

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Democratic politics is a respectable avenue for serving people in the best way'

Presently vice-chancellor of University of Development Alternative (UDA), Dhaka, **Prof. Emajuddin Ahamed** was born in Malda district in 1932. He obtained BA in 1952 and MA in Political Science in 1954 from Dhaka University. In 1961, he received MA degree in English from the same university and obtained PhD from Queen's University, Canada in 1977. He joined Dhaka University as a senior lecturer in 1970, and rose to the position of vice-chancellor of DU in 1992. He was awarded Ekushey Padak in 1992, Michael Madhusudan Gold Medal in 1992 and Bhasha Padak in 1998. He has written 38 books. **Shamim Ashraf** took the interview.

How much has the country advanced since 1/11?

The caretaker government (CTG) has done quite well since January 12, 2007. It has been instrumental in making the judiciary independent, reformed a few public bodies like the Election Commission, Anti-corruption Commission, and reconstituted bodies like Public Service Commission and University Grants Commission. The new voter ID card-cum-national ID card is a great thing done. The law and order situation has remained mostly normal during this period. The relief works during the floods and Sidr were commendable. On the other side one may find a dismal picture. The agenda of reforms initiated by the government has been left untended. Their role in the areas of economic activities especially in creating jobs for the jobless, in attracting foreign investment and

in keeping the prices of daily necessities within the reach of low-income people has not been at all satisfactory. They've taken quite a long time in performing their assigned responsibility of holding the general election and even now the situation remains a bit uncertain. By extending their areas of work, they seemed to have posed to be philosopher kings for the society and tried to handle each and every branch of socio-political activity, although they were supposed to concentrate on preparing the ground for general election. Some of the advisers were found to indulge in big talk rather than meaningful work. As a result, during the later part of this government, they have incurred a lot of displeasure. You said the situation is a bit uncertain...

I think the stage has at last been set for the general election. The considered views of the govern-

ment on the one hand and those of the major political parties on the other seem to have converged. Consequently, much of the fog of confusion has evaporated. The proper environment for a free, fair and credible general election is yet to be created, however.

How to remove this uncertainty?

If you look at the demands the political parties, especially the major ones, are making for creating the right kind of environment for a credible general election, you will find that some of these are very strongly worded and appear quite reasonable. They want total withdrawal of emergency provisions. They also want ceremonial burial of the "minus-two" theory. They want rescheduling of the upazila election dates. The government can remove these bottlenecks by taking steps judiciously. What purpose is the emergency likely

to serve when the general election is being held after a couple of months? The government seems to be convinced beyond any doubt that the ill-conceived minus-two theory has no room in Bangladesh. The upazila election, to be meaningful, should be held in time and that time must be propitious for such a massive electoral exercise. What is the lesson of 1/11 and following exercises?

The event of January 11, 2007 has been educative for the many in the society. People in general have learnt a lot, political leaders also learnt quite a bit. They have been put in situations they could never think of. The civil servants and other functionaries of the government also have learnt a lot. When a new, elected government takes over, these lessons might be visible in some areas quite distinctly. Is peaceful election possible under emergency?

A peaceful and credible general election and the emergency provisions are strange bedfellows. The two cannot be bracketed for several reasons. A credible election demands a kind of open environment, which is never generated under emergency provisions, in the first place, even though some of the provisions may be withdrawn. Secondly, the general election for the House of the Nation is such a significant event at the national level that it should take place in an absolutely free and unfettered

environment. The instance of the elections for city corporations and municipalities under emergency should not be cited in support of the general election of December 18 because those were local bodies and elections were held under different conditions. Finally, election under emergency provisions may appear as a veritable slur and damage national reputation. What can be the proper mechanism to ensure democracy in political parties?

If the political parties are determined to have a democratic system in the country, and are to be the prime movers, it goes without saying that the parties must, first of all, be organised democratically. The top leaders of the parties must be elected by the party workers, and not by the party chief only. The party programs must be absolutely transparent. The leaders of the party must be accountable for their activities, not only to the party workers and leaders but also to the people for whom party programs have been formulated. Moreover, policies should be framed by consent and consensus of all concerned. The leadership should be guided by interests of the people and the nation. These qualities should be the guiding force of party leadership. The leaders should be motivated, and they should, on their own, adopt these as the basic premise of party programs. These cannot

be forced on them; they should rather acquire them through their experience and wisdom.

