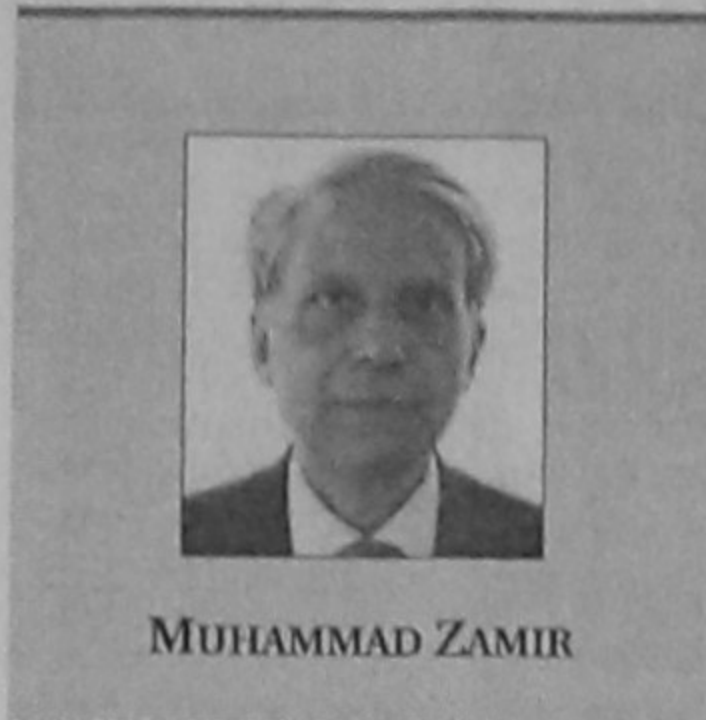


Running the last lap



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

TWO hundred and forty thousand transparent ballot boxes required for the forthcoming polls have started arriving. The first shipment of many is already here. The Election Commission apparently ordered them about six months ago and our development partners stepped in to finance the import.

The long marathon towards the holding of our national parliamentary election has finally reached its home stretch. We are now running the last lap. It has been a tortuous task. We finally have a date for the next round of elections -- for the Jatiyo Sangsad and the Upazilla -- and "here lies the rub" as Shakespeare would have put it. The process of awarding the Holy Grail has again raised questions.

Various political parties are still bickering about different factors -- the chronological details pertaining to the holding of the upazilla elections, the continuation of the emergency provisions and the finer points related to the registration of political parties ahead of the elections.

The Awami League appears to have kicked off its preparation for the JS polls and has publicly announced that it is reviving and rearranging the different election related committees so that they

POST BREAKFAST

The last thing that we need is another controversial election with its consequent political instabilities. We have already seen how FDI inflow into Bangladesh (according to the World Investment Report 2008 prepared by Unctad) slipped by 16 percent during 2007 partially because of political uncertainties. We cannot afford such a negative trend.

can start working more effectively on election related issues. It has also mildly suggested that the schedule for holding the upazilla elections are too near the Jatiyo Sangsad polls and could have been delayed. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies have been more critical. They want re-scheduling of the upazilla polls and are concerned that existing dates will hamper the holding of a fair upazilla election. Both major parties have, however, welcomed the December 18 date for the parliamentary polls.

I believe that the Election Commission, through the schedule, has once again proven its obdurate, inflexible bureaucratic approach towards the discharging of its responsibilities. One could be charitable and suggest that the Election Commission psychologically feels that if it does not complete the upazilla process within a few days of the Jatiyo Sangsad election and before the end of this year, there is every chance that the newly elected government, after taking over its responsibilities in the New Year, will postpone the completion of the upazilla process. That might be so. In that case, the date for the parliamentary polls could have been fixed in the second week of December to give some

breathing time to the different political parties to engage constructively in the upazilla elections. The other alternative could have been the holding of the first phase of the upazilla election simultaneously with the parliamentary polls.

One can only hope that the Election Commission, following the straight and narrow path, has not been influenced by extraneous influence. The Commission, in that case, would have demonstrated once again the disappointing precedent that not being totally independent has its dire aspects.

The nation has many aspirations. We want a system where there will be accountability, responsive governance, non-politicisation of institutions, and debate within the Parliament rather than confrontation on the streets. At least, that was the matrix that we set out to create after the much-hailed January 11, 2007 silent revolution. I am afraid, our success, till now (other than the revision of the electoral rolls and the initiation of the Identity Card process) has been marginal. We seem to be groping forward, making compromises at every step. This has inspired rumour-mongering and made the situation

less transparent. Accusations are also surfacing from different corners that there is a hidden agenda, and that the entire governance process is being directed towards this end.

