

Upazila poll issue

Let us come to a solution forthwith

THE current impasse between the political parties and the Election Commission over whether the upazila elections should be held before the national elections, as proposed by the EC, or after, as proposed by the parties, threatens to throw the long-awaited national elections into confusion.

The desire for national polls by December is a universal one. The political parties, the EC, the CTG, the public, indeed, the entire country is unanimous that these polls take place on time. And take place on time they must. This should be the starting point for all discussion.

Taking this as the starting point, we believe that it behooves both sides to do everything in their power to ensure that the process is not derailed.

To this end, we urge both the EC and the political parties to take the public (and the media) fully on board and fully explain the rationale for their positions to us. It seems to us that the concerns of each side can be satisfied by the other, and that the gaps between the two are not unbridgeable, provided there is the will to resolve things.

Political parties have yet to sufficiently explain what harm will be done to electoral or democratic processes if the upazila polls are held before the national election. Likewise, the EC needs to fully share with the public as to what their compulsion is to hold the upazila polls before the national election. Their rationale has not been fully explained, except to say that the upazila election is overdue and they assume that left to itself an elected government might drag its feet on the issue like it did before. This is being presumptuous in the same way that the political parties think that the government might manipulate the upazila polls with the possibility of eventually influencing the outcome of the national election. This is a nonpartisan government in transit; so how can it possibly have such an agenda?

For all we know, the AL has proposed that the government declare schedules for both national election and upazila polls in that order, the latter following the former with a built-in guarantee for completion of the upazila polls under an elected government. This can be one of the options to be mooted in the EC's discussions with political parties.

The bottom line however is, we believe, that the upazila election should be held without further delay and that way everybody will stand to gain from the outcome.

Mayors take oath

Promise must be matched by performance

THE newly elected mayors of the four city corporations took oath on Tuesday and have promised to improve civic facilities in the cities which have always been poor, as lack of planning and coordination among the agencies concerned created insurmountable problems in the past.

We congratulate the mayors on their having assumed the great responsibility of ensuring sustainable urban development in the four cities. Obviously, the challenge ahead is a formidable one, which the city fathers will have to face with great determination and an unwavering commitment to deliver. They have to work hard and prove that the city corporations -- which are seen as dens of corruption by the majority of the people -- can indeed become vibrant and viable centres of urban planning and growth. The image of the mayoral office has to be refurbished. And it has to shed partisan political overtone of any kind as a matter of principle.

There is something to be said about the role of the political parties in this respect. The parties which took part in city corporation elections unofficially have to not only admit, but also insist on the fact that the corporations should remain above party politics. This is an area where we have achieved very little since the mayors could not slough off their political identity in order to develop the corporation into a truly non-partisan body having the welfare of the citizens as its sole objective.

The newly elected mayors have promised to turn the cities into modern metropolises with all the necessary civic amenities. The mayors' plan to face the situation head-on is commendable, but at the same time people would not expect them to say anything that would soon sound hollow. They are expected to come out of the traditional mode of running public offices where the leaders promise a great deal more than they can deliver. And setting goals too lofty may also create a sense of despair as soon as they get down to business.

The mayors should concentrate on eliminating the grave problems like traffic jam and bring back order to urban life. Achieving a greater degree of coordination with other agencies that the city corporations interact with is another goal that can be attained within a short time. Finally, better planning coupled with a pragmatic action plan will help the corporations overcome financial constraints. The mayors will be doing the citizens a great service if they opt for a fresh beginning, leaving behind all that went wrong in the past.

Seven years after 9/11

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

While we wait for a clear articulation from the Obama camp as to how he would proceed in this regard we are in no doubt about McCain's priority. He considers terrorism "the transcendent challenge of our time," yet puts his reliance entirely on military force to counter it. He appears to be a man with a hammer to whom every problem appears to be a nail. That is a recipe for disaster.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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SEVEN years ago today, the myth of US invincibility was shattered by a bunch of terrorists. Regrettably the terrorists, who claimed to be Muslims, chose innocent civilians as their targets to take out on the US government their grievances for what they perceived as the anti-Muslim policy of the US. It was meant to be a demonstrable protest on behalf of the Muslims.

Little did they realise that what they were doing in the name of Islam, the very act of killing innocent people, who were not involved in any direct conflict with them, was in itself anathema in Islam. Their grievances may have been justified by the brazen US double standards and unprincipled stand -- demonstrated in the Middle East, Palestine and Israel, appearing to be protagonists of democracy yet supporting incorrigible despots, helping in overthrow of democratically elected governments, and in other similar despicable acts. But what the terrorists did on September 11, 2001 we cannot condone.

Nobody can justify the more than three thousand deaths in the

attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Not even the fact that the US embargo against Iraq had killed several times more than that; not even the several thousand deaths in Chile at the hands of a military tyrant whom the US government helped in dislodging a democratically elected government, exactly 28 years to the day that the Twin Towers were reduced to ashes -- can justify the deaths on 9/11.

