

Adopting the RPO

Political parties must concretise their objections

THE Representation of People's Order 1972 has been amended and made into a law. We had earlier commented on this, bringing out its positive aspects and suggesting exactly where it could still be perfected.

It has evidently come too late vis-à-vis the timing in the roadmap for registration of political parties by June this year in accord with an amended RPO, which should have come earlier. The political parties have not clearly specified what objections they have to the RPO, except to say it has come too late which, needless to say, we sympathise with. Thus the lead time for adapting to the changes has been curtailed. This is a concern that cannot be trifled with or made short shrift of. The EC and the parties should make the most of the time at their disposal.

Yet it devolves on the parties now, after having expressed reservations about the law, that they make a clear statement to the public and to the EC as well about their reservations in concrete terms.

Civil society, the media and the political parties have had protracted discussions on what should be the contents of the amended RPO. By and large, we believe, the RPO as it stands reflects those concerns. Where it does not, it would be for the political parties to specify in concrete terms. Let us not forget that what is associated with the process is the public aspiration toward a better political system.

With only a few months left before the projected general elections take place (they will come close on the heels of the planned upazila polls), it is important that the ground realities be taken cognizance of and the EC and the political parties be attuned to them.

The Election Commission is hopefully seized of the issues involved. The Awami League appears ready to sit with the government yet one more time. For its part, the Election Commission has suggested that it is willing to talk to both factions of the BNP.

Such an approach surely sets the tone for the much-awaited rounds of dialogue between the EC and the parties. The public expectation will be that the political parties will concretise their objections and the EC will adopt a flexible attitude to the same.

Pedestrian rights and obligations

Most neglected aspects of traffic discipline

THE pavements along the city streets are in a most chaotic state, unempt, craggy, and worst of all, occupied by squatting vendors, shop-fronts, ticket counters, welding gears, bits and pieces of construction materials, fallen rubbish from house-tops, and sometimes, sewer spillage from manholes. Add to this, the diminishing ledges or shoulders of thoroughfares, the pedestrians have nowhere to go. Thousands of walking people are an integral part of city traffic but that being congested all around, the pedestrians look for elbow room on the pavements. But the pavements meant exclusively as walk-ways have lost their character, so the pedestrians get thrown back on to the streets.

The situation is made intensely chaotic when the buses stop by at random to pick up or off-load passengers. We think the roadside anarchy will be reduced if the bus stoppages are not allowed in and around traffic intersections; in fact, farther the stopovers are from traffic thickets the better.

Who is in charge of keeping the pavements clear of obstructions? Obviously, the city corporation. The heart of the problem lies in utter lack of responsibility on the part of the ward commissioners who turn a blind eye to the setting up of assorted businesses on the pavements, manifestly the worst form of impingement on easement rights regarded as sacrosanct in modern societies. Admittedly, there is the pressure for making a livelihood in the city, and the local leaders, for fear of losing popularity, tend not to interfere with it.

But the ward commissioners can wield their influence, at the community level to ensure that the pavements remain free and not littered with garbage, construction material or vocational appliances. It is a pedestrian rights issue that calls for display of minimum civic sense by the people around. But as for the right to livelihood of the unemployed, we must adequately address the agenda for relocating hawkers in designated vending zones in different places in the city.

The pedestrians have a set of duties also. Rather than dangerously waving their hand to stop a moving vehicle to cross roads, they must habitually get to use overbridges; and where there is none, be patient and walk a little to cross a street from a safer point. We are firmly of the opinion, however, that there should be more of zebra crossings that are conspicuously absent at busier city points.

Jakarta diary



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE drive from the airport to the Santika Hotel takes about 45 minutes, and, as with all other drives to the heart of a capital city, is a decent introduction to a new country. Jakarta, I could not help but note, certainly seems closer to Dhaka in terms of development and third world chaos than, say, a city like Bangkok.

It is more developed, but has the same slightly dilapidated (sorry) air that Dhaka also has, and despite the stretches of prosperity and a general air of sufficiency, we passed by a number of pretty down-at-heel shanty-towns, clusters of tin-sheet huts under fly-overs and alongside railroad tracks.

