

Election schedule should allay any misapprehension about polls

Now political parties must move full steam ahead towards election

WITH the announcement of the election schedule by the Election Commission, another significant step has been taken toward the restoration of democratic government in the country. This latest move by the EC is one more sign of the gradual removal of the hurdles before the promised general elections of December 18. Indeed, the schedule just announced is a clear picture of where the nation goes from here.

Much of the onus, where a return to parliamentary government is concerned, now lies on the nation's political parties. They now have an opportunity to gear themselves into action through making full-scale preparations for the polls. The nation expects them to come up with clear, forward-looking programmes that will have as their focus the vision they are willing to offer the country at least for the next five years. As we have always insisted at this newspaper, the political forces must convince the country that they have the necessary plans and the strategy to provide purposeful leadership in the future. Between now and the submission of nomination papers, therefore, the parties will need to field candidates who will not only have a reputation for probity but will also be qualified to promote the interests of their constituents as also those of the nation as a whole. This means that the nomination process in the parties must be transparent and in tune with the expressed choice of party workers at the grassroots level. In the overall sense, the political parties should be receptive to popular feeling, which is that people expect a positive, enlightening campaign on their part. The negativism that has characterised electoral campaigns in the past necessarily has to be abjured in the interest of a durable democratic system.

The focus before the announcement of the election schedule was on the role of the caretaker government. A number of questions, even apprehensions, often came up regarding the government's motives. The announcement of the election schedule should now allay all such fears. The focus, in light of the new circumstances, is now evidently on the political parties. With the High Court dismissing the writ petitions relating to a re-demarcation of parliamentary constituencies, the way is now open for the parties to fulfill their end of the bargain. And that is to ensure that the elections are held in a peaceful and transparent manner and that an elected government is in charge before the year is out. Any attempt to create chaos and confusion or foil the election will not only be unacceptable but will also spell grave misfortune for all of us.

Myanmar ships in the Bay

A blatant violation of international law

THE news that four Myanmar ships escorted by two warships entered Bangladesh territorial waters to explore gas and oil in the Bay of Bengal came as a great shock and surprise to us, considering the undermining of bilateral ties that such an exercise would invariably lead to.

Apparently, Myanmar is taking advantage of the unresolved issue (in their perception) of demarcating maritime boundary in the Bay. However, it is supposed to be settled according to international laws and, of course, without making any attempt to intrude into the territorial waters of a neighbouring country.

Bangladesh has responded to the development by challenging the presence of foreign ships in our territorial waters. The Myanmar authorities should realise the aggressive, outlandish and intrusive nature of their exploratory venture and withdraw all the ships immediately, showing due respect to international norms and regulations. The presence of the warships in our territorial waters could easily be interpreted as a sign of applying force to grab more space in the Bay already identified as having a vast deposit of oil and gas.

Obviously, the issue was not handled efficiently by the stakeholders in the past. Evidently, Bangladesh was relying more on the good relations with the neighbours than concrete moves to explore oil and gas, even when India and Myanmar had undertaken such exploratory activities. The foreign ministry committee formed in 2004 to recommend how our deep-sea territory could be demarcated became inoperative well before it could make any progress in its task. Now, Myanmar apparently not in agreement with our maritime demarcation line, are trying to impose their own version of the maritime boundary.

We do agree with our foreign ministry sources that Bangladesh is now exposed to international oil and gas politics. It may also be true that the situation could remain volatile till 2011 when the maritime boundary will finally be fixed. It is important that we make persistent and determined efforts to protect our interests. Bangladesh cannot afford to lose in the bargain for its legitimate share of the oil and gas rich Bay, which will only weaken our case for retaining the territorial waters that belong to us as per international laws.

The littoral countries in the region should act in the spirit of regional cooperation and understanding, and refrain from doing anything aggressive to impinge on the legitimate rights of others. Bilateralism of the beneficial kind should help reinforce regionalism in this context.

The extraordinary story of Prothom Alo

Every paper has its readers. But ours seem to be different. They not only read *Prothom Alo*, they love it, share its ideals and feel ownership of it. That is why when the paper makes a mistake, or slips from their expectation, the reaction is swift and merciless. They cannot stand the paper they love to make any error. To say that we are grateful is perhaps the biggest understatement that I can make. We are beholden to them and owe all our success to them.

