

Candidates filing false and incomplete information

EC can't wait to debar them from election

WITH the High Court directing the Election Commission to investigate and take legal action against candidates furnishing false information or concealing facts in their affidavits submitted with their nomination papers for city corporation and municipality elections, the EC is left with no alternative but to comply with the HC ruling on an expeditious basis. Only four days are left to debar such candidates, who prove guilty on this count, from the elections, due on August 4. An investigative report in Prothom Alo had revealed that out of 46 mayoral candidates 12 concealed facts about themselves apart from other newspaper reports on candidates with questionable credentials trying to stage a comeback.

The EC gives us to understand now that its officials are out at various constituencies scrutinising the affidavits and on their reporting back to the commission will the latter act against the offender. But while we take this belated assurance for what it is worth we cannot help but share the public perception that there has been indecisiveness on the part of the Election Commission not to have cancelled defective candidatures earlier on. More so because the Supreme Court had directed the Election Commission to collect and publish personal information of prospective candidates to help voters make informed choices. Furthermore, the new laws for city corporation and municipal polls required cancellation of candidature of a contestant failing to furnish complete information in seven specified categories.

It's not enough to express frustrations over the malpractice; the law is there and now the directive of the HC robustly underpinning the Supreme Court ruling is also there to be acted upon. Why should the commission have failed to act so far when in fulfilment of a universal public demand for providing the voters with ready access to information about the credentials or otherwise of the candidates seeking public office, the relevant law was enacted. The changeover on 1/11 was all about reforming the way through which many a public representative got elected by default. All concerned must put their act together to set the right precedent for the upcoming national elections.

Back to square one

Trade talks collapse as West disgraces itself again

THE Doha round of negotiations at the WTO is finally dead. After seven years of often acrimonious debate and last-ditch efforts to cut a deal in Geneva, the talks were finally abandoned for good on July 29, due to irreconcilable differences between the US on one side and the G-33 group of developing countries on the other.

Once again, the sticking point was agriculture. Once again, even as they attempt mightily to put the blame for the failure on the developing countries, it was the West, specifically the US, whose intransigence and insistence on acting only in its own interest that proved an insuperable stumbling block to a deal that would reportedly have resulted in more than \$130 billion a year in tariff savings.

Enough is surely enough. At this moment in time we have seen enough from the West to understand that it will continue to act globally solely in its own interests and that the continued impoverishment of the developing world is of little concern to them.

Fine, but we should at least, then, be spared the hypocrisy and sanctimony of these countries pretending to be good global citizens. In this way, at least, the slow motion breakdown of the Doha round has been instructive.

The final impasse was the demand from the G-33 which wanted special safeguard mechanisms to protect farmers in the developing world against temporary surges in cut-price imports of cotton and rice. When one considers that these safeguards would be the only thing standing between hundreds of millions of subsistence farmers and penury, to say nothing of the stability of billions throughout the developing world, it is hard to fathom the opposition.

What is really outrageous about opposition to this from the West is that it insist not only on its own tariffs but also on massive agricultural subsidies that protect its handful of farmers and massively distort the international price of goods, causing further hardship to farmers in the developing world.

The attitude of the Western countries is nothing short of a disgrace. The only good that can possibly come out of the debacle would be if the US has learned that it needs to respect the growing power of the developing world and that it cannot simply force the rest of the world into servicing its interests any more.

Revisiting 1/11



WITH the national elections round the corner, one feels that there is a need at this time for a serious introspection of the developments that led to January 11, 2007 and all that has happened since then, so that we may take home the lessons therefrom to avoid repetition of the mistakes, and avoid the disruptions and pain that these have caused us. It is essential to determine how wise or "otherwise" we are, or are we, as a nation, any the worse for wear after eighteen months of a unique political dispensation. What have we learnt in the interregnum, if anything?

Some December 2008 there will be parliamentary election, and hopefully the country will have its elected representatives to run the affairs of the state, after two years of absence of political activities and democracy being kept on hold.

However, an elected government does not necessarily mean an efficient government -- but

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Perhaps the biggest lesson for us is that political reforms and reformed politics are matters that will have to be internalised by the politicians. It cannot be imposed from the top. However, democratic institutions can create conditions that would to an extent compel the political parties to undertake party reforms. But more than that, the conscientious citizens must play a more active part in this regard.

one hopes it will certainly be a government accountable to the people -- through the parliament.

The question that automatically comes up is will the elected persons be "good people"? Unfortunately, not all of them are likely to qualify in the objective scrutiny as "good" as one can understand from the very rueful comments of the CEC relating to the candidates for the forthcoming mayoral and municipal elections, that many of them are bad eggs with questionable past.

