

Party registration

Reform is more than changing a few words in a document

WE are heartened that the major parties have applied for registration with the EC and that they are engaging with the process of complying with the new RPO by amending their respective constitutions. These steps by the parties have greatly reduced the uncertainty that had been hanging over the upcoming elections, and are therefore very welcome.

However, we would have been happier had the impetus for reforms come from within the parties themselves, rather than from outside. Indeed, the BNP general secretary has even complained publicly that the reforms have been forced upon them. If these reforms have been undertaken by the parties under pressure, our question is why have the parties made no move to reform themselves which would have obviated the need for it. The very fact that pressure needed to be applied is a reflection on the sorry state of our politics.

We are at a loss to understand why the parties would resist greater intra-party democracy, honest and upright candidates, and other such reform measures. The parties may argue that they are happy to reform of their own accord, and object only to the coercion. However, this argument cuts little ice in light of the fact that they had never moved to reform themselves earlier, and even now some core negative elements, remain.

Why should it take outside pressure for the BNP to limit the authority of the all-powerful party head, or for the Jamaat to recognise the liberation war of this country.

Indeed, the fact that the reforms are being enacted by the political parties only now and with great reluctance begs the question as to how sincere the parties are and whether we can at all take their reformist steps at face value.

Whatever the circumstances of the current reforms process there can be no doubt that it is in the public interest and that the public wanted it, and that there was a historical need for such reforms. We ask the parties to reflect on this and truly embrace the reform agenda, not because it is imposed, but because it is the right thing to do.

We fervently hope that there will never again be any need for any interim government to demand needed reforms of the political parties, and that henceforth the parties will be more faithful to the wishes of the people and follow a continuous reform process.

Impounded unfit buses

Releasing them is self-defeating

THE news that the traffic department of Dhaka Metropolitan Police is returning the previously seized unfit buses to their owners, because of lack of space in its dumping yard, is a bit disconcerting. The whole exercise was aimed at clearing the city roads of the old, faulty vehicles that cause both pollution and congestion. And now releasing them is certainly a self-defeating move.

Let's have a deeper look into the matter. The owners, claims the traffic department, had to pay fines and sign bonds that they would not run the dilapidated vehicles in the city any more. But they did get the permission to operate outside the capital. This sounds like slackening the grip of law for no good reason. If the ramshackle vehicles were deemed unfit for plying the city roads, how could they be safe for running in the districts or rural areas? It is like putting a different price tag on the lives of people who do not live in the city.

The traffic department should have carefully planned the drive against the old and unsafe vehicles. But with, they should not have impounded the large number of vehicles that could not be kept in their dumping yard due to lack of space. Any half-hearted, poorly executed drive against the vehicles overstaying on the roads should have been avoided. Now the issue remains alive, as owners get back the unfit vehicles. The law enforcers cannot perhaps guarantee that some of the released vehicles would not return to the city streets. This may have also given a handle for corruption to the cops.

The traffic department's release of the vehicle without ordering these off the streets effectively shows, once more, how a good initiative peters out due to poor planning. The plan of cracking down on the worn-out vehicles had everything that the citizens wish for, except that the law enforcers could not envisage the awkward situation that they found themselves in after seizing the vehicles.

We should heed the message implied in the failed attempt. The method should be straight and simple: the vehicles, that create all sorts of problems, must be shown the way to junkyard. No other solution is acceptable.

The Invisible Man



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SOME quite peculiar things are happening in Bangladesh of late. Of those, perhaps the most interesting is that of a political figure, with an arrest warrant in his name, managing to remain invisible selectively.

Whether it is to the credit of the accused that he had managed to remain unseen by the law enforcing agencies while being in full view of the public, or to the discredit of the police and other agencies of the state that failed to notice his presence even while he was in some lofty places of the government, is for people to make out.

The question that naturally follows is whether those that are paid by the state to serve the course of justice had turned a blind eye under orders of the administration, because one would have to be of very poor intellect to believe that the law enforcing agencies had failed to notice him, given the way he was going about attending public meetings inside and outside the capital, and at some of which had even held out threats to the government of dire consequences if it did not meet his party's demands.

When a person with an arrest order hanging on his head is welcomed at a government-political party dialogue, the only conclusion that one can draw is that it was not on their own volition that the agencies looked the other way. And all that we can say is that it has put a blot on the character of the of the caretaker government, that of its

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

There are some harsh questions staring at us. Only a sagacious leadership that will neither acquiesce nor capitulate in the face of the dogmatists can reconcile the differences. But reconciliation does not mean giving in to their irrational demands but convincing the hardliners that their position is unreasonable, that freedom of expression is the very essence of Islam and that we can exist happily with the dual identity that of a good Muslim as well as a good Bengali.

being non-partisan. That raises a whole lot of other questions.