How to ensure transparent financial dealings of political parties?

Since the party leaders deal with the people, they should be open and transparent in regard to party funds. In this area, the Election Commission has a crucial role to play. The Commission may suggest ways and means of fund-raising and how the funds can be audited with a view to bringing in transparency.

Is there any need to bring the top two leaders to a table?

Democracy as a socio-political system works only in conjunction with democratic culture, and democratic culture implies a sense of mutual respect, tolerance, compromise, consent and consensus. The leaders of political parties must be gifted with these virtues. Power proposition is antithetical to democratic values. Since the two political parties -- Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Bangladesh Awami League -- are the biggest of the lot and since they account for practically 80 percent of the votes in any election, the two leaders should play a pivotal role in giving a sense of direction to other leaders in matters of democratic values. If they meet, as they should, well and good for the country; even if they do not meet, they can, by their behavioural and attitudinal manifestations, usher in a new chapter



Prof. Emajuddin Ahamed

in Bangladesh by scrupulously following democratic culture, whether in position or in opposition. They are the ones who can, by setting examples, rejuvenate democratic culture in the political society. Democratic politics is after all the respectable avenue for serving the people and the society in the best possible manner.

What do you think of the ordinances promulgated by the CTG?

The promulgation of an ordinance by the president is necessary to handle any untoward situation in the country when the Jatiya Sangsad is not in session. The non-party caretaker government has not only taken much longer to discharge its assigned responsibility but has also exceeded its responsibility and performed more than what is within its jurisdiction. The

promulgation of so many ordinances by the unelected government indeed looks unnatural.

What is your comment about Article 70 of the Constitution?

Article 70 of Bangladesh's Constitution is quite useful in that it has prevented the kind of horse-trading amongst the elected members of the parliament prevalent in some developing countries in terms of shifting of allegiance to a new party. It has, however, done a great disservice in that the elected members have to keep their mouths shut on anything which the party caucus dislikes. The jatiya sangsad has to evolve a satisfactory mode whereby the members of the sangsad elected on party tickets can express their views freely on anything, and at the same time maintain their loyalty to the party.

What should Obama do about Iran?

If Iran does not want to play on these terms then so be it. Back to containment and conflict. But the Iranian people will always know that Obama offered them the best person and the sweetest deal that any country could expect. But I am certain that Iran would not hesitate to accept this. There is only one cultural trait that they have to overcome: No bargaining on the basic points.

FORREST COOKSON

WITH a week left until the American election, and all indications pointing to Obama becoming the next president of the United States, it is time to start giving him advice about what to do with his presidency. I am concerned largely with a program for Iran, since this represents a terrific opportunity to bring greater peace to the world and also a chance to put a different approach to foreign policy to work.

This article suggests five steps that Obama can take to improve relations of the United States with Iran and reduce the chances for another war in the Middle East. The new president must do all that he can to reduce the conflicts and bitterness that consume that region.

- Time for the United States to recognise Iran and remove trade sanctions etc. levied against that country. No doubt Iran and the United States do

not get along, but it is time to make the big gesture and offer a hand of friendship. No conditions, Mr. Obama, except that Iran should agree to the four points below.

- The new ambassador to Iran should be Oprah Winfrey. She is uniquely qualified for this job. She is perhaps the richest woman in the world; she is certainly the most powerful woman in her ability to sway people and to sell people about the right things to do, to read, to buy etc.
- Almost every woman in Iran will know who she is and many have been following her television programs. She deals directly with some of the most pressing real issues people face. There is a rumour that Obama will send her to the UK as ambassador; that would be a waste. Why does she want to have tea with the queen and jolly about London when she can take on the real world. The Iranian ambassador to the

United States would be free to go where he wants and Oprah would have the same rights.

