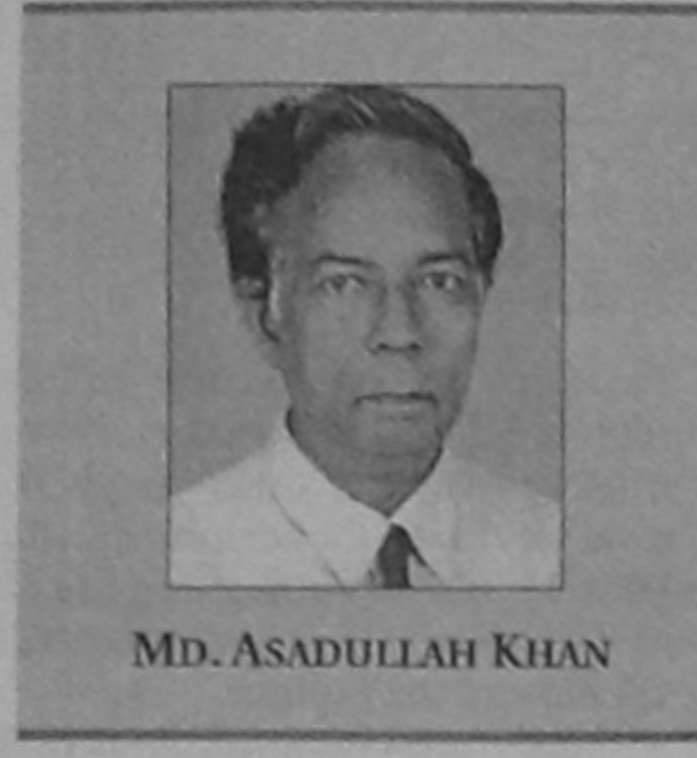


Needed a vibrant Parliament with untainted MPs



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

in the known history. Precisely speaking, politics became a way of making money. It was a sad tale of corruption, arrogance and mismanagement.

After such harrowing experiences in the pre 1/11 days, the relentless campaign of many political parties and civil society against the tainted ministers and MPs in the past government, has brought into focus as never before the infiltration and acceptance of criminal elements in public life. The

The Supreme Court struck it down, making it mandatory for all candidates to submit an affidavit revealing the cases against them, if any. Undeniably true, it took the combined efforts of the apex court, the Election Commission and civil rights groups to force politicians to declare their criminal antecedents.

Former Chief Justice of India J.S Verma in total agreement with the EC's suggestion put forward the view that framing of charges by the court is the most appropriate stage

stayed by a higher court should be disqualified. However, conviction rates in this country being so abysmally low and trials so long-winded, that most 'criminals' never end up serving a sentence -- or if they do, it's often decades after committing a crime. In the meantime, there's nothing to stop them from sitting in the Parliament or even becoming a cabinet minister and lordling it over the very officers investigating them.

So, here the criminal responsibility lies with the criminal justice

issue that the only way of cleansing politics is to improve both the criminal justice and electoral systems. We might take former Indian CEC Gill's observation into account to overcome the crisis. Gill says, "intense propaganda works really well -- better than legal safeguards -- in putting pressure on political parties to give tickets to good candidates". There is unanimity on one point: that you can't leave it to the politicians to come up with a code of conduct for themselves. The civil society will have to work in tandem

the opposition, the practice of boycotting the Parliament on any pretext must go once for all.

The grim fact that must not escape attention of the rulers in the coming days is that there are about 90 million people in the country who live on less than a dollar a day, in other words, in absolute poverty. These people are neither pro nor anti-reforms simply because reforms for them are irrelevant. Does it matter for such a family in Nilphamari or one in Bashkhal whether the foreign investor's share in Barapukuria coal mine or oil exploration project in an off shore islands in the Bay is 49 per cent or 74 per cent? They are unlikely to use the facilities of these projects.