The CTG's action has caused many to ask whether the government has been soft on certain individuals and political parties and whether the law has been applied selectively in certain cases. This particular instance as well as the government's handling of the radicals during the past year and half, and now wilting under pressure from some obscurantist when it came to the issue of Lalon's sculpture, cannot but reveal its kid-glove treatment of the religious extremists.

Whether it is out of fear of disturbing the status quo or out of sympathy towards their philosophy is something that we cannot comment definitively at this point, but which we would like to know.

While the CTG of President Iajuddin was criticised, justly so, for being an extension of the 4-Party Alliance government, some have drawn a similar parallel in respect of the current government for giving the impression that it is beholden to a particular political group with certain ideological leanings.

Not only in the case of the "invisible accused" but also its handling of, and reaction to, the activities of some fanatic groups have led many to ask whether the CTG is under the influence, if not under the control, of these elements. And whether,

therefore, it can really claim to be "neutral," and call itself an honest broker in the dialogue that it is engaging in with the political parties, and whether the level playing field that one expects it to provide to the political parties will not be distorted for some?

Admittedly, no person can claim to be apolitical. Everyone is motivated by, and adheres to, some fundamental beliefs. After all, we all cast our votes for one party or the other. However, many see the personal predilections and preferences perhaps being reflected in the approach of the CTG regarding certain issues. And when that happens, as a result of coalescence of thought stemming from shared interest in the final outcome of events, self-motivated or otherwise, no public office holder, or group, can remain immune to public criticism.

Much has been done by the CTG, either through utterances of individual members or through actions of the cabinet, to invite upon itself the criticism of it being not entirely neutral.

Some examples of the government action, and all actions one would presume stem from policy positions at the government level at least, are in order.

The very prompt action that the government took in rounding up the agitators following the Dhaka University students' unrest last

year was in stark contrast to the handling of the agitation and violation of the emergency regulations by an Islamist party not very soon after that as a protest against a newspaper for alleged anti-Islamic remarks.

While the benefits of all the available latest electronic gadgets were made use of to round up hundreds of students (and some non-students too), who were later charged, not only was no action taken against the offending party, they even were allowed to move in procession up to the Shahbag crossing from Baitul Mukarram area, under police escort.

In another instance, various Islamic groups organised demonstrations and processions, on several occasions, following the introduction of the women's empowerment bill this year, without any interference from the law enforcing agencies. And the recent action of the authorities of pulling down Lalon's sculpture under pressure from a handful of religious hardliners has reinforced public perception that the current government is reluctant to stand up to a particular ideological group, either because it is not in a position to do so or that it carries a conviction that its course of action, as it relates to this particular group, is morally and legally justified.

Without going into the wisdom of replacing a perfectly beautiful



Where is he?

fountain that had been put up at the same spot only recently, with a sculptor whose artistic excellence can only be assessed by a professional critic, but to some dilettantes it was a grotesque depiction of whatever was intended to be depicted (no offence to the sculptor intended), the administration should have stood by its decision and the government should have backed it up to the hilt. Unfortunately, the government gave in.

I suggest the government act quickly to dispel the perception that its own actions or inactions have created. It must act quickly against the utterances of some bigots that go against the very essence of the country's birth. Statements are being made that directly denigrate the sacrifices of the martyrs of the Liberation War.

Of late, these elements have gone so far as to depict "Shikha Anirban" as fire worship. We are

being engulfed by obscurantist interpretation of the Quran, and innocuous expressions of artistic forms are being equated with idol worship. What will stop them from reviling our other symbols of national resistance? Most disquieting is the fact that we are being asked to choose between being a Bengali and being a Muslim.

There are some harsh questions staring at us. Only a sagacious leadership that will neither acquiesce nor capitulate in the face of the dogmatists can reconcile the differences. But reconciliation does not mean giving in to their irrational demands but convincing the hardliners that their position is unreasonable, that freedom of expression is the very essence of Islam and that we can exist happily with the dual identity that of a good Muslim as well as a good Bengali.

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Hurdles to holding polls



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE long road towards holding of the ninth parliamentary poll is finally near the destination with the announcement of the poll date. But a smooth ride to the parliamentary polls set for December 18 is still suffused with confusion, as the major political parties have continued bickering on certain electoral issues.