Recently, I came across an interesting leaflet being distributed in front of gates of mosques after Friday prayers, and also being distributed free with certain daily newspapers. Issued by a group calling itself the "Vigilant Citizens," it has expressed serious dissatisfaction with the manner in which our higher judiciary has been treating cases of corruption, particularly of high profile persons involved with politics. They have described the whole process as a parody rather than an example of rule of law. In this context, they have particularly highlighted the activities of two judges dispensing justice from Court No. 22 of the High Court Annex building. It has been alleged that in the last three months the High Court has granted bail to 181 persons, and of that 143 have been given bail by those sitting in this court. I am sure that the esteemed judges were convinced sufficiently before they handed down their judgments. Nevertheless, it would probably be correct to say that suspicions have

surfaced that certain ends are justifying the means. I refer in this context to steps being taken on the wishes of "authorities concerned." This was best exemplified recently in the difficult posture adopted by the attorney general's department in its handling of the prayer of bail for the former prime minister Sheikh Hasina in one of the cases filed against her.

I will now touch upon a few other areas associated with the electoral process, and the spanners that need to be taken out of the electoral wheel by the responsible authorities in the Election Commission.

I refer first to two vital tasks which have come under focus in both the print and the electronic media -- that of preparing the constituency-wise electoral rolls and finalising the list of polling stations. The scenario has assumed a more complex character because the issue remains suspended, subject to a High Court stay order issued on recent re-demarcation notifications decided upon by the Election Commission. It would be pertinent to point out that the stay order might eventually hamper the possible announcement of detailed poll schedules in early November. This will indirectly also affect the preparation of constituency-wise voters lists.

The second apprehension deals with the requirements introduced in the Representation of the People Ordinance (RPO) promulgated on August 19. The Awami League has categorically demanded that the government and the Election Commission implement the RPO, except for some of the provisions that it has differed with in its dialogue with the Election Commission. In this regard, AL has

pointed out that they are opposed to the restrictions about parties having front organisations of professionals and having overseas units. They also want that the 2001 electoral rules (that would have guided the farcical January 22, 2007 elections) be amended to promote a fairer election. They have also demanded the immediate withdrawal of the state of emergency. On the other hand, the BNP and its allies have disagreed with almost all the elements of the RPO. They want all the new provisions scrapped or suspended till the upcoming polls are over. They have, however, agreed that the emergency provisions should be withdrawn.

We have seen more than one mistake by the Election Commission and several debatable compromises by the government (allowing political parleys within the special sub-jail). Ostensibly, these efforts have been taken to ensure a participatory election. However, the knuckling down under BNP pressure is slowly being interpreted as weakness rather than strength and resolve. The last thing that we need is another controversial election with its consequent political instabilities. We have already seen how FDI inflow into Bangladesh (according to the World Investment Report 2008 prepared by Unctad) slipped by 16 percent during 2007 partially because of political uncertainties. We cannot afford such a negative trend. We have to remember that having an exit strategy is important, but not at the cost of principles.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Getting back into the rhythm

The work cut out for us

THE near deserted look of the capital city certainly conveys a sense of placidity in what is normally a life of hectic activity for us. Realistically speaking, though, this is a welcome lull which will soon be overtaken by the normalcy we are so accustomed to. But the sheer delight of inhaling fresher air, because of the holidays, should entice us into a new realisation of how important it is for us to have a cleaner environment to live and work in.

As the euphoria of Eid wears off, it becomes important that such measures as security for citizens, is handled purposefully. This becomes essential because over the next few days those who have gone out of the capital to spend Eid with their near and dear ones will be returning to the city. Steps against crime must be in place. As such, the authorities should make sure that no slackness is there in ensuring the safety of people. Such security should take into account the movement of buses, trains and riverine vessels, all of which run the risk of accidents both before and after Eid, but especially in the latter period.