Even the hotel overlooked a small huddle of tenements and so one sees that poverty is really never far away. A useful reminder, probably better than hiding it behind high walls or keeping it tucked away in inconspicuous corners where we do not have to come face to face with it. The more poverty is in the face of the comfortable, the more we might be inclined to do something to alleviate it.

My taxi driver, Nasrallah, is from western Sumatra and has come to the city to seek his fortune. Indonesia's outlying islands, especially the smaller ones, are stun-

ningly beautiful, but there are few jobs and the ambitious all seem to flock to the big, bad city, Jakarta, which is today one of the world's mega-cities, at 15 million people, more populated even than Dhaka.

Nasrallah had hoped for a job in tourism/hospitality and has ended up driving a cab, which is more or less part of his target industry, but pretty far down the food chain. Does he ever dream of returning home? No, he says, with a laugh, the convention is that he can only return home once he has made it big and that hasn't happened yet.

The only event my first night is dinner with my hosts, KBR 68H, a network of more than 400 community radio stations that operate even in the most remote corners of the archipelago, and, specifically, Asia Calling, one of KBR 68H's weekly radio shows that is broadcast in 12 other Asian countries as well, and will be coming to Bangladesh next month. It is Asia Calling that has invited me to participate in a special two-day program on Islam and Democracy in South Asia.

The next day starts with the radio show in front of a live audience of perhaps 50 or 60. I am on stage with Safia Siddiky, member of the Afghanistan parliament and a

STRAIGHT TALK

As a non-Arab, Muslim majority country, with our own long tradition of syncretic Islam and progressive Islamic thought that is today under attack from non-indigenous, conservative, and intolerant interpretations of Islam, we have a lot in common with Indonesia, and I think much to learn from Indonesia in terms of creating a space for progressive Islamic voices.

very impressive woman. She was, in fact, deputy chairperson and chief speaker for the historic Loya Jirga, is also attached to the ministry of women's affairs, and has, among other things, survived three assassination attempts, in one of which her would-be assailant blew himself up to avoid capture.

The discussion centres on Islam's compatibility with democracy, and both of us are vocal in our belief that there is no incompatibility between the two, but that religion and politics should occupy distinct, separate spheres.

In Indonesia there is a debate raging as to whether Islam and democracy are compatible, with a small but vocal minority believing that the two are incompatible and that Indonesia should be an Islamic state and not a secular republic.

After the show, we go to the offices of the Jakarta Post. I am immediately stricken with envy at seeing their luxurious state-of-the-art premises and equipment. The paper has a circulation of 70,000 and is backed by a conglomerate of vernacular papers, which allows it to enjoy economies of scale and to piggy-back on the others' distribution networks.

Interestingly enough, most of the sub-editors are foreigners, and I note, similar to other south-east

Asian countries, that not too many people speak English very well, hence perhaps the need for the foreign sub-editors.

But more interesting is the fact that Jakarta is filled with foreigners, some of whom have been there for decades, and they all seem to speak Indonesian fluently, as far as I can tell. It is rare to meet a foreigner who has lived in Bangladesh for more than a few years, as most are doing tours of duty with an embassy or donor organisation, and rarer still to meet a foreigner who can speak Bangla to save his or her life.

Next up is a trip to Madinah magazine to meet with the editor. I am not sure what to make of this. The magazine bills itself as "a truly Islamic magazine" and occupies a small beat-up office in a run-down strip-mall. The editor tells me that the circulation is 5,000, which actually isn't bad for something like that.

The purpose of the magazine is to create space and a platform for progressive Islamic voices. I am impressed. I don't know of any comparable publications in Bangladesh that take on issues such as homosexuality and women's rights and the rights of minorities and Ahmadias from a perspective that is self-consciously both Islamic and

Slaves of freedom



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHAT has happened to the dissenting voices, people who disagree to agree and speak their minds in the face of mortal challenge? The whole world believed that the sun revolved around the earth until one Nicolaus Copernicus proposed his contrary hypothesis. People of ancient Arabia indulged in idolatry and the Prophet of Islam proclaimed that Allah was the one and only God. When one Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door, the Catholic Church proved critically flawed.