MAHFUZ ANAM

AS we celebrate the 10th anniversary of *Prothom Alo*, I am proud to say that there has never been a newspaper in the history of Bangladesh that sold nearly four lakh copies daily. There has not also been a paper that involved itself with so many educational, social and humanitarian issues as *Prothom Alo*. All this has made this newspaper the most trusted, loved and patronised in the country. Such is its credibility that at times of natural calamities people spontaneously approach *Prothom Alo* to give relief to the victims and express a desire to become associated with its humanitarian efforts. All this is testimony of the place this newspaper has gained in the hearts and minds of its readers, patrons and the advertisers.

On this auspicious occasion I thank its readers, but for whose support we could not have come where we have. Every paper has its readers. But ours seem to be different. They not only read *Prothom Alo*, they love it, share its ideals and feel ownership of it. That is why when the paper makes a mistake, or slips from their expectation, the reaction is swift and merciless. They cannot stand the paper they love to make any error. To say that we are grateful is perhaps the biggest

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Then, of course, there are our advertisers who, having seen the unique paper that *Prothom Alo* is, have extended their full cooperation. Though ours is a commercial relationship still there is a special bonding between the paper and the advertisers, as the latter share many of the values and goals of *Prothom Alo*. We are proud of this shared ethos.

How did the "miracle" of *Prothom Alo* become possible? First and foremost was its adherence to ethical journalism, and its commitment to fundamental rights, democratic politics and a market economy with social justice. We believed that Bangladesh could do better than it hitherto had. We believed in its people and their love for the country. That is why we relentlessly followed stories that told not only of what went wrong but also how to correct them, and more importantly of the people who were behind the solutions to our considerable problems.

There was always an attempt by us to focus on the outstanding success being achieved by our farmers, workers, entrepreneurs, community organisers, business leaders, NGOs, teachers, students

and people in general. Our fight against corruption was relentless. More revelations about corruption and the people behind it found place in *Prothom Alo* than anywhere else. We were vigilant about political mal-practice and partisanship that earned constant ire from political leaders.

The magic of *Prothom Alo* also happened due to the staff who came together to bring it out. From the very outset, I was deeply impressed by their talent, skills, commitment and enthusiasm. There was such a festive spirit behind all their effort that working with them during the preparatory stage of the paper became a joy for me. Over years they have all matured into masters of their respective responsibilities. Most importantly they always adhered to a high moral standard, both in their professional and personal life, that has made the readers trust the paper, that nothing else could have done.

Today, when I visit them from time to time I do not miss any opportunity to tell what wonderful work they are doing and how proud I am of every one of them. On this auspicious occasion of the 10th anniversary, I pay my deepest respects to all my colleagues, both journalist and those of other departments, in *Prothom Alo*.

No story of *Prothom Alo* would be complete without a word of appreciation for the Board of Directors of Mediastar, the owning company of *Prothom Alo*, led by its Chairman and Managing Director, Latifur Rahman (Shameem Bhai to us all). The Board's commitment to principles of press freedom and ethics of journalism has been, and continues to be, unequivocal. There has not been a single incident when as the publisher, or Mati Bhai as the editor, felt any pressure of either publishing or not publishing any news.

Simultaneous with total non-interference on the journalistic side, there was strict monitoring of the financial aspects of the business, which helped us not only to be efficient and highly productive, but also to be visionary and determined, as it threw one higher target after another for us to achieve. I have no hesitation in highlighting the role of Mr. Latifur Rahman in pushing the paper to attain the unprecedented height that it has. He never wavered, not for a fleeting moment, from his total commitment to the paper. He made the necessary investments both in requisite amount and at the moment it was necessary, even when unexpected rise of newsprint cost pushed the budget totally off track. I have always been impressed by his capacity to see beyond the immediate and the obvious. Often, he foresaw the rise of the paper before either its editor or publisher did. This is especially true for circulation rise, where his intuition seemed always far sharper than our market calculation.