The point here is that the country needs to get back into a rhythm. There is the question of politics as it has been shaping up, or been in a state of stagnation, over the past many weeks. The nation will now expect a fresh spurt of rejuvenation to come into politics. Fruitful results are what it will look forward to, obviously in light of the expectations associated with the forthcoming general elections. Add to that the issue of the financial indebtedness faced by the United States economy and the implications of the resultant \$700 billion bail-out. To be sure, the impact of the crisis on Bangladesh will be minimal owing to the fact that the country is a recipient of foreign investment in a limited way. Even so, the crisis sends out the strong message that with an economy like ours, we need to place continued emphasis on productivity and diversity in exports. Let it be noted that consumer demand will be changing patterns as a result of changing global conditions, which means our export regime too needs necessary attuning to. There are the rumblings that one keeps hearing within the nation's garments industry. It is one of those crucial areas that need to be kept under watch as we all get back to work after the Eid holidays. There is also the matter of the food supply lines that need to get back on a normal footing. It must be ensured that they are not disrupted.

It is the work ethic that matters, that needs to be back in place. We all need to get back to work, through making sure that our holidays are really over. The tendency to stretch holidays or to go beyond them must be curbed. As we all make our way back to our workplaces, let the rhythm come back, with all its vigour and vitality.

Melamine alert

Translate the resolve into action

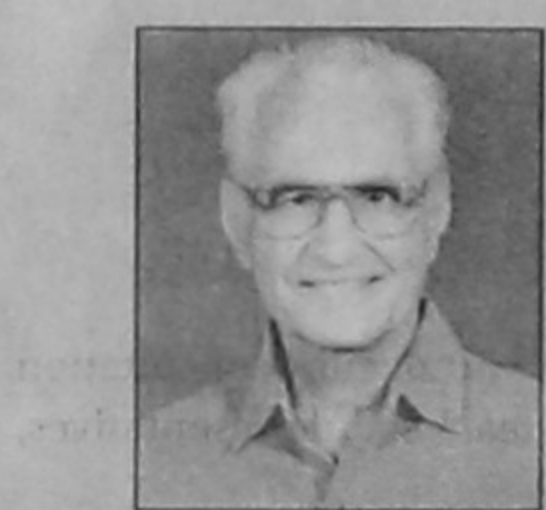
A private testing laboratory named Plasma Plus confirming the presence of melamine in a sample of Chinese brand baby milk products available in the market, the government testing institute acronymed BSTI and the Department of Chemistry, Dhaka University, are set to mount a wider surveillance on imported baby food. Although the government has imposed ban on sale of three brands of powder milk for the health hazards they pose, many more milk products are suspect, according to knowledgeable circles.

It is not surprising that a private laboratory has come forward in detecting melamine in a milk formula while the government testing laboratory languished in the periphery. But it is only upon the confirmation of the presence of melamine in the milk by government laboratories, that the Institute of Public Health and Nutrition (IPHN) can take legal action against the importers of hazardous milk. Three Chinese baby milk products had been sold in the markets without having been registered with the IPHN.

The penalties prescribed in the breast milk substitute (market control) regulation, 1984 require to be sterner by way of deterrence against hazardous import. And that's why a new ordinance providing for five-year jail term and a fine of Taka one lakh is being envisaged. The decisions to constitute a task force to go to the bottom of the problem of unchecked imports and strengthen mobile court operations to seize banned powdered milk are welcome; nevertheless, so long as we fail to re-equip and modernise the laboratories of Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) to cope with their increased load of work, we shall not be able to stave off hazardous products intruding into our markets.

We cannot allow anybody to play around with baby food. Even though we are informed that no child in the country has been afflicted; yet, given that the milk products have been in use for some time, a scooping investigation is called for, to assess the extent of damage done to our children, and go about redressing it.

The dilemma remains



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PAKISTAN-American relations are more important than any other story, except Pakistan economy's straits. President Asif Ali Zardari went to New York supposedly to impress upon the American president that the US should not take unilateral military action on Pakistan territory because of its supposed right of hot pursuit. The outcome is known.

The US president side-stepped the issue and said that America was aware of the strong concerns of the Pakistan government regarding its sovereignty. Just that. Read with voluminous speeches of senior American officials and generals, it is a no-go for Pakistan. The Americans have, in effect, refused to promise not to take unilateral military action on Pakistan territory.