Even in the darker days of the world, one voice could have the power of many. It rang through the walls of repression, and defied rulers and religion scoffing at freedom. But then the world made its journey to light. The Enlightenment era struck loose the sturdiest of chains. It unfurled the human mind and gave it the free-

dom to bring upon lips what brewed at heart.

Ever since, a new reality has dawned. Democracy presented the age of freedom and equality, the freedom of choice and freedom of speech, the right of every man to agree to disagree. But is that changing? Is it turning around for a relapse? Is freedom becoming its own nemesis?

In the name of freedom, speaking of truth is being grievously discouraged. Dissent is now repressed to protect freedom. It is risky to tell in the United States that George Bush has lied to invade Iraq. It's one thing if you say it as an American. For a foreign citizen visiting the country, it could mean courting trouble with the Homeland Security.

A terrible trend exists in Egypt. Reda Hilal, a journalist, disappeared four years ago. Libyan dissident Mansour Kikhaia vanished in Cairo in 1993. This month an Egyptian scholar named Saad Eddin Ibrahim has been sentenced to two years in prison, with hard

CROSS TALK

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labour, for harming his country's reputation through his writings in the foreign press.

The number of Egypt's prisons has grown fourfold in 25 years, and security police forces comprise of 1.4 million officers, nearly four times the size of the Egyptian army. Egypt's jails contain some 80,000 political prisoners.

That doesn't isolate Egypt as an island of repression. North Korea has 200,000 political detainees. Political repressions are common in China, Russia, other Asian, African and the Middle Eastern countries, parts of Europe being a modest exception.

People are being thrown in jail, their lives threatened, and their reputations ruined. The dissidents are ruthlessly gunned down, and most regularly accused of spying against their own countries.

Truth and freedom have always been on the collision course, more so in a climate of exploitation. Mukhtaran Mai in Pakistan was gang-raped and forced to walk naked in front of the villagers

because the freedom of her tormentors was unrestrained.

But they threatened to kill her when she defied them and went to police to tell the truth. The vested interests quickly coalesced to the highest level and the Pakistan government tried to stop her from travelling to New York. It feared she was going to embarrass them.

People spoke up in ancient times, truth being their expression of freedom. But it always conflicted with people in power who exercised their freedom as expression of their truth.

Girolamo Savonarola, the great Florentine friar, was hanged and burned at the stake for his conflict with the papacy. Syed Meer Nisar Ali Titumeer, who died by a cannon shot while fighting against the British army, inspired others to start revolting against the British rule.

In Orwell's 1984, Big Brother propagated three main slogans: war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength. Power distorts truth for the freedom to rule. For those who are ruled, fight for

progressive in its outlook

The next day starts with the second part of the radio show. This time it is the turn of Beena Sarwar from Pakistan and Asghar Ali Engineer from India. Again, the discussion is both provocative and thought-provoking, helped by the fact that Mr. Engineer is a legitimate Islamic scholar who can readily cite the Quran and Islamic history to make his points. Progressive Islam is in safe hands with him on stage.

The next day and half bring a number of further visits to an Islamic social organisation, an Islamic university, and a pesantren (Islamic boarding school), as well as a visit to the premises of Tempo magazine, Indonesia's premier weekly publication.

In between, are superb meals, one at humble but spotless roadside restaurant, where we sit cross-legged on reed mats and drink out of young green coconuts (dab) and eat off banana leaves, and one at the sensational Lara Jjongrang restaurant in the heart of the city, where we eat in an atmosphere of traditional old-world charm surrounded by stunning art and sculpture that show-cases Indonesia's rich and proud pre-Islamic heritage.

Our last night takes in a photo exhibit on Afghan women at Utan Kayu, an artists' collective. The photos are unbelievable in their depictions of courage and determination in the face of incredible odds and in the question and answer session that follows, Ms. Siddiky once again mesmerises the locals with her stories of quiet heroism.

truth is essential to defend freedom. The dissenting voices play a balancing role.

