decades due mainly to political interference.

Candidates seeking job through PSC had to even graze the palms of a section of top bosses of PSC. Some former PSC members are now on the run on charges of corruption. Many stories of irregularities and corruption of a section of PSC top people came out in the press, to

the surprise of the saner section of society.

It is time to ponder over reform of the quota system so that merit and only merit gets top priority in recruitment. In my opinion, merit should get at least 80% share of all recruitments in civil service, and people with integrity should get the responsibility of conducting recruitment. Stern punitive action has to be taken against anyone in the PSC if he/she is involved in any sort of irregularity.

The image of the PSC has to be restored, and it is hoped that the present administration will do the needful so that those seeking jobs in civil service can have total confidence in the system and in the institution. There is also need for proper pay packages in civil service so that quality people increasingly opt for the service.

Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS.

# After the 'surge'

**Ordinary Iraqis are as unsure as anyone what to make of this existence -- a "peace" in which masked men still run tense checkpoints, towering T-walls blot out neighbourhoods from view and the lawnmower buzz of drones fills the air.**

NISID HAJARI

**T**O see what peace looks like in Baghdad, go to the Karrada district. At dusk, Iraqi families picnic in a thin stretch of park recently built on the banks of the Tigris River. A couple of blocks away, along lively Sadoun Street, sidewalk restaurants flame-roast chickens on long spits and a crowd of teenagers spills out of a bright new juice shop.

The al-Shamari family returned to Karrada from Damascus a year ago, and they say there haven't been any sectarian killings for a couple of months. But they don't want their real name used, for safety's sake.

Their street is cordoned off by barbed wire and one of the low concrete barriers, which are scattered across Baghdad like a child's spilled Lego blocks. In one corner of their manicured backyard they've dug a well to get water. They have a computer and a TV, but only two hours of city-provided electricity a day. And Karrada is probably the best-off neighbourhood in Baghdad.

Ordinary Iraqis are as unsure as anyone what to make of this existence -- a "peace" in which masked men still run tense checkpoints, towering T-walls blot out neighbourhoods from view and the lawnmower buzz of drones fills the air.

In Baghdad earlier this month, as the last of the "surge" brigades prepared to leave, the war I saw seemed to be entering a confusing interregnum period. Suicide bombers continue to wreak havoc, killing at least 50 people last week. But the conflict is now hazier, more unpredictable, and more political.

Ensnared in their villas and offices inside the Green Zone, Iraqi leaders exude optimism. Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish politicians all made the same argument to me: the country, in the words of Sunni Vice-President Tariq Hashemi, had

reached "a turning point."

The key was Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's decision in March to launch an assault on Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Basra. The bloc of Sunni parties Hashemi leads has rejoined Maliki's coalition. Shiite leaders declared that Iran had been taught a lesson about the limits of its influence in Iraq. Kurdish Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said the government's solidarity had inspired new respect among Iraq's Arab neighbours.

A senior Western official, who asked for anonymity in order to speak freely, was more cautious. But he captured the prevailing thinking. During the worst of the civil war in 2006 and 2007, he says, Iraq was paralysed by fear: "Sunnis feared the future, Shiites feared the past and the Kurds feared both." The hope is that those anxieties are beginning to dissipate.

This bonhomie, however, may just as well be driven by a different kind of fear -- of challenges to the status quo. One of the latest additions to the power map of Baghdad is Sheikh Ali Hatim's house.



American soldiers in Iraq. Who is helping whom?

# Notes from the land before email

**Vittachi**

ONLY IN ASIA

by Nury Vittachi

**A** friend of mine regularly organises business deals between small and medium-sized companies in odd bits of darkest Asia. Complex jobs are tricky enough in modern cities, where data can be accurately transferred by the Internet.

But trying to organise anything complicated (like a lunch), where things are done using phone messages and bits of paper, is a hundred times harder.

"It's only when people get out of Hong Kong or Singapore that they remember that more than 80 percent of Asia's population have no Internet connections," the merger expert, a Scot, moaned.

His worst experience was trying to

organise a formal meeting between two antediluvian firms at which information was traditionally passed by shouted phone calls on long-distance crackly land lines.

"Instructions take days to get to people and they get horribly distorted as they're passed along," he said.

Preparations for important meetings would evolve something like this:

MEMO Monday From: Head Office To: Vice Presidents At 10 a.m. on Friday, the new parent company's president will be meeting

the group vice presidents and touring the establishment on its 80th anniversary. Dress casual day is suspended. Please ensure that desks are tidy. Food should be taken in the canteen, not at your desk. This will be followed by cross-party talks in the boardroom. All employees are expected to attend.

MEMO Wednesday From: General Managers To: Unit Heads At 10 on Friday, the company president's 80-year-old father will be meeting our vice group and trying out our establishment. To mark his birthday, dresses should not be worn. Please clear the main area by removing all desks and storing them in the canteen. This will be followed by a cross-dressing dance party in his

bedroom. All employees are expected to attend.

MEMO Thursday From: Unit Heads To: Office Managers At 10 in the evening tomorrow, the president's father will turn 80 and will be trying out several vice establishments and then visiting our offices. Dresses should be removed. Please clear the main area for a cross-dressing party. Any employees who are expecting should attend.

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MEMO Friday From: Office Managers

To: All Staff Late tonight, the company president's 80-year-old dad will be having a wild birthday bash and staff are expected to join in the spirit of the evening. So clear all desks away and get ready to get down and party. You may have thought this was a dull firm but we can assure you this message comes to us directly from our new head office. Party on! Yeah! Whoohoo!

Come to think of it, there's a lot to be said for the old way of working. It makes life just that little bit more unpredictable.

Much the same can be said for this writer's website, at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).