The shame of Bangladesh is not only criminalization of politics or defence scams or the murder of innocent people and sagacious leaders; the shame of Bangladesh is also that we have created an obscenely unequal society in which a 'fortunate one' can happily spend Tk. 3000.00 for a single meal, while for millions Tk. 3000.00 means three months' earnings.

We have had reforms for nearly 15 years, but they have made little or no impact on poverty levels. If anything is trickling down, it is trickling down very, very slowly. Besides, the trickle down theory is now universally rejected -- something reformists themselves concede. Sensible citizenry believe that the party to be elected to run the country has to give these citizens self esteem by putting money in their pockets through gainful employment so that they too can eat two square meals a day, every day.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

WITH the graft trial caught in a tangle and most of the charge sheeted political party members and businessmen coming out on bail from the H.C., the ACC is now perhaps fighting a losing battle. Set up last year for quick disposal of cases, the special courts were entrusted with the task of 204 corruption cases which included 105 cases filed against 154 people, mostly politicians and their family members. Even if the prosecution has succeeded in getting the verdict in its favour in the trial court, a higher court must adjudicate any appeal against a lower court verdict in a corruption case in 90 days of filing the appeal. Boggled down by a plethora of backlog cases, the HC could not dispose of the cases within the stipulated time and the problem that agitates public mind now is whether the convicted persons and those freed on bail can contest the election.

The country known for chaotic governance, extremist politics, and criminal politicians accepted 1/11 as a relief from the ills that plagued it in the past five years. In fact, BNP-Jamaat alliances' last five years in power has been one of the worst periods of corruption and misuse

question if an election seeker is either 'clean' or 'tainted' can go on ad infinitum. The situation today is such that a lawyer of repute with long record of social service or a doctor or a retired teacher or a media personality constantly creating a churning in the society cannot get elected to Parliament but one with little education but handful of money and muscle wins hands down in election after election. Apparently, politics here has no room for decent persons because the system encourages criminals. Significantly, when the EC's stand in India in the last Parliamentary election that all candidates must disclose their police records was upheld by the apex court, political parties across the board joined hands to negate the ruling through an ordinance.

at which criminals can be weeded out of the system. The EC and legal luminaries in Bangladesh might take cue from such observation. Speaking in the context of Bangladesh, the law as of now is that only after a person has been convicted can he (or she) be barred from contesting the election.

Our past experience suggests that existing provisions of law, norms of public morality have failed to keep dubious characters out of elected bodies. Now if the civil society armed with full information on these deviants, cannot mount enough pressure to keep political parties from entertaining them and voters from electing them, legal safeguards ought to be more stringent. But sensible citizenry feel that such legislation will hardly work. Conviction has been

system to speed up matters. In a bid to ensure cleaner politics after a traumatic experience, citizens have to come forward in making the right choice. The RPO (Representation of People Ordinance) is yet to be adopted. As an alternative safeguard against mafia dons, black money holders and loan defaulters (excluding house loan and agricultural loan) being elected to Parliament, the EC might consider if the winner gets less than 50 per cent of the votes cast, there should be a re-poll. Citizenry have watched with trepidation that the weakness of the criminal justice system is what ails the country's polity and economy. Investigations are flawed, charge sheets poorly framed, and the conviction rate very low.

There is broad unanimity on the

with the Supreme Court, the Election Commission and the media, if our grubby body politic is indeed to be cleaned up.

Hopefully both AL and BNP, two majority parties likely to participate in the election have learnt some lessons from their previous tenures and whichever party wins election must deliver to the 140 million people of the country the kind of governance that an impoverished country like Bangladesh needs. This time the polls result must be a clear rejection of criminality and lawlessness, something the past alliance government seemed not to have noticed. The party winning the election must quicken the reforms process and rid the country of petty corruption in all places of the government so that the common man is less harassed. And for

The great night of honour

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

IF one is asked to state the importance of the holy night of Lalatul-Qadr or the Night of Honour of the lunar month of Ramadan vis-a-vis all other lunar nights of lunar months, then one must perhaps say with all the emphasis that it is the greatest and noblest of all the nights.

