

RPO 2008 has features boding well for politics

Differences be resolved through discussion

THE Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance 2008 in the main addresses our political reform agenda, although some political parties have expressed reservation on certain of its provisions. It will usher in, one hopes, a new political culture in Bangladesh. If the provisions are applied in their true spirit we are certain that it would stimulate a culture of democratic practice in many political parties that was missing heretofore. A very welcome feature of the Ordinance is the three-year caveat for participation in election by retired government servants, military personnel and NGO top brasses, and also the provision for 'no-vote'.

The amended RPO reverses the practice as introduced by President Zia, for parties to have affiliated student or labour organisations as party appendages, without in any way preventing these elements from organising parties in their own rights or being members of political parties as individuals. This, we are confident, will help restore students' politics to the glorious days of the past. Prohibition of international wing of the political parties we feel will prevent the schism within the Bangladesh Diasporas on party lines outside Bangladesh.

The provision for party nomination is a totally new feature which we believe will inculcate the growth of committed political parties led by equally committed politicians. The new process of party nomination to the parliament, the bottom-up system, where the views of the grass root party members will have to be taken into the reckoning of the party bosses at the center, will infuse a new dimension to the electoral process. This will, we hope, curtail the 'nomination business' that some parties were alleged to have been involved in, in the past, as well as instill democratic practice within the parties.

There are a few specific comments, however, that we would like to record for consideration of the EC.

Insofar as earmarking 33 percent of all committee positions for women in the party at all levels is concerned, the time frame of 2020 we feel is a bit longish. We suggest that the 12-year period be reduced to make it fully effective by the 2013 election.

We feel also that there ought to be provision for state funding of political parties for election. This can be done with a perspective plan in the same progressive manner as has been conceived for empowerment of women through reserved party committee positions for them.

Needless to say RPO-2008 has features that many political parties may, on the face of it, find hard to internalize. Our request to all the parties is that they should register with the EC, and any differences that they might have on any provisions of the RPO should be taken up with it, and the EC on its part should also try to accommodate the views of the political parties to the extent possible, across the table.

The end of the Games

It has been a renewal of the human spirit

THE end of this year's Olympics in Beijing is occasion for a new round of reflection on an event that brought people across the globe together. The story of Michael Phelps, all these years after Mark Spitz's spectacular performance at Munich in 1972, has been stunningly captivating. Jamaican speed king Usain Bolt ran thrice and won a hat-trick of golds. Barring instances of embarrassment, as that brought on by a North Korean's doping disaster, the Olympics have thrown up a new generation of sportsmen and women distinguished by a sense of extraordinary grit and confidence.

Speaking of confidence, it is the host country that has clearly demonstrated plenty of it. China's achievement, through overtaking the United States and every other country in its tally of gold, has catapulted it into the position of a sporting superpower. The traditional American dominance of the Olympics has thus taken quite a slide, with the Russians coming in third. The Russians and Ukrainians of course turned heads with their superb performance in rhythmic gymnastics. As for Asia, it put up a rather remarkable performance, a sure sign that the continent has now come of age in the sporting world. Unfortunately, though, the nations of South Asia did not fare well. India's individual gold still does not show much by way of performance; and Pakistan and Bangladesh simply were not seen anywhere. The Afghans (and this despite their political problems) have, however, come away with a bronze.

All said and done, the Beijing Olympics have been symbolic once more of the renewal of the human spirit. The degree to which sports can unify people across the globe has never been in doubt. And that ethos has been proved true all over again. As for China, it has done well despite the negative publicity (largely in the West) that it came by prior to the commencement of the games. It weathered the troubles in Tibet and the crisis engendered by an earthquake. And it handled fairly well the smog that for years hung over Beijing.

And now for a new four-year hiatus, until the flame is lighted once again... in London.

The amended RPO



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE government promulgated the Representation of the People Order (Amendment) Ordinance 2008 on August 19, with a number of amendments, and the amended version of the RPO 1972 was put into force on August 21 with immediate effect. The amended RPO has made registration of political parties compulsory, and also banned their front organisations.

The reconstituted Election Commission (EC) initiated a commendable move for registration of political parties, fulfilling eight conditions, to bring them under a regulatory framework.

The people felt encouraged by the EC's proposed electoral reforms, particularly the move to register political parties with necessary reforms in the present interregnum so that democracy could be sustainable. After few days, the EC relaxed some conditions for registration of the political parties.