However, my favourite part of *Prothom Alo*'s story deals with the paper's editor, Matiur Rahman,

Mati Bhai to us all. He turned out to be, perhaps, the most outstanding editor of our times, whose innovations, creativity, tireless commitment, intuitive capacity to guess the need of the readers and superb organising capability combined to make the *Prothom Alo* the most popular newspaper ever in this country. His fully deserved the Magsasay Award that he got, and which made our journalism recognised in the region. In all honesty,

I have nothing but admiration for this man. His effort behind the paper is unmatched and beyond measure in ordinary terms. For him it was a labour of love, and what a fantastic love affair it was. Over the last ten years there has not been a moment when he did not put the interest of the paper over that of his own person. There were moments when he was ill. There were other times when he was under psychological strain. Yet nothing, absolutely nothing, could dampen either his spirit or energy to put in his best to make the paper better.

There is a story that I must share with our readers on this occasion. I have known Mati Bhai since my student days and greatly admired his organising capacity as a student leader. His role as the editor of *Bhorer Kagoj* impressed me sufficiently to say to him, on several occasions, that I would very much welcome an opportunity to work together. Implicit in my suggestion was a hidden desire to bring out a Bangla daily with similar values, ideals and goals of serving the nation as *The Daily Star*.

Many months later, Mati Bhai suddenly asked me whether my wish of working together was serious. When I replied in the affirmative he said he was planning to quit *Bhorer Kagoj* and that if I really wanted to work together this was

the moment to plan something. I have been feeling the need for a vernacular daily alongside *The Daily Star* for a long time. Following Mati Bhai's offer I approached Mr. Latifur Rahman if a Bangla paper would interest him. It was bad time for any new venture as he was struggling with a very deep and excruciating personal tragedy, that of his daughter's (Shazneen's) brutal murder. He was my natural choice as the sponsor of a Bangla paper as I admired his commitment to free and independent journalism, his strict adherence to financial propriety and his managerial style of total non-interference but very strict supervision through Board meetings. There was also the feeling that a new project would help him to divert his mind of the tragedy that anybody would find so hard to accept, leave alone live with.

After presenting my arguments to him as to why we should go for a new Bangla daily, and explaining its market potential, I suggested the name of Mati Bhai as its editor. Obviously, I spoke a lot about him, but there was one sentence that Shameem Bhai never tires of repeating, one that he says played a vital role in making up his mind about the venture. I said: "If there is any editor that I consider to be superior to me then it is Mati Bhai." I believed it then, and after ten years of his miraculous and magical performance, my belief stands stronger and deeper. He is by far the best editor of our generation. I wish Mati Bhai, all his staff and everybody connected with this paper a very happy 10th anniversary, and many more anniversaries to come.

The writer is the Publisher of *Prothom Alo*, and the Editor-Publisher of *The Daily Star*.

Are you ready, brother?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

NOW that the Election Commission (EC) has announced the detailed schedule for the 9th parliamentary election, which is to be held on December 18, and that the High Court has also rejected three separate writ petitions challenging the Commission's gazette notification on the recent re-demarcation of parliamentary constituencies, all the equations for some of our politicians must have gone topsy-turvy overnight. The sound of their shattered dreams still reverberates through the length and breadth of the country.

Why so? What has gone wrong with the announcement of the date of the national election? Isn't this what they have been asking for since the takeover of the caretaker government? Actually the reason is, it has taken many of them off guard. They are not ready yet to go to the

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Dear readers, do you remember that recently some political leaders had asked the CEC and his men to get lost. They were very angry with him for having said that he wanted the upcoming election to be as good as the one held in 1970. Well, it was like throwing a stone at a beehive. All the bees came out and began to chase him down the Rokeya Sharani. Some of them even informed the nation for the first time that the 1970 election was a rigged one!! Well, we do not want to go into a debate on such juvenile uttering.

people for seeking votes. They have no agenda, no plan, no vision, no acceptability among the people because of their past records of corruption. They are looking for ways to come to power through the alleyways, not daring to get exposed on the highways.

This lot of politicians had great hopes that the EC would not be able to announce the schedule and that the High Court would accept the writ petition on the demarcation controversy. Some foxy little leaders even held public meetings defying the emergency to show their clout. But everything came to an end last Sunday. Now, the ball has been pushed to the court of the politicians.

Hence, we wonder what is left for our squabbling politician brothers to squabble about any

more. Yes, our brothers will now miss the "fun" of doing politics -- which is, talking tough about the caretaker government, talking tough about the EC, placing demands one after another, running from one flat to another, doing fish-fish in each others' ears, and then appearing before the TV cameras to talk junk. It's all over now.