The caretaker government (CTG) and the Election Commission (EC) are out to hold the parliamentary poll under the state of emergency. But the state of emergency, RPO provisions and upazila poll dates are the hurdles towards getting agreement of the political parties for participating in the parliamentary polls.

Though the major political parties have not yet taken any anti-election stand, they have been expressing their doubts and confusion regarding their participation in the parliamentary poll clearly and volubly in many different ways. AL and BNP have now taken a strong stand not to participate in

the parliamentary polls if their top leaders are not allowed to contest in the parliamentary poll.

The Awami League-led 14-party combine asked the CTG on October 16 to create a congenial atmosphere for holding the ninth parliamentary polls by releasing its president Sheikh Hasina unconditionally, and also withdrawing the state of emergency.

The BNP-led four-party alliance has placed before the CTG and the EC a five-point demand, including withdrawal of state of emergency and scrapping of the RPO (Amendment) 2008, as condition for participating in the forthcoming parliamentary poll.

The other demands are holding of upazila elections a reasonable time after the national election, withdrawal of the Gatco, Niko and Barapukuria corruption cases and false cases against alliance leaders, and release of all political leaders and activists detained without specific charges.

Things have become seemingly

embroiled as a Dhaka court has issued arrest warrants against nine accused in Barapukuria coalmine graft case. They include former BNP ministers M. Saifur Rahman, and Aminul Haque and state minister A.K.M. Mosharraf Hossain and former minister Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed of Jamaat.

The court also directed BNP chairperson and former prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami, former BNP ministers Abdul Mannan Bhuiya, M. Shamsul Islam and M.K. Anwar, now on bail in the case, to appear before it. Begum Zia appeared before the court on October 16. Meanwhile, the High Court has stayed the proceedings of the case against Begum Zia for three months.

The BNP-led alliance is quite unhappy with this development. BNP Secretary General Khondker Delwar Hossain firmly said on October 11 that no election would be acceptable to the people as well

as to the international community without the participation of the party chairperson Khaleda Zia.

Expressing doubts over holding of the parliamentary poll on December 18, the acting president of AL, Zillur Rahman, said on October 17 that the spirit of 1/11 political changeover was defeated and a deep rooted conspiracy was being hatched concerning the ninth parliamentary polls. Zillur made the remarks while speaking to Jubo League leaders at his residence.

The UK State Minister for Asia, Africa and the UN, Lord Mark Malloch Brown, said that everybody understood that the state of emergency should be lifted before the polls, and urged political parties and the CTG to resolve the issues through a pre-poll consensus.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on November 1 or 2 to observe first-hand the build-up to the December 18 parliamentary

poll. An advance team for the UNSG's visit is already in Dhaka. An AL delegation told the UN team that AL would not take part in the forthcoming polls if its president Sheikh Hasina was not released unconditionally.

The European Union appears to have made sending of poll observers conditional to lifting of emergency. EU usually does not send its poll observers to a country under emergency rule. It may not send its Election Observer Mission to Dhaka if it is not convinced of the CTG's measures for holding of a free and fair election.

The demand for lifting of emergency is becoming increasingly shrill, not only from the political parties but also from the donors, as, according to them, no free and fair election is possible under the state of emergency. On the other hand, the Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed told a British parliamentary delegation that the state of emergency was part of Bangladesh's constitution, not any extra-constitutional measure, and it was not affecting the common people.

The chief adviser's argument that the state of emergency would help restrict infiltration of black money and muscle power in the electoral process bears some merit. It is also true that, while many of the fundamental rights remain suspended under emergency rules, it is against the spirit of free, fair and credible elections.

The CTG has announced another round of dialogues with

the political parties in order to remove all these hurdles. This dialogue is crucial if the CTG really wants to pay heed to what the political leaders are saying. Politics always stresses on dialogues and compromise, keeping national interest above all other matters.

The major political parties, including AL and BNP, which are likely to join this last round of dialogues have stressed the need for removing the hurdles, and demanded that the CTG should create a congenial atmosphere for a free and fair poll. The CTG must change its rigid attitude that has thrown the electoral process into uncertainty.

The long-stalled ninth parliamentary election is certainly the most crucial one in our checkered political history. But the latest complications in the run-up to the polls are really worrying the people, as they wholeheartedly believe that return of power to an elected government is the only solution to all their miseries.

The stakeholders should remember that if the all-important election becomes uncertain due to their bickering, it will surely invite a tragedy of sweeping proportions for the nation. Therefore, to avoid an inevitable unrest, the CTG, the EC and the parties involved must act promptly to remove all the hurdles to holding the ninth parliamentary poll in a peaceful manner acceptable to all.