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be eligible for registration if it had won at least one constituency in any parliamentary election since independence, or secured at least five percent of total votes in the constituencies contested.

A new political party would be eligible for registration if it had organisational committees in at least ten districts and 50 upazilas. All committees must be elected with a target of getting 33 percent women leaders in them by 2012.

Article 90B (1)(a)(iv) of the amended RPO stipulates that for registration of political parties, and to qualify for contesting in the general elections, the parties are required to get nominations forwarded by local level committees of every constituency and get these approved by the central body.

According to Article 90B (1)(b)(ii) of the amended RPO, political parties will have to incorporate a provision in their constitutions to get elected members on their committees at all levels, including the central committee, for registration.

This is surely a welcome development that provides opportuni-

ties to the grassroots leaders to play a greater role in running the party democratically.

As there were no official criteria set forth for formation of a political party, we saw a vast outgrowth of political parties over the years. Most of these parties have failed to emerge as responsible, accountable and transparent organisations to turn social thought into political actions.

Consensus on a common national agenda has also become hard to achieve, because of the existence of so many political parties with different ideologies.

The EC had moved before to make registration mandatory for all parties. But the major parties opposed it, forcing the EC to make it optional before the 2001 parliamentary election. The major parties, which are still opposing it, should realise that the proposed reforms are urged not only by the EC but by the whole nation as well.

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The leaders of the major parties have argued that they are not in a position to comply with the toughened conditions for registration with the EC as the state of emergency still exists and amending party constitution is a time-consuming process that requires approval from the national council session.

According to the election roadmap, registration of parties was supposed to be completed by the end of June. Now they have only two months -- September and October -- to complete registration with the EC. With their chiefs and key leaders in jail, they will really find it difficult to fulfill all the criteria set forth for registration.

According to the amended RPO provisions, the parties will have to sever relations with their front organisations and do away with their chapters abroad. Three

major political parties -- Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party -- will each need to sever relations with at least 17 of their front organisations to fulfill the criteria for registration.

With the promulgation of the new RPO, government officials who resigned or retired from service will not be able to contest the parliamentary elections unless a period of three years has elapsed since the date of resignation or retirement.

In the event of removal or dismissal or compulsory retirement, a former bureaucrat aspiring to public office will have to wait for five years after retirement from service. It is really a commendable step taken by the caretaker government to put an end to the political ambitions of many bureaucrats who, in the past, had exploited their official position to lay the groundwork for their bid to contest in the general election after retirement.

The amended RPO also bars defaulters of bank loans and utility bills from running in the parliamentary election. As for the war criminals, the amended RPO debar from parliamentary election those convicted of war crimes by a national or international court or tribunal.

If we compare our amended RPO with the relevant sections relating to corrupt practices and electoral offences of the Indian Representation of the People Act 1951, it gives us a sense of satisfaction as it has somewhat been

equipped to deal with our cumbersome electoral process.

But the retraction of the caretaker government of its decision to add a provision to the amended RPO, to disqualify contestants convicted by a trial court for criminal offences involving moral turpitude, has greatly frustrated every conscious citizen of the country.

It seems that the caretaker government had not been able to learn the lessons derived from the local body elections, where most of the candidates elected in the mayoral and councilor posts are accused in various criminal cases.

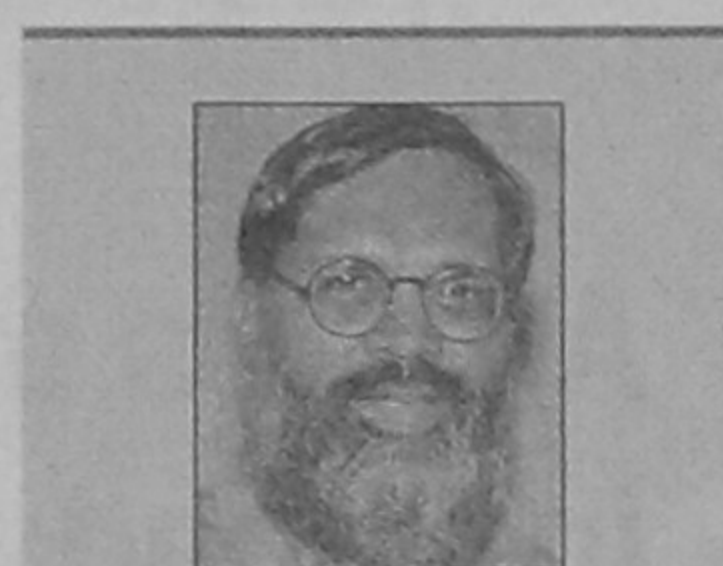
If the caretaker government and the EC fail to debar such people from contesting in the upazila and national elections, then all the development so far made to release the country's politics from the grip of the corrupt, crooked and criminal will boil down to a farce.