True, the second biggest worry of Pakistan is about its economy. Despite America's own well-known economic difficulties, Zardari inaugurated a Friends of Pakistan Conference on September 26 with a view to finding the means for a bailout for Pakistan. To GB were added China, Saudi Arabia and UAE, Pakistan's particular friends. While its precise outcome is not known, a lifeline of cash would probably be made available sometime -- apparently political hitches

PLAIN WORDS

The state of the country is none too satisfactory. Law and order is virtually breaking down, with the Islamic extremists trying to bomb as many widely different places as possible but concentrating on Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. The administration is on red alert virtually all the time. The extremists have shown that they can attack any city at any time, and appear to have enough sympathisers in various large cities in the country.

have been removed -- though the group will meet in October in UAE. One supposes that the Americans will be willing enough to help so long as Pakistan stays in its rather subordinate-ally role in the War on Terror and does not change the globalisation paradigm.

While economic bailout is a vital necessity, politics, too, is pressing. It is, however, doubtful that foreign friends can come up with adequate funds required to keep the imports free regime going, that are now over twice the exports of Pakistan. That creates a very big hole in Pakistan's current account. Given the earlier cushion of some inflows of foreign investments, the law and order situation in the country has now blocked much of the FDIs. Thus, Pakistan has to do something drastic about its imports -- they cannot remain double of exports. This is over-consumption, pure and simple, of what Pakistan does not produce or earn.

The second devil eating into the economy's innards is the runaway inflation. It is killing the exports because they require many imported inputs. Imports become more expensive during inflation, increasing the costs of exports. With inflation at the current rates, Pakistan would require a minimum of \$15 to 20 billion a year. This is an impossible

demand; no one can keep on feeding Pakistan's elites, including the army that requires at least \$ 500-600 million a year to keep going. Pakistan has to come up with an alternative recovery plan. It is a difficult task for Pakistani economists, a majority of whom appear to be totally sold on globalisation; they think there is no alternative to this paradigm.

American inroads into Pakistan have created a big dilemma. It cannot be over-emphasised that Americans are not particularly liked in this country. Public opinion is intensely opposed to American boot on Pakistan's soil, independently of what the Islamic extremists and Taliban say. This is an automatic nationalistic reaction by Pakistanis in general. Doubtless there is a thin slice of liberal, secular opinion that is horrified by Taliban-like Islamic extremism. While this is view well represented in the media, its impact on the society remains small. Superficially, the march of Islamic extremism now seems irresistible.

While it is established that most Pakistanis do not approve of the violence of the Taliban and other Islamic militant groups, the fight against it requires mobilisation of the masses by political parties, particularly the ruling

one, so as to isolate extremist elements. They have to win over the hearts and minds of not only those who are not directly in love with Taliban ideas but also of those who are supporting the militants.

No one should forget that the Pushtoon voters in Pukhtoonkhawa, the new name of NWFP, voted for a secular nationalist party, Awami National Party, rejecting the alliance of six religious parties, MMA, in last February's elections. If there is a political strategy of the right kind, the majority population can be mobilised against the Islamic extremists in general and those claiming to be Taliban in particular. This is doable. There is no need to be too pessimistic.

Unfortunately, everyone is inflexible vis-a-vis the tribal areas of Pukhtoonkhawa. The army and a part of the civil service that administers and controls the purse strings do not want a change in the system; they want to go on ruling it through the traditional instrumentality of pro-government Malik -- elders whose are supposedly respected by tribesmen -- all paid or bribed.

There is much corruption involved, and the army also does not want to relax its grip; it has, in fact, usurped many of the func-

tions and privileges of the Political Service that nominally controls the tribal areas. The government has no new ideas. The tragedy of Pakistan is not so much the poverty of the masses as the poverty of ideas in the elite groups that govern it.

Americans are dead set on "hot pursuit." They have employed it in extended form in various parts of the world. They think that Pakistan's military intelligence agencies are either corrupt or include sympathisers of Taliban groups, or both. Therefore, they think that it is necessary for them to take direct action and not operate through unreliable Pakistanis. Most of their experts believe that Pakistanis are playing a double game. Which is why there is the likelihood of more incursions by ISAF (Nato) troops led by Americans.

The issue of issues is: what more American incursions in Pakistan will do to Pakistani public opinion, given the woodenness of its ruling elites and their insistence on traditional practices? Strong reactions would be no surprise to any intelligent foreigner, let alone Pakistanis. However, a new idea has been floated in Washington, perhaps to appease Pakistanis. It is joint patrolling by Nato forces, Pakistanis and the Afghan army; they will be tasked to patrol the Afghan-Pakistan border and take military action, presumably on both sides of the border. This looks like a face-saving device for letting Americans into Pakistan, along with a few Afghans and Pakistanis, but it will run the risk of strong public disapproval in Pakistan.