- What would Oprah do as ambassador? First, she should be empowered with an old idea of Thomas Friedman's -- my version is to offer the Iranians 5,000 four-year scholarships to undergraduate or graduate school in the United States. Conditions -- have to get admitted to the university. 50% male; 50% female. Under 30; not married and no children. This would be an annual program, so after four years there will be 20,000 such scholarships. Nothing more. Selection? So long as they can get admitted the Iranian government can do the selection, or whoever they appoint to assist. Return to Iran? Of course, but that is up to Iran to organise and carry out.
- Oprah, working with the US government and American NGOs, would establish a number of health clinics to provide



The author's choice.

improved medical service to women, and mothers during their pregnancy and the first year after giving birth. These would be well-equipped medical clinics and would provide

full medical services to women who went there. They would be staffed by female Iranian and U.S. doctors. The Iranian government would agree not to interfere in this provision of

medical services.

- The United States would offer a \$ 5 billion line of credit for development of the energy sector. The proceeds of the loans would have to be used with American companies and American equipment. None of this, of course, would be associated with any nuclear program. So that is it. Nothing more and nothing less. We send one of America's leading personalities, a person full of accomplishments with direct access to President Obama, and who has a very big heart and is in contact with the real world of men and women, with three things to do -- education, health, and energy. If the Iranians accept the deal Obama should sign on the spot. If they reject it or think they are in the bazaar then forget it. Nothing here is dictation but it is a package.

If Iran does not want to play on these terms then so be it. Back to containment and conflict. But the Iranian people will always know that Obama offered them the best person and the sweetest deal that any country could expect. But I am certain that Iran would not hesitate to accept this. There is only one cultural trait that they have to overcome: No bargaining on the basic points.

Forrest Cookson is an economist.

The sculpture row

Notwithstanding such a situation, the government cannot accept such an audacious act by the militants, who are certainly not capable of winning the hearts of our peace-loving people.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

DESPITE repeated assurance from the CTG, neither the political parties nor the common people are certain about parliamentary election being held on due date. However, the CTG, EC and political parties are preoccupied with various works related to election. In such a situation, a small group of Islamic militants is trying to be prominent through some provocative actions.

All of a sudden, the amir of Khatme Nabooat, Mufti Noor Hossain Noorani, wants to replace the sculpture of five bawls with a Haj Minar because he feels that the statue (he does not differentiate between a sculpture and a statue) in that spot will hurt the religious sentiment of the Hajis.

It is unfortunate that a small group of Islamic militants has dared to take steps against the government decision during

emergency. We do not understand how a government decision is less important and less effective than the decision of a small, capricious militant group. Needless to say, the people in general are deeply shocked.

A few months back, the police department informed us that some militant groups were secretly organising themselves for starting violent activities. We suspect that this incident might be a warning for a big storm brought about jointly by Islamic militants to stop a free, fair and credible election. Thus, this incident, though apparently created by a small group, may not be treated lightly by the authority.

The militant leaders, who have taken the leading role for completing this job, are reported to be Mufti Noor Hossain Noorani and Mufti Fazlul Haque Amini. Mufti Noorani is the Amir of Khatme Nabooat and convener of Zia International Roundabout

Resistance Committee and Mufti Amini the chairman of Islami Oikya Jote.

It may be pointed out that Mufti Noorani started a countrywide agitation to force the government to treat the Ahmadiya community as non-Muslim. Later on, the said community had to approach the US to quell this menacing movement.

The government is very concerned with election related functions, and is making preparation for an honourable exit. The political parties are more or less silent about the event because of their fear of adverse reaction on voters if they use any words of condemnation in the parliamentary and upazila elections.

The civil society is also not courageous enough to face the militant groups. Notwithstanding such a situation, the government cannot accept such an audacious act by the militants, who are certainly not capable of winning the

hearts of our peace-loving people.

Mufti Amini is smarter than Mufti Noorani. As such, he will spare no pains to utilise the anti-bul sculpture installation movement. It is a common knowledge that Mufti Amini desires to transform Bangladesh into Afghanistan. On October 9, 1998, he stated in an interview in a Bengali weekly (2000) that he would not allow installation of statues (sculptures) on road inter-sections if the government failed to stop it; his followers would break them, even if some people lost their lives.