They refuse to accept the distortions, stand up to set the records straight. It's the good germ, bad germ situation. The germ which keeps truth healthy for the freedom of one group infects the truth of another group and afflicts its freedom.

Former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky met with President George Bush right after his reelection. Bush admired Sharansky's book The Case for Democracy, and Sharansky returned his praise with praise.

He called the US president "the world's leading dissident," because his administration supported the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture against the weight of world opinion.

Mistake is that dissidence is not arrogance. Dissidence is when a person disagrees with a government or a powerful organisation. Arrogance is scorn for others, an overbearing pride over the superiority of one's authority or opinion, or both. When one man goes against the rest of the world and he has the military and economic might to back up his arrogance, it amounts to authoritarianism.

"End of History" -- famed Francis Fukuyama has asked in an article written last Sunday in The

The Utan Kayu space is very nice. In addition to KBR 68H's radio station, there is also a theatre/auditorium, canteen, and open space for artists, writers, philosophers to exchange ideas. Every Saturday morning one can find Abdurrahman Wahid, revered religious leader and ex-president, sipping a cup of coffee and chatting to anyone who stops by to say hello.

We end the night with a trip to the old city, coffee and ice cream at the Batavia Hotel. There is a torch singer being accompanied by a piano and double bass and with the high ceilings, dark furniture, and liveried waiters we could have stepped through time into 100 years ago.

Right outside this relic of colonialism is a reminder of traditional Indonesia, thousands are gathered quietly in a city square to watch an epic shadow puppet show in the Javanese vernacular, in anticipation of Indonesia's independence day, which is only a few days away.

Jakarta is a lovely city. It is a bit crowded and overwhelming, but for a Dhaka resident this is nothing. In fact, the hustle and bustle and occasional pocket of squalor made me feel quite at home.

As a non-Arab, Muslim majority country, with our own long tradition of syncretic Islam and progressive Islamic thought that is today under attack from non-indigenous, conservative, and intolerant interpretations of Islam, we have a lot in common with Indonesia, and I think much to learn from Indonesia in terms of creating a space for progressive Islamic voices. More next week.

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Washington Post: "Are we entering the age of the autocrat? The response he gave is conditional."

The next era in world politics will depend on whether gains in economic productivity will keep up with global demand for such basic commodities as oil, food and water.

That should decide if we are going back to the good old days when freedom was repressed with repression. How does it work now? The great emphasis on liberty and equality, the doldrums of democracy is repressing freedom with freedom. While custom-made democracy is peddled to the countries, any resistance or criticism is bitterly opposed.

The voices are muffled and cookie-cutter minds are producing clones. Thoughts are rationed in morsels of freedom. Once again, the picture of freedom is being fitted within the tight frame of narrow interests. Repression defined freedom in the past. This century, freedom is defining repression.

When great minds scramble at the sight of an assistant undersecretary, the compulsion comes from the Big Brother's mould. Nobody should raise his voice; just comply, don't contest. The world has changed. For twenty centuries, the slaves longed for freedom. Now freedom is longing for its slaves.

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The first principle is the primacy of learning

At the primary level, a teacher does not teach, s/he facilitates because children mostly learn naturally. The teacher facilitates learning to ensure that the activities in the classroom allow acquisition of the desired competencies. The challenge is to create the learning environment inside the classroom and encourage children to engage themselves actively.

R.R. MAHMOOD HASAN

"FIRST Principles" (August 18) touches on scores of issues but I'll focus on curriculum and what Prof. Anwarul Huque describes as "adherence to universal child-friendly pedagogic treatments" and "real school working days." These, I felt, graduated beyond the realm of the rhetoric.

Let me begin with some of Prof. Huque's unfounded claims. Many toss around expressions such as "child-friendly" and "child-centred," assuming that the meanings were obvious. Huque suggests that "child-friendly pedagogic treatments" are "universal."

None of the South Asian countries, other than Sri Lanka and Maldives, and most developing

countries, don't have child-friendly, let alone, child-centred schools.

The former is popularised by Unicef emphasis on safety, while the latter refers to a comprehensive education system, highlighting learning environment, classroom resources, teaching, and assessment.