The state of the country is none too satisfactory. Law and order is virtually breaking down, with the Islamic extremists trying to bomb

as many widely different places as possible but concentrating on Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. The administration is on red alert virtually all the time. The extremists have shown that they can attack any city at any time, and appear to have enough sympathisers in various large cities in the country.

Among the cities, Karachi occupies an important place; it is the largest Pushtoon city, having more Pushtoons than either Peshawar or Kabul. Through tribal linkages, Islamic extremists have penetrated it and have found friends, relatives and sympathisers to protect them. This is true in Punjab cities as well, where it has become fashionable to profess extremist ideas on Islam. Many people are now becoming born again Muslims.

Pakistanis are now required to discharge a historic obligation: they have used Islam for political purposes for far too long. It is becoming fashionable to profess extremist Islam and some elite ideas: they (Islamic zealots) are the more suitable rulers of the Islamic country. Extremists have already wrested control of most of the tribal areas in Pukhtoonkhawa and, indeed, many parts of province itself.

The writ of the government does run, but erratically, and the Taliban can hit any place at any time, including Peshawar. Pakistan's greatest vulnerability is the authority's political illiteracy, with no new idea or cognizance of true norms of democracy, despite their invocation of democracy day in and day out. The combination of these factors is extremely worrying. No one knows what will happen when.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

Weakness in political system makes it un-democratic

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

followed.

THERE is perhaps no universally recognised definition of democracy, but it generally means 'government of the people by the people for the people' and a system which is governed by the rule of law where all citizens irrespective of caste, creed and colour have access to government and all citizens enjoy freedom and liberties. The government is accountable to people and transparent in governing the country. Where freedom of political expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of press incorporated in the constitution are supposed to be strictly

In our case and in most other cases as well, parties form government. But in our case most of them do not follow democratic norms in their own organisations. For instance, leaders of Bangladesh Nationalist Party have declared life long chair of the party. By all means the decision by the members of the standing committee negates basic principles of democracy. The decision does not reflect the opinion of the general members of the party. This also shows lack of leadership quality in the party.

It is not the question of sycophancy as some commentators would have us believe. It is the inherent weakness in

It is the inherent weakness in the political system in Bangladesh. There is no need to bring any resolution either by the standing committee of BNP or presidium of Awami League to declare life long chief of the party. In the existing system the top leaders of the parties will continue to preside over the destiny of the party until death. There is also no provision to groom the next chief of the party from among the dedicated and sincere activists. Therefore, chiefs of political parties will remain chiefs until they are incapacitated.

the political system in Bangladesh. There is no need to bring any resolution either by the standing committee of BNP or presidium of Awami League to declare life long chief of the party. In the existing system the top leaders of the parties will continue

to preside over the destiny of the party until death. There is also no provision to groom the next chief of the party from among the dedicated and sincere activists. Therefore, chiefs of political parties will remain chiefs until they are incapacitated.

None of the political parties hold election to elect chairperson, president or Ameer and other members of the executive committee through secret ballot. The selection system itself is undemocratic.

Life long chairperson of a party

holds absolute power and absolute power breeds corruption. The leaders in BNP unfortunately do not appear to have realised the lesson from the corruption charges brought against some stalwarts of the party by the interim government. Most of the corruption charges do not seem to be politically oriented. A glance of their wealth and property explains incompatibility with legal income. It is good that chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party did not accept the proposal. It is expected that chairperson of the BNP and president of Awami League may consider transferring power to their next rung leaders.

Reform in political parties is the demand of the day. There is no

alternative to reform. BNP or Awami League must reform themselves to be truly democratic. Chief of the party should be elected for a certain period, say for four years. When such person is nominated as the prime minister, he or she should relinquish party post immediately to govern the country on non-party basis. In this case, the prime minister of the country should be accountable to the people of Bangladesh, not to a political party. All political parties should be pledge bound to the people that under no circumstances they would allow muscle-men, black money and nepotism to enter in the arena of political parties.

The country needs a good

government which follows rule of law and governs the country in democratic manner. Without reforming political parties, we cannot expect a good and honest government. Martin Luther King Jr once said "there comes a time one must take a position that is neither safe, nor political nor popular... but one must take it simply because it is right". Therefore, leaders of both leading political parties should resolve to restore confidence of the people in the parties. If the leaders do not behave in a democratic manner, the people of the country will themselves bring about drastic changes for their survival.

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