The world has changed since 9/11. And ever since the so-called global war on terror was launched through Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in October 2001, and Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 the planning of which predated 9/11, the world order has continued to degenerate into near disorder. And every year since then we ask whether the objectives of the Bush government have been met.

It may be pointed out that the Bush government had offered more than one hundred reasons for the invasion and illegal occupation of Iraq. Each new justification was as unconvincing as the previous one, betraying the administra-

tion's predilections for falsehood and prevarication of facts to justify illegal actions.

Whether rationality will dictate US international conduct under a new president one is not certain. Whether we will see the US using its power to prevent conflict or vice versa, we are not sure. The signals are mixed and one wonders whether the White House is ready to accommodate a black president -- who would recast the current US strategy of global war on terrorism.

This is also the right time to look at the two theatres where the fight against global terror is being conducted, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The verdict is out in both the cases. Many see Iraq as an unmitigated failure of the US policy while some have gone so far as to call the venture a defeat. In spite of McCain insisting that US forces are winning the war in Iraq and, according to him, if allowed to fulfill their tasks, "would leave behind a working democracy, check disruptive influences and clear the way for a transformed Middle East," and the Bush administration flaunting the "success" that the "surge" has accomplished, the mission remains far

from accomplished. The claim that al-Qaeda in Iraq has been completely defeated cuts little ice with impartial observers.

Despite the Bush administration's effort to link Saddam with al-Qaeda, official reports have discounted that possibility. The US ploy to justify continued presence in Iraq, as a guarantee of safety of the US, by overplaying the presence and role of al-Qaeda in that country has also been contested by experts. Even the US National Intelligence Estimate, released in 2006, described Iraq as a "cause celebre" that attracted many Islamic radicals from other parts of the world to gravitate towards Iraq. And according to Bruce Hoffman, a veteran counter terrorism expert: "The vast majority of the fighters who are part of al-Qaeda in Iraq are Iraqis who have shown little interest in seeking targets beyond that country's borders."

Muqtada al-Sadr may have been quietened through a deal, but nobody can guarantee that his pliant attitude will continue and the ceasefire by the Mahdi Army will hold for long. There are talks about secret operations that US

forces have indulged in to eliminate al-Qaeda terrorists. The Son of Iraq program that saw the Sunnis battle al-Qaeda alongside the Americans has helped bring Anbar province under control. However, the crux of the matter is not the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq but the political dénouement in that country. It is how the two major sects resolve to run the country as an integrated entity without it being fragmented into three parts that will dictate Iraq's political course.

The worrisome truth is that, notwithstanding its weaknesses, the al-Qaeda leadership remains in place and continues to be a reckonable force. Its major base, on the Afghan-Pakistan border, continues to be effective in allowing it the operational space that it had prior to US invasion of Afghanistan, which might cause the coalition and ISAF operation in Afghanistan to end in failure.

Bush's obsession with Iraq had left the central point of the war on terror -- Afghanistan -- unattended and out of focus of the US planners. Thus, even though the first objective, the removal of the Taliban regime, has been attained, the second, destruction of al-Qaeda is far from being achieved. The coalition has been bogged down for the last seven years in a manner reminiscent of the Soviets. And the new regime is not in position to run the country effectively, a fact that was acknowledged by President Karzai in an interview with AP when he said that Afghanistan did not have a functioning government yet. In spite of the Coalition and Nato commanders' call for more troops, it was only the other day that

President Bush committed additional force, which in any case is not likely to be deployed before January 2009. But more troops do not necessarily guarantee achievement of the aim.

In the meantime, loss of civilian lives in US aerial attacks on alleged enemy locations inside Afghanistan, most of which are conducted by RPVs, continues. This has caused the people in Afghanistan to be further estranged from the Nato and the ISAF troops. The Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda on the Pak-Afghan border exploit this to their advantage, and continue to operate with impunity.

This year the focus on the so-called war on terror is even more intense with America preparing to elect a new president. It has evinced greater interest than in the past only to see whether there will be a continuation of the Bush policy through McCain or there will be more rational considerations in the policy formulations under Obama, insofar as the global war on terror is concerned.

While we wait for a clear articulation from the Obama camp as to how he would proceed in this regard we are in no doubt about McCain's priority. He considers terrorism "the transcendent challenge of our time," yet puts his reliance entirely on military force to counter it. He appears to be a man with a hammer to whom every problem appears to be a nail. That is a recipe for disaster.

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Anti-corruption and ethical society

NO NONSENSE

One may wonder, have the politicians learned anything over the last 22 months or so? Hard to say if they did since we still hear the threats of political movements and see the specter of campus and street violence by student wings of national political parties. If anything at all, they may have learned that unbridled corruption will not go scot free.