In this context it would be worthwhile to refer to very important Quranic Ayats (Verses) in which Most Gracious Almighty Allah declares: (i) "We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Honour (Qadr)."

(ii) "And what will explain to thee the Night of Honour is?"

(iii) "The Night of Honour is better than a thousand months."

(iv) "Therein come down the angels and the spirit by Allah's permission."

(v) "Peace this until the rise of Morn."

With regard to thousand nights we may refer to Note 6218 relating to Ayat 3 of aforesaid Sura of the Holy Quran and see the commendation of the world renowned translator Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali as indicated below:

"A thousand must be taken in indefinite sense as denoting a very long period of time. This does not refer to our ideas of time, but to timeless Time." One moment of enlightenment under Allah's Light is better than thousands of months or years of animal life, and such a

moment converts the night of darkness into a period of spiritual glory."

In this connection we may recall that there is a reference of Lalatul-Miraj in the Holy Quran relating to the holy Prophet's miraculous Night Journey and momentous meeting with Lord Ceator Most Gracious Allah and as regards Lailatul-Barat (Night of Salvation), we observe this holy night in accordance with instructions given by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). But so far Lalatul-Qadr is concerned Benign Allah has graciously been pleased to reveal a separate Sura (Chapter) -- Sura Qadr (Honour) -- eulogizing its greatness and nobility.

So, in this holy month of Ramadan we must take the fullest advantage of the said Sura Qadr of the Holy Quran through "Zikrillah" which means Remembrance of Allah, through special prayers and recitation of the Holy Qur-an for long hours so that Benign and Bounteous Allah will forgive us and shower His Bounties on us. Through prayers and supplication to Most Gracious and Merciful Allah during this Night we should endeavour for our salvation. There are innumerable nights in the twelve lunar months of the Islamic calendar, but the said night is undoubtedly the best and noblest of all the lunar nights.

Muslims all over the world observe this holy Night of Honour with due solemnity and fervour.

Kazi Aulad Hossain is a retired govt high official.

Key political prisoners released prior to elections in Burma

LARRY JAGAN

BURMA'S military leaders have released several key political prisoners on the eve of the anniversary of last year's brutal crackdown on the monk-led demonstrations in Rangoon that left hundreds dead and many more injured.

The political activists were part of a massive amnesty for more than 9,000 prisoners -- mostly petty criminals, which analysts believe is part of the regime's preparations for the planned elections in two years time.

Among those freed was the country's longest serving political prisoner, the veteran journalist and political activist, Win Tin. At least four other prominent MP's of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were also released.

However, the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest in her Rangoon residence, where she has spent more than 13 of the last 19 years.

Win Tin has spent the last 19 years in jail on subversion charges. Immediately after he was released he vowed to continue fighting until Burma was a democratic nation -- a battle he took up during 1988, when mass pro-democracy demonstrations brought the country to a standstill for months before the army intervened and seized power in a bloody coup. "I will keep fighting until the emergence of democracy in this country," he told Burmese journalists gathered

outside his house in Rangoon. Many analysts believe these particular releases are timed to help deflect criticism and pressure from the international community at this year's United Nations General Assembly, which got underway in New York last week.

Only last week, the UN envoy for Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, appealed to the Burmese leaders to release the country's political prisoners. It would seem that the regime may now be trying to make concessions to the international

remaining political prisoners.

"While the release of U Win Tin and his fellow prisoners is certainly the best news to come out of Myanmar for a long time, unfortunately they represent less than one percent of the political prisoners there," Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher told The Daily Star from London in a phone interview. "These handful of people should never have been imprisoned in the first place, and there are many, many more."

about forced labour.