But let us start from a very basic question that as a citizen one would like to ask the politicians. (I hesitate to call them leaders -- since in my estimate none of them qualifies as one. Had that been so we would have been spared the prolonged caretaker government's rule of the past eighteen months). Is it not the time to have a rethink about the idea of the caretaker government (CTG)?

Very few will contest the view that the concept of the CTG is a manifestation of the mutual distrust of the two major political parties. It was an expedient to

ensure a free a fair election -- which the then opposition (AL) thought was not possible if the party in power (BNP) was allowed to retain hold on the reins of state power during the conduct of the election. The first CTG, following Ershad's departure, had conducted a very successful election in 1991, and AL's cue came from there.

But we were made aware of the fact that every good thing could be distorted, and the party in power could manipulate every honest system to win elections at any cost. The BNP led 4-party alliance had done everything conceivable to see that the opposition did not come to power.

Just one example -- the voter list, a list that had more than fifteen million ghost/false voters -- illustrates this point; and Tk. 60 crore was spent on it, which apparently everybody seems to have forgotten about.

Can anyone forget the Dhaka-10 by-election of 2004? There is no need either to mention the various other machinations of the erstwhile BNP government had devised which made Iajuddin's

CTG a virtual extension of the alliance government. Thus, did some people with dishonest intentions and wicked mind spoil a good arrangement? Should we then continue with a system that is vulnerable to manipulation?

If getting a good election was the good side of the caretaker system, the flip side of it was having an unelected government running the affairs of the state -- the consequences need hardly be recounted. But if certain things have gone awry for the CTG -- some think it is due to their lack of sense of direction while others think it to be so in spite of their good intentions -- one cannot lay the entire blame on them.

Two years is twenty-four months too long for a group of disparate individuals, albeit with impeccable record of academic brilliance or honesty, to fill the political vacuum, or run the affairs of the state without the inevitable hiccups.

That brings automatically to the next lesson that relates particularly to the political parties -- which is how the political parties should conduct their business in

the future. It must have become immensely clear to them that whatever they do, they cannot by their foolhardiness precipitate events that might result in democracy's prolonged state of limbo or facilitate supra-constitutional forces' inroad into the country's politics, by default.

It is neither advisable nor a good excuse to misinterpret the two Roman maxims -- "welfare of the people is the highest law" and "safety of the state is the supreme law" abridging the democratic system, the likes of which are not unfamiliar with.

Therefore, we expect that inter-party dissensions and political rivalries will not spill onto the streets, that the parliament will be the "battleground" of all ideas and the only forum for sorting out political and national issues. It is hoped that we have seen the end of the days of chase and counter chase on the streets between political rivals.

Perhaps the biggest lesson for us is that political reforms and reformed politics are matters that will have to be internalised by the politicians. It cannot be imposed from the top.

However, democratic institutions can create conditions that would to an extent compel the political parties to undertake party reforms. But more than that, the conscientious citizens must play a more active part in this regard.

Without 1/11 we would perhaps not have had a reformed

ACC. But we have also learnt that just as political reforms cannot be implemented fully overnight there is no magic wand to remove corruption instantly. But it is a lesson too that fight against corruption must not be motivated by political considerations, nor are the numbers the criterion. What was needed was making examples of a few of the congenial corrupt through producing incontrovertible evidence to convict and keep them where they deserve to be -- behind bars.

But at least the many that are undergoing trial for alleged charges of corruption, and those that have avoided arrest so far but are known to have indulged in it, will have realised that law will catch up with them eventually. Whether or not they are made to pay for their crimes will depend on how well the state presents its case. Everyone must be accorded a fair trial but it will be a pity if the real culprits get off.

At the end of the day perhaps the question that will ring louder than all the others is, have we learnt from our follies? It is said that fools never learn from their mistakes, but they do a great service to the wise who learn from the mistakes of the fools. That is why the Chinese say that a wise man will never reproach a fool. Objective evaluation of the recent past is necessary, unless we want to see ourselves cast in the category of the latter.

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

Same sad story



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

I am just retelling the same sad story that a younger columnist Zafar Sobhan told in his column on July 11. Zafar told Suma's story in emphatic words that really touched the heart of every reader. I am going to tell Roni's story, the circumstances and harrowing details of which are sadly similar to Suma's. In my story, the victim is Roni, who was also burnt in the lust of a beast. Suma was preparing herself to sit for the SSC examination next year while Roni's HSC examination was going on this year. And that is all the little difference between the two horrific stories of Suma and Roni. Badly burnt, both the girls are now fighting for life in the burn unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Nur-e-Jannat Roni of Monohorpur village in Rangpur was a student of a local school. A few local ruffians started teasing her on her way to and from school. Their teasing and harassment increased after she had

BY THE NUMBERS

With the increasing incidence of physical persecution of women, the appalling crimes committed recently against Sumi and Roni can no longer be dismissed as isolated instances as so many young women in almost all parts of the country have been subjected to such brutality. The same sad story all of them have.

passed SSC in 2004 and these ruffians started coming up with marriage proposals.