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

WHILE analysing corruptions and immoralities of our politicians, I invoked God in two of my recent articles. In the August 20, 2007 piece, "Socially isolating the corrupt" I wrote:

"Why do our politicians and public officials engage in immoral and illicit pursuits, given that they go to the mosque, perform their prayers, and observe all other religious rituals? Truly, God-fearing religious people would define them as hypocrites -- not as religious people. Would God then listen to a hypocrite's prayer for party unity, release from prison, or for working together to lead the country to ruin again?"

In the October 19, 2007 piece "Loyalty to leader versus country," I wrote:

"Corrupt politicians, public servants, and businessmen are afraid of the ACC. My friends and I are also afraid. We are afraid that, if the old politicians make the ACC dysfunctional, they'll rule the

country in the old ways. We're afraid of the politicians who raise their hands, praying to God for their leaders' release from prison. We're afraid that God, in a moment of mercy, will listen to them. And it's that fear which keeps us busy, praying to the same God for maximum incarcerations for their crimes. We have to wait to see whose prayers are answered."

Apparently, our waiting is over and it seems their prayers have been answered, and seemingly our prayers went unheeded.

The incarcerated are walking out as winners, amid noisy and boisterous revelry, displaying no remorse of their guilt and humiliation. Once out of the prison gate, they start demanding the release of their leader and others they left behind inside prison.

Hamstrung by procedural loopholes and legal gambits, ACC Chairman Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury gave the best antidote to this melancholy. He admitted that the unflattering image of the ACC is being getting dented due to recent bail binges and stay orders

in the cases filed against corruption in high places.

Chairman Mashhud's consternation is revealed in his muted optimism on September 2, when he said the cases will get on legal track after disposal of writs and stay orders, indicating that the "freed" may not be free after all.

He said that detaining someone or granting no bail in graft cases isn't a big deal for the ACC. "Stay orders and bails are indispensable parts of law."

Yes, the right to be free on bail is a fundamental right of all citizens. But ACC's successes or failures may not simply be measured by counting how many cases were prosecuted with positive outcomes; instead it should be measured in terms of the standings of the ACC relative to where it was 12 months ago.

Only the corrupt politicians and their followers will persistently attempt to belittle and deface the achievements of this CTG while covering up their mischief and failures. One such politician is BNP's Khondaker Delwar Hossain,

who at every utterance made it a habit of mocking the CTG, the ACC, and the EC while shamelessly evading wholesale damage BNP did to this impoverished nation. To my judgment, this man is the bête noire -- an insufferable individual -- among all politicians in recent memory.

Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, what the politicians could not accomplish in 16 years, this CTG consummated many of the unfinished jobs in less than 2 years. For example, the job of producing photo imprinted voter identity card -- a stupendous task -- unimaginable only a few months ago; is a monumental success. While many recent writers highlighted other accomplishments and failures, the one that may have by passed our attention is the obliteration of the growing design of Zia family's "dynastic rule" in Bangladesh.

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specter of campus and street violence by student wings of national political parties. If anything at all, they may have learned that unbridled corruption will not go scot free.

To combat corruption, the government is considering the adoption of a 'national integrity strategy' (NIS) -- one that will create an ethical society to back up ACC's corruption drives (The Daily Star September 9). The government hopes to achieve such a society through 'rebuilding integrity' in every segment of the society including public, private, and political sectors.

It's reported that the NIS will be run under policy guidance of a National Integrity Advisory Committee (NIAC) to be led by the prime minister. Other members will include the Speaker, cabinet ministers, an elected representative from local government, attorney general, ACC and PSC chairman, chief election commissioner, Ombudsman, Comptroller and Auditor General, and representatives from NGO, business sector, media, civil society and political parties and families.

While wishing well for the NIAC, I view it as the creation of a \$150 million Asian Development Bank funded gargantuan and complex bureaucracy.

NIS approach to combat corruption is a kind of holistic approach -- one that is identified with the principles of holism in a system of therapeutics (holistic psychology)

considered outside scientific approach. The holistic approach may reform some people having some semblance of feelings of shame and guilt for their actions.

In his widely acclaimed journal article, "American national conversion about shame -- everything but" (Journal of Social Research, winter 2003), Dov Cohen highlighted shame, guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation as The Four Horsemen of Abasement.

To comprehend shamefully, one needs to highlight two other attributes: Honour and self-esteem. Obviously, honour and shame are opposites. Honour implies status and reputation of a person in the eyes of his or her peers, and is accorded by a reputation for good moral character.

Shame and self-esteem are completely different traits, because the "self is both, the one that's being esteemed and the one doing the esteeming." Hypothetically, no one else needs to be involved in one's furthering of self-esteem.