In a press statement issued last week, the ILO said it was "concerned and disappointed" at the sentence -- the maximum permissible under the law. The ILO had been in contact with the military government about the case "at a senior level," it added.

Only last week Lu Tin Win was sentenced to two years in jail, on charges of "disrespectful act towards the state," according to opposition sources. Lu Tin Win was originally detained in 1999 but

elections planned for two years time," the independent Burmese academic, Win Min told The Daily Star. "The regime knows it must find ways of controlling the outcome without looking too draconian," he said.

The elections, which are part of the country's roadmap to "disciplined democracy," are scheduled to be held in the early part of 2010, according to Burmese military sources.

As yet, there is no concrete information as to which parties will be

prisoners. The UK-based human rights group, Amnesty International, estimates that there are still more than 2,100 political prisoners languishing in Burma's jails.

In the weeks to come, as the regime plans the scheduled elections, there is likely to be many changes in Burma's political scene. However, most of these are likely to be cosmetic. The regime has already begun to describe itself as a transitional authority.

The Information Minister, Brig-General Kyaw Hsan, told the UN Envoy Ibrahim Gambari when they met in Rangoon last month that the transitional government would "oppose and wipe out those who attempted to jeopardise or harm the constitution."

This can only mean that the military authorities are going to continue to ruthlessly suppress dissent. And there is little likelihood of the forth-coming elections being free and fair. "The military will not make the mistake it did in 1990 -- allowing a free and fair election (which the NLD convincingly won)," Win Min told The Daily Star. "But, at the moment, what it fears most is another uprising on the streets -- and Win Tin's release in particular may also be intended to dampen the anger against the regime in the country that is growing and becoming more vociferous everyday."

Larry Jagan, a former Current Affairs Editor, Asia, BBC World Service, writes for The Daily Star from Bangkok.

"The release of political prisoners probably signals the start of a process of preparations for the elections planned for two years time," the independent Burmese academic, Win Min told The Daily Star. "The regime knows it must find ways of controlling the outcome without looking too draconian," he said.

community for fear that the UN Security Council might resume its efforts to get international sanctions imposed against Rangoon.

"The releases were planned to help reduce international pressure," Bo Kyi, who runs an organisation for Burmese political prisoners based in Thailand, told Asia. It is meant primarily to serve as a weapon for its allies -- China, India, Russia and Asean in order to defend it at the UN."

The international community has welcomed the releases -- especially that of Win Tin. But most analysts and diplomats in Rangoon do not believe this is the start of a mass amnesty for the country's

The releases came as a complete surprise, as in the past few weeks the regime has sentenced several students and NLD activists to long prison sentences. During September this year alone, the regime has arrested 37 political activists, including the renowned student activist of the 88 groups, Ni Lar Thein, Bo Kyi said.

The sentencing of the young labour activist, The Way to two years hard labour earlier this month drew sharp criticism from international organisations, especially the International Labour Organisation. They had been helping people, especially child soldiers, to file complaints against the government

released in 2007.

He was re-arrested almost exactly a year ago at a checkpoint where he was searched and found by the police to have a copy of the book "Opinion of 88 Generation Students."

"This is the junta's strategy -- release political prisoners, especially when the sentences finish, and re-arrest them when they fear they are becoming a threat to the regime," said Bo Kyi. But others feel that the regime's larger strategy for the future may be behind the recent release of these political prisoners.

"The release of political prisoners probably signals the start of a process of preparations for the

elections planned for two years time," the independent Burmese academic, Win Min told The Daily Star. "The regime knows it must find ways of controlling the outcome without looking too draconian," he said.

The regime recently announced through the state run media that thousands of prisoners would be released in the run-up to the elections because of their good behaviour, and to allow them to serve the nation.

The junta has already begun to release the 9,002 prisoners in a gesture of "loving kindness and goodwill," the state-censored independent weekly newspaper Myanmar Times reported.