Bringing the political parties under a regulatory framework is long overdue, and enforcing registration is the first crucial step. Political pathology tends to believe that the political system in the country needs reforms to conform to the democratic dictum.

Implementation of the new RPO will make politics free from the caprice of parties and persons, and the political landscape of the country will be drastically changed for durable democracy.

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Welcome end to a dictatorship



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

WE must all join the Pakistani public in rejoicing over Mr. Pervez Musharraf's decision to resign as president. After a show of bravado, followed by bargaining over his departure's terms, he finally ended nine years of authoritarian rule.

Mr. Musharraf's options narrowed after his allies in the MQM and the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) deserted him, following the Pakistan People's Party's decision to join the Pakistan Muslim League (N) in demanding that he quit or face impeachment.

The crunch came when US told Mr. Musharraf it wouldn't side with him, and President Bush stopped taking his calls. Saudi Arabia conveyed a similar message. Finally, the Pakistan army told him that it wouldn't support him in a confrontation over impeachment.

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The resignation is not so much a victory of Pakistan's political parties, or proof of sagacity of the army's leadership, as a triumph of civil society, especially the lawyers' movement joined by numerous social activists, and of the media.

It must be unreservedly welcomed as a major step forward in Pakistan's democratisation.

Like all dictators, Mr. Musharraf, too, became a victim of hubris and failed to understand that he had lost legitimacy. The first dents in his legitimacy appeared within a year of taking over, when he betrayed his promise to cleanse the administrative system, make the rich pay taxes, and promote moderation. He mutilated the constitution to consolidate his rule.

In December 2004, he refused to shed his dual position as head of state and army chief. What finally destroyed his legitimacy was his sacking of the chief justice and imposition of emergency rule in November -- which earned him

the wrath of an increasingly assertive middle class and civil society organisations.

To be fair, not everything in the Musharraf legacy was negative. He increased women's reservations in legislatures, and tried to undo General Zia-ul-Haq's Hudood laws. His decision to turn against al-Qaeda-Taliban after September 2001 brought Pakistan out of its isolation and revived its economy.

Domestically, Mr. Musharraf first tried to contain extremist influences, but soon compromised with them. He abolished separate electorates for religious minorities. He loosened the Zia-era oppressive restrictions on cultural activities and musical performances. He allowed private TV channels. And he held elections as promised.

The architect of Kargil executed a remarkable turn by launching the peace process with India. He also made a bold departure from Pakistan's traditional position on Kashmir, and proposed a solution which wouldn't redraw existing borders.

However, these measures were soon diluted and failed to curb bigotry and promote moderation.

In operations against al-Qaeda-Taliban along the Afghanistan border, Mr. Musharraf practised outright deception. He diverted much of the US's \$12 billion aid, and shielded the Taliban, but convinced the Americans for years that he was their indispensable ally.

Pakistan's real challenges begin now. The ruling coalition must stabilise democracy without the anti-Musharraf glue that bound it earlier.

Pakistan's economic situation is grim -- inflation at 24 percent, the rupee having dipped from 60 to the US dollar to 74, and foreign exchange reserves down from \$16 billion to barely \$10. Pakistan had to accept an oil bailout from Saudi Arabia.

Politically, extremism is on the rise, with the Taliban resurgent. Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Western Province seethe with discontent. Pakistan's volatile western border poses an unprecedented challenge, aggravated by US pressure for effective operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which lack popular support.

The ruling coalition is divided.

Four differences have come to the fore: the choice of a presidential candidate, reinstatement of the sacked 60 superior court judges, trying Mr. Musharraf (or giving him indemnity), and acting along the western border.

Mr. Nawaz Sharif insists on the dismissed judges' immediate reinstatement. But PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari is wavering because he fears that, if restored, the deposed Chief Justice Iftikhar Choudhry will rule against the ordinance that granted him amnesty against corruption charges as part of a US-brokered deal which brought him back home.