The upshot of these distinctions is to establish the notion that when we say: "Politicians of Bangladesh are shameless," we're referring to their lack of sense of guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, honour and self-esteem.

Both the misanthropists and the pragmatists are wondering if the NIS approach would succeed in reforming these politicians.

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Good intentions

Despite the apparently warm relations between the two presidents, how long can the bonhomie last? Insurgencies on both side of the border seem to be growing in intensity and breadth. Taliban safe havens in Pakistan have become such a threat to coalition forces across the border that the United States has ramped up its Predator drone attacks against militant positions inside the tribal region, carrying out at least five this month.

RON MOREAU

IN his first press conference just hours after being sworn in as president today, Asif Ali Zardari chose to share the spotlight with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, apparently in an effort to calm the tense relations between the two neighboring countries, each of which is fighting an expanding Islamic insurgency.

Karzai, whom Zardari had invited to his inauguration at the presidential palace in Islamabad, had had a very rocky relationship with former president Pervez Musharraf. Karzai had blamed the Taliban's resurgence on the sanctuaries that he claimed the guerrillas enjoyed in Pakistan's tribal belt along the two countries' common border. Musharraf denied the

charge, shooting back that Karzai should put his own house in order first and that the Taliban was a homegrown problem.

As Karzai and Zardari shared the rostrum together this afternoon, all vitriol from the past was gone. The two leaders seemed to be of the same mind on how to tackle their respective insurgencies and how to cooperate together. "Pakistan and Afghanistan are like twins joined, inseparable. That is why both are suffering the same problems, the same evils," said Karzai. "For each step you take in the war against terrorism for bringing peace and stability to the two countries, Afghanistan will take many steps with you." Zardari agreed. "We should stand with each other," he said.

Zardari, 53, made it clear that he

has the ability to rally Pakistanis to support the war on Islamic extremism, while Musharraf, having widely been seen as Washington's man who was fighting an American war, did not. "Yesterday's war may not have had the people behind it, but today's war does," he said. "In fact it has the president of Pakistan (behind it), who is also a victim of terrorism," he added, referring to the death of his wife, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who was a victim of a terrorist attack while campaigning last December.

Karzai couldn't seem to tire of praising his counterpart. "The feeling of brotherhood and good neighborliness goes beyond the complaints that we have," he said. "Today I see the president and prime minister of Pakistan (as having) exactly the same view-

points as I have, and they have the same background of suffering as we have in Afghanistan."

Karzai didn't even single out Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan as his country's main problem but rather pointed out that insurgents have sanctuaries on both sides of the border. In responding to a question on the mounting civilian casualty toll in Afghanistan, Karzai said the US-led coalition should not fight the war in villages or populated areas but rather should "concentrate on the sanctuaries, whether those sanctuaries are in Afghanistan or Pakistan."

Zardari said he accepted the presidency in the name of his martyred wife, adding that the country could be proud of the democracy that has taken hold since her death. "We can proudly raise our heads up and boast that we are indeed a democracy," he said.

He also tried to inject a new, less imperial tone into the presidency since the days of the autocratic Musharraf, emphasizing the more than eight years he had spent in jail under the general's rule. "You should see in my presidency a humility after long suffering," he said. "I've suffered (because) a

president or an individual thinks he knows more than the wisdom of the people or the Parliament."

About his future plans and vision for the country, however, Zardari had little to say. He did not say what he plans to do with Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, whom Musharraf had sacked, and whose restoration to the bench had been a common goal of both Zardari and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, his coalition partner until last month. When Zardari reneged on promises to reinstate the justice, Sharif walked away from the coalition, weakening it.

Nor did Zardari divulge much about his plans to address the country's mounting economic woes, other than to say he was cutting the budget of the presidency out of solidarity for people suffering from the sharp economic downturn. He also sees the country's security woes as a possible economic opportunity. "We are in the eye of the storm," he said. "I consider that an opportunity. I intend to make it our strength. We intend to take the world with us in developing the future of Pakistan."

Questioners gave Karzai and Zardari little opportunity to talk

about anything but the War on Terror. Zardari made it clear that he would not allow insurgent safe havens in Pakistan. "Not one inch of land will be lost to any miscreants," he said, using the term the Pakistani military uses to refer to insurgents.

But, he added Pakistan was not the aggressor and that it was only fighting against those who were attacking it. Negotiations could take place if the insurgents laid down their weapons. "We only go on the offensive against people who are on the offensive against ourselves," he said. "Otherwise we asked for peace and asked them to lay down their arms. If they lay down their arms we can negotiate with them."

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The two presidents in a show of unity.

Pakistanis widely see these attacks as violations of the country's sovereignty rather than assistance in combating extremism. A real test of their friendship will come if another major terrorist attack occurs in Kabul, like the car

bombing of the Indian Embassy last July, that can be traced back to insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan. That's when emotions could get the best of good intentions.

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