But there is no mention of whether any of these planned releases would include political

Crocodile tears for upazila polls?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

NARROW politics still remains an evident obstacle to holding the long overdue polls to upazila parishad, a crucial local government tier considered as an effective political device to ensure decentralisation of power for the welfare of people.

The two major political parties, Awami League and BNP that have been playing a cat-and-mouse game with the fate of upazila parishad for last 17 years now have started shedding crocodile tears for the crucial local government body, forgetting their previous deeds.

The two-archivals that ruled the country since restoration of parliamentary democracy through mass upsurge against military ruler HM Ershad in 1990, carefully made the upazila system paralysed for nothing but partisan interests.

The only objective found behind their play was to establish partisan control over the development activities at grassroots level through 'partisan lawmakers' and party men to ensure win in the parliamentary polls, the only way in a democratic polity to grab state power.

The game however took a dramatic when the current turn caretaker government itself stepped into the politics of upazila parishad election by announcing to hold the polls to the vital local government institution before the parliamentary elections.

The caretaker government's much publicised willingness to hold upazila polls however raised questions as it apparently gave more priority to holding the local polls first than the long stalled parliamentary elections.

Many political analysts believe the caretaker government came up with the plan for holding upazila polls first to keep pressures on the political parties using upazila as a 'bargaining agenda'.

Initially, the announcement of holding the upazila polls sparked a storm of protest around the political arena as the parties started campaigning that the interim administration planned to consolidate its power at grassroots level by electing individuals 'loyal to them'

to the local government bodies. In defence of their arguments, the political parties referred to the previous military rulers' tactics to establish control at grassroots level in the name of strengthening the local government system.

Despite the strong opposition of political parties, the caretaker government's move was able to drum up support for upazila polls as the successive government since 1991 ignored the popular public demands for it.

Under such circumstances, the political parties particularly AL and BNP have been compelled to speak in favour of holding the upazila polls after the all-important ninth parliamentary election.

As the political parties vehem-

mentally opposed holding upazila polls before the national ballots, the Election Commission (EC) decided to hold the upazila polls on December 24 and 28, after holding the stalled ninth parliamentary election on December 18.

Informed by the EC, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed in an address to the nation announced the times for the polls, leaving the responsibilities on the EC to announce detailed schedules for both the elections on appropriate time.

On the other hand, the opposition BNP started street agitation to topple the AL government and announced that it would resist the planned upazila polls.

As the EC failed to hold upazila polls with the stipulated time, the AL took the authority to announce the election schedule for the EC and vested it with the LGRD ministry.

However, with the then opposition gearing up the street agitation demanding early national polls, the AL government asked the EC to prepare for holding upazila polls in

posals, he will find the same meaning as that of the BNP proposals.

Now even if both the parties give assurance in writing can we keep confidence in them? What our previous experiences are? Did the parties fulfil their electoral pledges for upazila polls?

It's the BNP that dissolved the upazila parishad system within a few months into coming into power in 1991. Citing the reason that as upazila parishad system was introduced during military ruler HM

Ershad, so it should not exist in a 'democratic' polity.

But it was learnt that the BNP dissolved the upazila parishad system only to empower the party lawmakers to establish controls at the grassroots level, spending public money themselves for or in the name of development activities.

The AL came to power in 1996 promising to the nation that it would revive upazila parishad system. In line with its electoral pledges, the AL revived the upazila parishad system in 1998 by enacting a law.

The upazila parishad law made the EC to hold upazila polls within a specific time. But the then EC was unable to hold the polls due to the political turmoil at that time as the

efforts to divert the opposition movement. But the EC did not agree with the proposal considering the political crisis. Finally, the upazila polls were not held during the tenure of the then AL government.

In the run up to eighth parliamentary polls in 2001, the BNP, in a reversal of its earlier stance on upazila, pledged to the nation that it would revive the upazila parishad if voted to power.