The PPP and the PML (N) have divergent views on the presidential candidate issue, but Mr. Zardari remains the strongest contender. Even trickier is the question of prosecuting Musharraf on the coalition's charge-sheet.

By all indications, Mr. Zardari was party to the "understanding" that Mr. Musharraf would get safe passage and indemnity if he resigned.

Mr. Sharif is deeply suspicious of the US Global War on Terror. Mr. Zardari has probably made various commitments to the Americans on fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

As the two battle these differences out, the economic agenda might be put on the backburner. This will only erode the ruling coalition's legitimacy. Mr. Sharif may walk-out, precipitating early

elections in which he hopes to do well.

India should be sympathetically disposed towards Pakistan. It should certainly have welcomed Mr. Musharraf's resignation as a step towards democratisation. Instead, it described it as Pakistan's "internal matter."

This apparent neutrality masks New Delhi's preference for Mr. Musharraf, stated in so many terms by National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan less than one week before he quit. He said his departure would leave "a vacuum" in which extremist outfits would flourish.

This position betrays apathy towards the people of Pakistan. Worse, like much Indian TV commentary on Pakistan, it shows a paternalistic attitude that believes Pakistan is destined to remain a quasi-dictatorship.

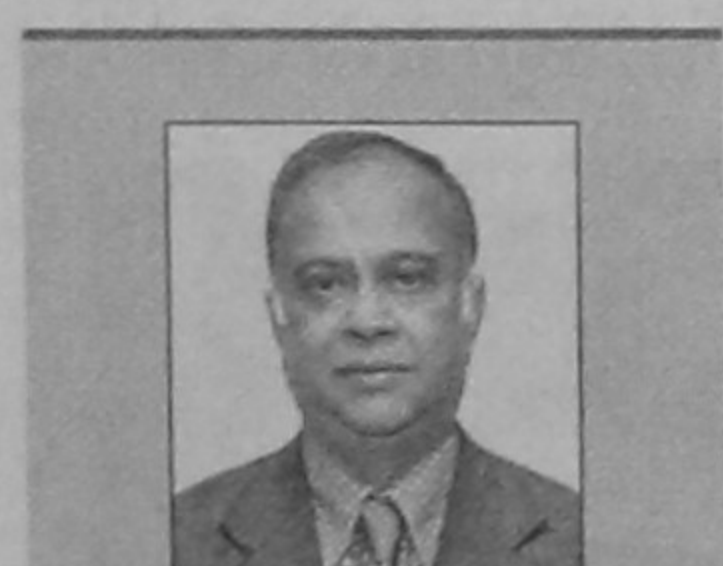
Democracy is fine and well-deserved for India but, like the US, India prefers to deal with autocrats in its own neighbourhood. Such double standards speak poorly of Indian foreign policy.

India is taking a myopic view of the Pakistan events and has failed to express solidarity with its democratisation process. Unless it corrects course, India risks alienating Pakistani public opinion.

Worse, it stands to lose credibility as a force for democracy in South Asia -- even as it beats the democracy drum internationally.

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'Golden dawn' in Nepal



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

HIS real name is Pushpa Kumar Dahal, but he was known as "Prachanda," meaning "fierce one." He launched a relentless armed struggle from 1996, bent upon abolishing the monarchy and turning the impoverished country into a republic. Monarchy has been done away with sometime ago. Rather paradoxically, the once dreaded "Maoists" are at the vanguard of the remarkable changes.

The former rebel leader is now the prime minister of the country. Definitely, this is another momentous occasion for Nepal. Now Nepal has an elected legislature, a ceremonial elected president and

MATTERS AROUND US

But the bottom line is that the glorious changes that are sweeping our neighbour must be worthwhile for its masses. The school teacher turned radical communist leader was attracted to radicalism by the numerous woes of common people. He says he has nothing to gain from government position, but only to give. One should wish him success in his mission -- albeit that it is somewhat Herculean. His party says a "golden dawn" has been ushered in. Certainly, the changes are like a new dawn for the country.

a new prime minister. It has embarked upon a new phase in its journey. The change is certainly glorious regardless of what is in store in the future.

Nepal consigned the monarchy to the history books by turning the nation into a republic, in line with the pledges that the Maoists and the political parties made before the last elections. The ultras and other major political parties added a glorious chapter in their quest for transforming the Hindu kingdom into a secular republic.