Our self-declared tratas (saviours) are not happy because the CEC has assured the people of a free, fair and neutral election and said this in his speech:

"I want to assure the voters that we will do everything possible so they can go to the polling centres without having any fear, and also can return home safely after casting their votes. We will not let the voters be hostage to terror, hooliganism, and muscle, and will

arrange to hold the elections peacefully at any cost." He further stated that for holding the elections peacefully, members of the armed forces would be deployed along with the police, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Bangladesh Ansar, and the Village Defence Police (VDP).

Our brothers are not happy because the CEC has warned of tough actions against candidates and election officials for violating electoral rules. He gave the call for all election officials to carry out their responsibilities with neutrality and efficiency. There are more reasons for our politician brothers to be unhappy. The CEC has requested candidates to abide by the new electoral code of conduct, which bans using colour posters and writing graffiti on walls, erection of gates, etc. He

has also warned candidates against undue entertaining of voters and buying of votes.

Oh come on Mr. CEC ... that takes the fun out of elections, doesn't it. Look at them! Have some pity, sir! They have been playing this election game for decades and they know how the game is to be played. They know how to woo (read threaten) voters to the voting booths and get the ballot papers dropped in their boxes. You have no idea of the racket, sir, so please don't come in the way of materialisation of their dreams. This is a seasonal business, have some sympathy for them.

Dear readers, do you remember that recently some political leaders had asked the CEC and his men to get lost. They were very angry with him for having said that he wanted the upcoming election to be as good as the one held in 1970. Well, it was like throwing a stone at a beehive. All the bees came out and began to chase him down the Rokeya Sharani. Some of them even informed the nation for the first time that the 1970 election was a rigged one!! Well, we do not want to go into a debate on such juvenile uttering.

But what has to be noted here is that none of these "great politicians" has ever talked about the ridiculous role played by the jokers in the EC under the leader-

ship of the former CEC. Must we forget what the EC had done to rob the nation of its mental peace? Must we forget how a state institution danced like a puppet in the hands of some corrupt politicians and plotted to organise a flawed election? Must we forget how the EC had "prepared" a flawed voter list that was all set to bring the ruling parties to power once again?

So, brother politicians, take stock of your own weaknesses and strengths, and find out where you stand as far as your commitment is concerned. Look at your own faces in the mirror and see if you can say with great conviction that you are ready to serve the people and not deceive them. Please, for God's sake, be honest and try to do something for those hapless millions who spend cold nights under the open sky. Try to arrange food for the millions of hungry souls who walk miles to cast their votes in your favour.

Brother politicians, have a heart, please. Shun your putrid, decaying politics once and for all. The 21st century demands a different kind of politics -- one that will harness scientific knowledge and apply technologies for overall growth. So prepare yourself. The days of bluffing the people are over.

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Wake-up call for India



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

This marks a turning point. It shows that the sangh parivar will stoop to the basest criminality. It disproves the assumption that terrorism in India is solely the work of jihadi-extremist Muslims. Fanatical Hindus, driven by intensely anti-secular ethno-nationalist politics, are equally capable of terrorism.

THE Maharashtra police have unearthed something with all the makings of an organised, well-ramified Hindutva terrorist network. They've arrested key individuals -- "Sadhvi" Pragna Thakur, Sameer Kulkarni and former major Ramesh Upadhye -- for blasts outside a mosque in Malegaon this past September. They may have been involved in other bombings outside mosques too. The police are questioning a serving army officer for his links with the network -- the first such instance ever.

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assumption that terrorism in India is solely the work of jihadi-extremist Muslims. Fanatical Hindus, driven by intensely anti-secular ethno-nationalist politics, are equally capable of terrorism.

The sangh parivar, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party, has much to answer for. Its advocacy of intolerance, hatred and Islamophobia for over 20 years has brought India to the present pass. The Indian state, too, must radically revise its understanding of terrorism in the light of this.

Police from three states are investigating the suspects. Apparently, they have weighty evidence of their role in bombings not just in Malegaon, this year and in 2006, but also elsewhere, in

particular in Maharashtra's Marathwada region. All the targets were mosques.

Given the suspects' connections with sangh parivar organisations, it's extremely improbable that the police would have acted without hard, unimpeachable evidence.

According to sources, the police are also looking into the network's role in other attacks, like the May 2007 Hyderabad Mecca masjid bombings, the October 2007 Ajmer blasts, and the February 2007 Samjhauta Express bombings.