But assuming the power, the BNP led ruling alliance unfolded more drama over the upazila polls.

The then LGRD minister, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, requested the EC to take preparation for holding the upazila elections and assured it that the authority to declare polls schedule will be returned to it.



Is Governor Sarah Palin a factor?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

FOR months the Republican nominee Senator John McCain has struggled to overcome Senator Obama's seductive image as the new face for a change in Washington politics. Now McCain has brought a new face by introducing a young woman Governor of Alaska Sarah Palin as his running mate who fired up the Republican Party at the convention.

Since Sarah Palin was introduced the complexion in the presidential elections in the United States has changed dramatically.

A new Gallup poll of likely voters puts McCain 10 points ahead of Senator Obama in a post convention bounce of 16 points. In the crucial category of white women, a Wall Street Journal/ABC survey shows McCain winning 52 percent to 41 percent. This has resulted in Palin's electrifying speech at the Republican convention. She is a mother of five children with executive experience of 20 months. One Democratic operative has to admit by saying, "The freshness, newness and aura around Barack Obama have been eclipsed. The campaign has been knocked off its stride" in spite of the fact that Governor Palin has been confronted with the controversial removal of State safety commissioner after he refused to fire Governor's former brother-in-law, a state trooper, who was in a messy custody fight with Governor's sister.

Palin is subject of a state ethics investigation over charges that she used her clout as Governor to dismiss State safety commissioner. The Governor also put pressure on a Librarian in her town home Wasilla to censor some books, but the librarian refused to listen to Governor's dictation. Pregnant unmarried teenage daughter of Sarah also becomes a social problem. As a Mayor of tiny Wasilla she lobbied for and secured \$ 27 million federal earmarks. Another remarkable allegation came to the light that she publicly supported providing federal funding for Alaska's notorious bridge to nowhere.

Small town mainstream American Sarah Palin stands in sharp contrast to Obama who told a gathering at a closed door fundraising campaign in San Francisco during primary election that small town Americans 'cling to guns or religion or anti-pathology to people who are not like them'. Sarah Palin has stolen Obama's spotlight with tough talking of reforms that will bring a change in Washington. Both Senator McCain and Governor Palin

now have been applying the carbon copy of Senator Obama's change rhetoric in the campaign which by implication indicates that McCain has disassociated with Bush policies, both domestic and foreign.

This is an audacious tactics adopted to separate him from Bush administration. But most of Bush policies were supported by McCain during the last seven and a half years of Bush administration. It appears that McCain wants to make fool of Americans. It is hardly understandable when McCain claims that he is fighting against Washington. The fact remains that he has spent 26 years in Washington and his record in the senate speaks hardly of his stance.

Governor Palin supports the teaching of creationism side by side with evolution, anti-abortion, and promotes abstinence above sex education in schools.

Against this trend, Senator Obama and his running mate Senator Joe Biden are facing an extraordinary task to convince the voters, particularly white women and working class men and women. Since the country is economically in doldrums, both Senator Obama and Joe Biden should concentrate on failed economic policies of the Republican Party. The election campaign should focus on the issues like ending occupation in Iraq and controlling growing power of Taliban in Afghanistan, restoring image of America abroad, and building an economy that works, apart from health care and social security problems. They should not get trapped in distraction tactics of the Republican Party in any way.

They will have to carry clear message to working class voters in Michigan, Ohio, Florida, and the other swing states to create jobs for them as they are real backbone of the economy of the country. Some commentators are of the opinion that the Governor would stumble on her own because she is novice in politics and therefore, democrats should refrain from attacking Sarah Palin. Joe Biden, who has been raised in working class neighbourhood, could connect with the blue color who is skeptical about Senator Obama. The people in the United States are tired of watching failed domestic and foreign policies of the Republican Party and want a change in Washington. The democratic nominee should avail of this opportunity to win the election.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.



Shakhawat Liton is a senior reporter of The Daily Star.