While her parents were confused about what they should do, they met one Nasiruddin Shuvo, who allegedly introduced himself as a DGF field-level constable and came forward with assurance to help them. After a few months Shuvo also started teasing Roni on her way to and from college as his proposal for marriage with Roni was refused.

Shuvo threatened Roni's parent a few days ago to give their daughter to him in marriage or to face the dire consequences. Eventually, the threat was carried out on June 7, when Roni went to bed at night after wrapping up her preparation for the next day's examination.

Roni wake up at midnight as she felt something oily on her body. Sitting up, she found her body and bed soaked with some oily substance. She purportedly heard the voice of Shuvo near the window. He threw a lighted matchstick on her.

She shouted for help but could not get out of the room as it was

locked from the outside. Hearing her cry, her father rushed out to see flames engulfing the room inside. Breaking into the room, Roni's father found that fire has already burnt her face, throat, breasts, abdomen, and hands. She was rushed to Rangpur Medical College Hospital where the doctors referred her to Dhaka Medical College Hospital immediately.

If we turn to the recent past, we come across lots of women who had been subjected to similar barbaric incidents, most of which relating to dowry, unrequited love, or for rejection of marriage proposals. But the most frustrating part in these brutalities is that the perpetrators were hardly given any exemplary punishment, as there are so many loopholes in the laws.

We have also witnessed suicidal deaths of so many promising girls in the recent past only to get respite from the incessant teasing. Trisa, Simi, Selina, Salma, Rumi, Fahima, Rini, Luna and Indrani are just the tip of the iceberg, whom we have known by virtue of media. They are but a

few in the long list of the teasing victims, who were so harassed or teased by the hoodlums that they were forced to commit suicide.

The criminality of the tormentors to Sumi and Roni, in no way is less grave compared to the brutalities where girls were forced to take their own lives unable to bear the terrible agony of teasing and harassment. The acid and petrol victims like Sumi and Roni, if they finally survive, are compelled to lead a very miserable life, may be even less preferable to death.

With the increasing incidence of physical persecution of women, the appalling crimes committed recently against Sumi and Roni can no longer be dismissed as isolated instances as so many young women in almost all parts of the country have been subjected to such brutality. The same sad story all of them have.

The logical question that comes up here is that these ghastly crimes could not continue unabated if the law enforcers had not failed to deal firmly with such crimes. One really fails to understand how the hoodlums

can carry out harassment of young women day after day if the law enforcers sincerely play their role.

As committing of such ghastly crimes against women still remains a persistent criminality in the society, the whole society cannot also evade their responsibility of having failed to protect their sisters and daughters of becoming victims of barbaric crimes. It is not a long ago, when there was social resistance against teasing and harassment of women. But very few people now feel obliged to protest such offences.

There are at least a dozen organisations that have been working for socio-economic and political emancipation of women in the country. And yet the truth staring us in the face is that, emancipation of women exists only in theory, not in practice.

What seems particularly shocking to the case of Roni is that the main culprit Shuvo himself is allegedly a member of law enforcing agency, a field-level constable of DGF. We advocate exemplary punishment for those involved in these tragedies, but a culprit like Nasiruddin Shuvo deserves exemplary punishment to deter others like him from committing such crimes.

The government, however, has tightened the laws, enacting the Acid Control Act 2002 and the Acid Crime Control Act 2002 to stop acid violence and similar

other brutal attacks. Situation has also improved as the number of acid attacks reduced to 156 in 2007 from 367 in 2002. Strict enforcement of these laws and sincerity of the law enforcers in investigating such cases can help in reducing occurrences of ghastly crimes including acid attacks.

Silence of the society has also contributed to an increase in such brutal crimes to women. Alongside the existing legal instruments, social deterrent must also be strengthened to protect the weaker section of people against the criminality of the tormentors. Social organisations and NGOs working in this area should come forward to support the victims as they belong to poor families who are unable to fight legal battles against the tormentors.

Though the country takes pride for the modest progress it made in empowering the women, oppression to women is an area that has permeated all pores of success. Throwing of acid or setting on fire after pouring petrol on body still remains as a potent weapon to punish young women for unrequited lust or spurned marriage proposal. These ghastly practices have also put the mainstream society to shame as we have failed to protect our girls from being the victims of ultimate barbarism.

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

Are education planners thinking ahead?

Simply put, they represent a huge drag factor that stymies a nation's growth potential. Clearly, the education system must find a way to re-educate this group also. While re-education is an individual's responsibility, they must have the option to update and upgrade themselves. Is such capacity being contemplated? The alternative is that the nation risks remaining stuck in time, old-world imagination, and stupendous mediocrity.