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The case for Barack Obama



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

IT has become fashionable to lament the state of presidential politics and decry the tenor of campaigns. But, in fact, this election has been a pleasant surprise. In the last debate, as the candidates discussed their respective health-care plans in some detail, the danger was that the American people would be turned-off, not by negativity but by boredom.

Compare this election to the one

And imagine how Americans would feel if they saw their country once again fulfilling its founding creed of equal opportunity, if they saw that there really were no barriers in their country, not even to the highest office in the land, not even for a man with a brown face and a strange name.

In 1988 -- when the Pledge of Allegiance, Willie Horton, flag factories and Belgian endives dominated the campaign. Or contrast the relatively brief appearance of William Ayers with the barrage of Swift-Boat attacks on John Kerry. Some of this is because the American people have clearly tired of slash-and-burn campaigns. But much of it is because the two candidates are men of decency and honour.

John McCain is brave, and this courage has manifested itself not simply in the prisons of Vietnam. Over the past two decades he has

broken with his party and president on global warming, campaign finance, government spending and the use of torture. He has chosen, for the most part, to forgo the racial coding that the Republican Party had used for decades in its campaigns. But despite these tremendous strengths, as a candidate for president in 2008, he is the wrong man for the wrong job at the wrong time.

To watch McCain address the current economic crisis is to see a man out of step with his time. His responses have been a recitation of old slogans: cut taxes, limit the gov-

ernment, cut spending that are largely irrelevant to today's problems. Does anyone really believe that tackling earmarks will get credit markets functioning?

In some ways, McCain's intellectual fatigue reflects the exhaustion of the ideological revolution begun by Reagan and Thatcher. The country needs fresh thinking that is ready to accept new facts and new ideas. It's a new world out there.

On foreign policy, John McCain is a fighter. In fact, his bellicosity has increased over the past few years as he has discovered his inner neo-conservative. He wants to keep the

battle going in Iraq, speaks casually of bombing Iran, and is skeptical of the Bush administration's diplomacy with North Korea. He wants to kick Russia out of the G8 and humiliate China by excluding it from that body as well. He sees a "league of democracies" locked in conflict with an alliance of autocracies. This is cold-war nostalgia, not a strategy for the 21st century.

McCain's problem is not only one of substance but perhaps more crucially of temperament. Throughout the campaign, he has been volatile and impulsive. He moves suddenly and unpredictably one day suspending his campaign, the next urging that the chairman of the SEC be fired, the third blaming Democrats for the economic crisis.

He apparently wanted to name as his vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman, a pro-choice semi-Democrat with decades of experi-

ence, instead picked someone close to the opposite Sarah Palin, a rabble-rousing ultraconservative with limited experience and knowledge of the issues.

By contrast, Barack Obama has been steady and reasoned throughout his campaign. After careful deliberation, he endorsed the administration's decision to intervene in the financial industry, but with caveats not to score campaign points but to make the program work better. These modifications were adopted by the administration and employed last week by Secretary Paulson.

Obama's broader economic agenda: health-care reform, infrastructure investments and a major push for alternative energy are large solutions to the growing problems of our times. They are not radical, but neither are they overly constrained by the fear of seeming liberal. Bill and Hillary Clinton were always careful not to stray too far

from the country's comfort zone. Obama is pushing to change the parameters of that zone. That's leadership.

On foreign policy, Obama is cool to McCain's hot, discriminating about the fights he wants to pick. He argues for greater international cooperation and the aggressive use of diplomacy. He sees a world in which America doesn't have to get adversarial with everyone and tries instead to work with other countries of whatever hue to solve the common problems we face.

Let's be honest: neither candidate has past experience that is relevant to being president, except that they have now both run large, multi-year, multimillion-dollar, 50-state campaigns. By common consent, McCain's has been chaotic and ineffective, while Obama has run a superb operation, and done so with little of the drama and discord that usually plague political machines.

This is the case for Obama on

substance, which is the most important criterion. But symbolism is also a powerful force in human affairs. Imagine what people around the world would think if they saw America once again inventing the future. And imagine how Americans would feel if they saw their country once again fulfilling its founding creed of equal opportunity, if they saw that there really were no barriers in their country, not even to the highest office in the land, not even for a man with a brown face and a strange name.

I admit to a personal interest. I have a 9-year-old son named Omar. I firmly believe that he will be able to do absolutely anything he wants in this country when he grows up. But I admit that I will feel more confident about his future if a man named Barack Obama became president of the United States.

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