Prof. Huque claims that "a primary school teacher, irrespective of the subjects s/he studied, is required to teach all the 11 primary education (PE) subjects up to grade 8." As there are only 5,000 secondary schools with PE sections, all other primary schools, understandably, are primary up to grade five.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the teachers in these schools

could not teach up to grade 8. Secondly, I had thought that primary schools had subject-based teachers because the NCTB believed that all subjects needed dedicated teachers.

It is possible, however, that partly because there are fewer teachers than prescribed and partly owing to teacher absenteeism, they are often required to cover for other teachers.

The author's favourite areas seem to be teacher profile, curriculum and real working days. It is not clear what the author means by teacher profile. In advanced countries, teachers are required to qualify for teaching through teacher training, which includes years of teaching practice in real classrooms.

As a result, trainees can learn classroom transactions hands-on. In most of these countries, the primary teacher is the class teacher who facilitates the full primary curriculum, which means there are usually no subject teachers; therefore, no subject-based periods.

This means teachers are expected to take responsibility for acquisition of the full range of defined competencies by each learner. My working experience in 700 full primary schools in Bangladesh, which came to be widely acknowledged as "one of the two best primary education systems in the developing world," suggests that even if the teachers had only HSC qualification, it would have been possible to train them through hands-on experience.

Clearly, graduates with science background would potentially be more effective as teachers than others, especially in the upper primary.

Prof. Huque explains. "Though the curriculum is the prime mover of an education system, especially at the primary level, teachers are

the providers of the basic foundation for subsequent stages of education."

In reality, curriculum is a key element for high quality education. In itself it does not ensure learning, and learning, clearly, is the rationale for schooling. The national curriculum of Bangladesh is mainly based on the British curriculum, except for the first 16 or so, but this has not led to quality education. The story is the same for most parts of South Asia.

At the primary level, curricular objectives are development in reading, writing, math, science and technology, and life skills. In high quality education, competence in reading means the ability to read fluently and independently with comprehension, in both Bangla and English.

Similarly, writing is the ability to express oneself, and communicate, in writing in both languages. Competence in math involves understanding the number system and place value, calculations, and solving problems involving shapes, space, position and movement; lengths, mass, capacity and time.

The objectives in themselves, however, do not ensure learning. Nor can they be provided or transmitted by a teacher. In conventional schools this might be the case because teaching and learning are rote based.

The textbooks and the system of assessment, i.e. examination, reinforce rote learning. Textbooks, by setting questions at the end of each chapter, encourage learners to memorise answers. The system of examination does this by assessing basically the ability of the learner to recall from memory. The system does not allow assessment of what the learner knows and is able to do!

Training hands-on in a classroom environment that ensures

learning by doing, and engaging each child actively in a purposeful activity every minute, allows a teacher to recreate the learning environment in her/his own classroom and facilitate learning.

At the primary level, a teacher does not teach, s/he facilitates because children mostly learn naturally. The teacher facilitates learning to ensure that the activities in the classroom allow acquisition of the desired competencies. The challenge is to create the learning environment inside the classroom and encourage children to engage themselves actively.

At the primary level, therefore, teaching and learning must essentially be competency based within the framework of specific disciplines or subjects. Thus, there is no contradiction between a competency based and a subject based curriculum. Competencies are the fundamentals that allow a learner to dig into a subject.

Bangla and English are subjects, but it is the competency in reading and writing, as explained above, that creates opportunity for the

learner to enjoy the subjects. As for Multiple Ways of Teaching Learning (MWTL) promoted through the PEDP I/IDEAL project, it failed for the same reasons that PEDP II is failing. Neither of the two national projects envisaged a classroom complete with the resources, the activities, the teaching learning and assessment.

Understandably, the implementers failed to create what they had not seen. As a result, the teachers continued to be trained in the conventional way (C-in-Ed), including practice teaching in the conventional "demonstration schools" attached to the PTIs. The result was inevitable.

As for what the author calls "real annual school working days" being only about 100, he has a point, except that his assumption that all teachers are engaged in "non-PE functions" at the same time, and the schools effectively remained closed during these periods is wrong and misleading.

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