The network's members are inspired by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideology. They have all been members of the BJP or of

well-known parivar organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Even more interesting is the role of less-known groups like Thakur's Rashtriya Jagaran Manch, Kulkarni's Abhinav Bharat, and Bhonsala Military School at Nashik, where Upadhye taught.

These groups' genealogy is instructive. Abhinav Bharat was created by RSS hardliners wanting "real" anti-Muslim action. Its original avatar was established in 1904 by VD. Savarkar, the first ideologue of Hindutva. Bhonsala Military School was started in 1937 by one-time Hindu Mahasabha president BS Moonje. Moonje was a major extreme-right

influence on RSS founder KB Hedgewar.

Moonje was a firm admirer of European fascism. He met Mussolini in 1931. The school's stated aim is "to inculcate military virtues" in the pupils. Clearly, there's only a thin line between "military virtue" and militant Hindutva.

These organisations' involvement in terrorism was first discovered in 2006, when Maharashtra's Anti-Terrorism Squad investigated a bomb explosion in the home of an RSS member in Nanded, in Marathwada. Two Bajrang Dal activists were killed while fabricating a bomb to be used at an Aurangabad mosque.

The ATS charge-sheet filed in 2006 established the existence of a Bajrang Dal-centred network responsible for serial bombings -- November 2003 in Parbhani, and August 2004 in Jalna and Purna. The bombers underwent training at Bhonsala Military School.

According to the ATS, the bomb-making operation was part of a large-scale devilishly devious conspiracy to allege that Muslim extremists would not hesitate to kill other Muslims. This would widen the communal divide and help Hindutva forces to blame

Muslims for all acts of terrorism, including diabolical attacks directed at Muslims.

Other parivar activists' involvement in bomb-making, revealed through recent accidental explosions in Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu, Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh and again in Nanded, reinforces this conclusion.

As this column noted, the September 2006 Malegaon bombings were part of this pattern. Ironically, the police arrested only Muslims for them -- although the victims were all Muslims observing *Shab-e-Barat*, or remembrance of the dead. The bomb-carrying bicycles bore Hindunames.

The police ignored vital clues in Malegaon. Worse, they tried to cover up Bajrang Dal-VHP involvement in the Nanded operation by planting firecrackers in the house -- to suggest the explosion wasn't caused by bombs. They also ignored the planting of false beads to suggest that the bomb-makers were Muslims.

After the Nanded April 2006 explosion, civil society groups -- including People's Union of Civil Liberties -- produced a scathing critique of the police version with photographic evidence exposing the Bajrang Dal's bomb-

fabrication operation. They warned of an imminent attack by Hindutva militants, but were ignored.

The Nanded case was soon transferred from the ATS to the Central Bureau of Investigation, which indulged in some sordid manipulation.

The CBI's new charge sheet, procured through a Right-to-Information-Act application, shows that it greatly diluted terrorism-related charges and presented the Nanded explosion as an isolated incident unconnected with the parivar or a larger conspiracy. It soon dropped the investigation altogether.

It is imperative that the police get to the bottom of the saffron terror operation and investigate it impartially and thoroughly. The time has come to name names and punish the guilty.

The BJP either brazenly denies that the Malegaon suspects are linked to the sangh parivar, or says they're innocent. This won't wash. The artificial firewalls the BJP always creates between itself and its more extremist parivar organisations have collapsed in the present case.

There are just too many connec-

tions between the BJP, Bajrang Dal, VHP and other parivar outfits in the conspiracy for the denial to stand. These include photographs showing a cosy relationship between BJP President Rajnath Singh, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan, and "Sadhvi" Thakur. A former ABVP-Durga Vahini office-bearer, Thakur campaigned for the BJP in the Gujarat elections.

Even more contemptible is the argument that "Hindutva terrorism" is a contradiction in terms because Hindutva is tolerant. It is indeed tolerant, but Hindutva is the opposite -- a divisive ideology of extreme intolerance of diversity, pluralism and secularism.

The Centre must pursue the Malegaon case seriously. It must ban the Bajrang Dal and the RSS and prosecute BJP members connected with these organisations. Nothing less can reaffirm the secular spirit of Indian society and the Constitution at a point when the minorities' alienation has peaked.

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