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE higher education institutions (HEIs) in Bangladesh will continue to face numerous challenges in the coming days, which include the issues of quality, access, cost, capacity, consistency, and so on. To meet these challenges, there is a critical need to develop coherent, comprehensive, and socially responsive strategies to make higher education more relevant, rigorous, and proactive.

The political and academic leaders in the country will need to develop a clear vision and guiding mission of what to do with higher education. While there are many issues to contemplate, three significant issues

looming in the horizon needing immediate attention, with political and social ramifications, are the burgeoning population, the state of human resource quality that needs to be upgraded to global standards, and the spiraling costs.

The first issue, the burgeoning population and its quest for higher education, is a demographic phenomenon that will not go away, nor can it be wished away. Each year more students are successfully completing their HSC examinations. Their appetite for higher education has also been whetted since reasonable and respectable jobs are not available without a basic graduation degree.

Clearly, as the demand for

higher education continues to skyrocket, supply must keep pace with demand. Unfortunately, the malaise of resource inadequacy continues to deprive higher education of needed funds to build capacity in the education system, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to close the gap.

It is imperative, therefore, to employ creative strategies and bring in more private funds to the system or increase capacity utilisation of the existing facilities. In addition to physical capacity, there is also a tremendous need to add human capacity (mainly qualified teachers) to the higher education system very rapidly. Otherwise the inaccessibility of higher education to

those who will have completed secondary education will increase even more dramatically.

Is anyone thinking about this large and growing group that is being systematically marginalised and relegated to depths of despair? Mostly unemployable, with their growing unrest, and its potential manifestation in a variety of socially unacceptable behaviours (from likely drug dealing to engaging in violent forms of behaviour), they will add to the country's dilemma in dealing with them.

The economic consequences in terms of lost opportunities by failing to bring this large group of wishful graduates on-stream as productive resources has not been estimated. The political consequences may also be difficult to assess as they become more inclined to join wayward political groups that offer them hope but introduce much instability to the nation.

Re-education is another strategic area that demands additional thinking and planning.

Knowledge is not static; it evolves through a process that often builds on and enhances its foundations. The need to learn continuously is no longer an option: either one upgrades one's skills or becomes obsolete in a fast-changing world of globalisation.

New knowledge and its benefits are often unavailable to those who have already gone through the higher education system. Many of these people hold responsible positions. Today, many of them are stuck with outdated knowledge because once they are out of the education system they have little opportunity to get back in to enhance their knowledge and understanding of new developments, theories, and methods that might serve them better.

When these same people devise or dictate policy based on outdated understanding of the issues, the policies are likely to be flawed and possibly irrelevant. Simply put, they represent a huge drag factor that stymies a nation's growth potential.

Clearly, the education system must find a way to re-educate this group also. While re-education is an individual's responsibility, they must have the option to update and upgrade themselves. Is such capacity being contemplated? The alternative is that the nation risks remaining stuck in time, old-world imagination, and stupendous mediocrity.

The third factor, cost of higher education, according to some, is driven by a frenzy to make money. Many higher education institutions, in fact, are seen as moneymaking enterprises. There is also a contention that some of them "sell" certificates without requiring students to attend classes.

Given the income levels in the country, private universities also charge fees that seem to border on extortion. Such fees make education accessible only to the moneyed, spurring the average citizen to make money in any way possible to gain entry into the world of opportunity through

the higher education system.

Unfortunately, the high price of education nowadays begins early on: Witness the exorbitant prices levied by private elementary schools and the private tutoring system that it has fostered.

The pricing pressure imposed by academia is creating adverse ripple effects in the economy that must be addressed and rationalised because these prices are not based on free market forces, but on restricted market structures that represent localised monopoly conditions.

Such conditions may be breaking the economic backbone of the country. It is important that the higher education system comes under careful scrutiny to bring about needed reform. Such reform may include industry-academy partnerships for the students to earn their way, government and/or private loans to be repaid upon employment, scholarships, and other innovative approaches.

The higher education sys-

tem, today, is not only a window of opportunity at the individual level; it also has strategic implications for national growth. Thus, it needs to articulate a strong and pragmatic vision infused with meaning and purpose and energised with a strong sense of mission, growth plans, proper ideals, financial resources, and a strong community of excellent academicians and administrators to resuscitate and revitalise the system.

Hopefully, this article will serve to invigorate strategy dialogue and self-assessment to address the issues highlighted with resolve. Otherwise, demographic pressure, lack of opportunity to re-equip oneself with modern knowledge and concepts, and the continuing high costs will hinder future cohorts from shouldering the responsibility of nation building.

Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Professor and Program Chair, Pennsylvania State University, Erie, USA, and Editor, Journal of Bangladesh Studies.