Not long ago, a remarkable democratic victory was achieved in Nepal. King Gyanendra capitulated, and finally agreed to reconvene the elected parliament which he had dissolved in 2002.

Nepal introduced Westminster type democracy in 1990, ending the more than two centuries old monarchy, but was later robbed off this system. Some politicians were also to blame for the situation as they failed to live up to the people's expectations because of their unbridled corruption and abuse of power. The king exploited this situation to grab absolute authority for the throne once again, but his repressive rule and lust for power and wealth once again turned the masses against him and, consequently, Nepal reverted to representative rule.

The seven-party government headed by Prime Minister G.P. Koirala faced two main problems when elected government was

restored. First, the monarchy issue as the government was vacillating on the matter. The alliance carried out the anti-king movement in collusion with the Maoists, who were totally opposed to the existence of monarchy in any form and wanted to make the country a "People's Republic." The political parties were somewhat at variance with the radicals on this issue. The monarchy debate posed a big challenge, since some quarters felt that the country could continue with constitutional monarchy while many others argued that the monarchy concept had to be scrapped altogether.

Secondly, the two sides had some disagreement on the question of status of the Maoists militants and the arms belonging to them. This remained a nagging issue defying a resolution.

As the monarchy issue caused some rupture in the Maoist-seven party unity, people by and large felt that the country could move ahead towards a new future if the political parties and the Maoists worked together in that direction. The two sides maintained broad understanding and agreed for elections in November for a constituent parliament to draft a new constitution. The Maoists also joined the government but quit later.

The radicals charged that the political parties were not doing enough against the monarchy. The government had taken several decisions, including curbing political and financial powers of the king, and was mulling with the idea of nationalising the seven palaces belonging to the royal family. But the Maoists considered these measures as inadequate and opposed royalty tooth and nail. They decided to boycott the November polls, which were held only when the ultras agreed to participate. The radicals, a force to reckon with by that time, were

sufficiently wooed by the government of Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, who also agreed in principle that the throne would be abolished, but a formal and legal decision on such a major issue would be taken by a constituent assembly that would be formed through popular votes.

The balloting was held in April this year, and the Maoists scored a stunning victory. The mandate was seen as an endorsement by the people of the radicals' position on the monarchy. People danced on the streets on hearing the decision by the legislature that the kingship was over, and May 29 has been declared as Republic Day. King Gyanendra was given two weeks time to vacate the palace in Katmandu, which he did, and is now living like a commoner.

King Gyanendra took to the throne following a mysterious palace massacre in 2001 that killed popular King Birendra and most members of the royal family. He and his son Paras, both widely disliked by the people for their corruption and other misdeeds, were at the centre of the conspiracy theories about the killing of King Birendra. People heaved a

sigh of relief when their powers were curbed and monarchy was turned a ceremonial position. But most Nepalese were waiting eagerly for it to be scrapped altogether.

The new prime minister will no doubt face big challenges in meeting the hopes and aspirations of the people, who would naturally pin high hopes on a government that would be different from the previous ones in many ways. Prachanda launched his underground movement and election pledges on populism, like making drastic changes in socio-economic areas like land reforms and better living for the people. He will also have to deal with the sensitive matter of integrating his former guerrilla cadres in the national army as some quarter have already voiced concern about such a development. Besides, the prime minister confronts the acid test of running a democratic government as his experience and conduct of affairs since he shot into prominence as a rebel leader were obviously in contrasting style. He will also have to be very careful in the foreign policy issues as the country is the

neighbour of two Asian giants -- India and China.

Prachanda, himself a great admirer of Mao, will clearly be monitored in the national and international issues. Expectedly, he will spare no efforts to change the face of Nepal, at least economically and socially. How far he will succeed in a country of myriad problems remains to be seen. Former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, Prachanda's rival in the election for premier, said the performance of the new government would be closely watched. But the bottom line is that the glorious changes that are sweeping our neighbour must be worthwhile for its masses. The school teacher turned radical communist leader was attracted to radicalism by the numerous woes of common people. He says he has nothing to gain from government position, but only to give. One should wish him success in his mission -- albeit that it is somewhat Herculean. His party says a "golden dawn" has been ushered in. Certainly, the changes are like a new dawn for the country.

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