Amini's slogan is: "We are all Taliban, and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan." He even hinted at the possibility of bloody encounters. He stated that if his followers could capture power (we are not sure about the method of his capture), all the statues installed in Dhaka University would be smashed.

He wants to extinguish "Shikha Onirban" (symbol of war of liberation) at the Dhaka cantonment because he is against worshipping of fire. His attack was mainly aimed at Sheikh Hasina and her party, the AL.

By containing the movement of

JMB, the government has so far been able to control Islamic terrorists' activities to a reasonable extent. As per a police report, the reorganised militants may hit back after the exit of the CTG. Let us hope that our law enforcing agencies will be able to handle any such danger.

Though militant groups are small in size and in numbers, they are capable of undertaking creating big mishaps. The simultaneous bomb blasts in 530 places

during the 4-party regime is an example. The government must handle them firmly because it has nothing to lose. Instead, appropriate action against these militants will bring them good name.

We love democracy and believe in sovereignty of the people. We shall never allow our "Sonar Bangla" to be transformed into "Ashar" (dead) Bangla by sympathisers of the Taliban.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.



You can bring down a sculpture but you cannot break our spirit.



Where the Asian space race is really headed

WHY did India's first space rocket recently blast off with no people on board? It was just a test run. The country's next space flight WILL carry human beings, although it may not be a smooth ride. I can reveal full details in this exclusive report from the future:

An Indian manned space mission to the moon ran into trouble yesterday when a mystery explosion rocked the capsule. "Delhi, I am thinking we are having a problem," said senior astronaut Ashok Kumar.

On Earth, the head of Mission Control rocked his head diagonally and replied: "Achcha."

Experts at Mission Control, an open-air stall in a crowded bazaar in Old Delhi, gathered around tumblers of milky tea to discuss the problem.

"We have narrowed it down to one of three things," said Hankipank Navot, chief spokeswoman for the Asian Superpowers Space Exploration Society (ASSES).

Theory one: A package of extra-spicy chili sambol smuggled on board exploded.

Theory two: A tandoor oven smuggled on board exploded.

Theory three: A double-hot vindaloo eaten to celebrate a successful take-off caused an explosion from the nether regions of a crew member.

Critics castigated the Indian authorities for allowing astronauts to take unlisted items onto the craft.

"It wasn't our fault," countered Ms. Navot. "They brought huge families with them. While we were unloading relatives, they slipped sundry items on board, including foodstuffs and several household appliances, including a portable tandoor, two peons and a punkah-wallah."

Reached by satellite phone, senior astronaut Ashok Kumar maintained that he and his men had a right to eat what they liked. "We're Indians -- it is our basic

human right to eat food spicy enough to blow our heads off," he said.

Asked about the presence of servants on the craft, Kumar replied irritably: "We have reached the stars, we are pinnacle of society, you expect us to live without staff? Aiyo, man."

Space-watchers say the main difference between this incident and the 1970 Apollo 13 explosion is that there has been no panic. Delhi's Mission Control staff, all of whom are government workers, knocked off work as usual at 4.30 pm.

"In India, we can take a 1940 Morris Minor car and keep it going for 70 years using only common household items such as ghee and stockings," said Ms. Navot. "Our astronauts are needing to keep their spacecraft going for one week only. They'll be fine."

True to her prediction, news almost immediately emerged that Ashok Kumar's peon had managed to fix the spacecraft by fashioning a patch made of poppadums and tikka masala sauce.

A spacewalk is expected to go ahead as planned, although one member of the crew is arguing that he doesn't need to wear a space helmet as he has a turban.

Meanwhile, there has been much discussion at the United Nations about what the Indians plan to do when they get to the moon.

Concern has centered around leaked documents which showed that they intended to mine the moon for a rare substance known as "isotope curranium 235." US intelligent experts believe it is a highly addictive substance that has made curry the most popular food on planet earth. Spectrographic analysis showed the moon has significant curranium deposits.

The mission's slogan is: "One small snack for a man, one giant biriyani for mankind."

If you think that was silly, see the rest of the stuff at our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.