

Relaxation of emergency It squares up with the demand of the situation

THE decision by the government, hot on the heels of the announcement of the election schedule, to go for a relaxation of the state of emergency is welcome. There can be no denying that the move eases further the situation vis-à-vis the holding of the general elections next month. The fetters that have been there since January last year now have been removed in order for politics to get back to normal. At the same time, by revoking certain clauses of the Emergency Powers Rules, the government has removed the hindrances that have so far stood in the way of the working of the media. There have already been notable developments among the political circles, with parties like the Awami League taking preparations for participation in the polls. It is expected that other parties will take the cue and go fully into election mode in the next few days.

There can be little question of the significance involved in the withdrawal of the soldiers from the scene. The army, we will remember, was brought in to aid the civil authority in carrying out the responsibilities of the state. Now that the soldiers have been withdrawn to the barracks, normalcy has been signalled and we are firmly on course towards a smooth, quick return to democratic government. At this newspaper, we have always kept the hope for democracy alight. We have, therefore, reason to think that the new initiative of the government is a vindication of our optimism. It squares up with the demand of the times and allows the nation as a whole to go wholeheartedly into the business of electioneering.

We expect that all remaining fetters to electoral activities will be removed in good time in accordance with the road map outlined by the caretaker government. It now remains for the political parties to reassure the nation about the transformation that they intend to bring about in national politics through the elections. We have earlier expressed the hope that they will discard the negative politics of the past and instead take the country into the future through reinventing politics in accordance with the demand of the times. A fundamental necessity is for the parties to nominate honest, dedicated candidates for the Jatiyo Sangsad and thereby convince the nation that they have learnt some very obvious lessons in the last two years or so.

In the last many months, hope was kindled in the hearts of the millions of people of Bangladesh about an enlightened future for themselves. The relaxation of the emergency gives new substance to that hope.

Graft in land offices

Antidote lies in computerising land records

WE are seldom surprised by reports of bribe taking in public establishments. Nevertheless, as reported in this newspaper yesterday, the method employed by a land office in Chittagong, the wanton manner in which the staff had gone about taking bribe from the public who were seeking their service, has startled us.

The entire complement of staff of Chikandondi land office of Hathazari Upazilla was caught red-handed by officials of the anticorruption commission, who happened to be there in connection with a complaint against one of the officials of the said land office, either taking bribe or having graft money on their person. It was a case of netting not one or two, but five birds in one drive, since all of them were found with cash that they could not account for. And that too these people had not received their salary for the month. More than a hundred thousand taka was found scattered all over the place, apparently collected from those that had gone in connection with sale, purchase or transfer and mutation of their landed property.

Just imagine if such a large amount of money passes under the table in one day in one small land office in the country what is the volume of graft that is transacted in all the land offices in the country. The irony is that palms have to be greased for legitimate services that are supposed to be provided to the public in exchange for laid down fees.

This is but, unfortunately, an abhorrent manifestation of the vice that is prevalent in most public offices. Land record offices are perhaps one of the service providers that earn substantial revenue for the government, and dishonest officials do not only deprive the government exchequer of large sums in revenue, their interpolation of, and tampering with land records, distort records related to holding and land ownership.

While corruption will take time to be purged from society, as for now, the government as a matter of urgency should go for computerisation of documentation of all records related to land transaction. This could help reduce incidence of graft and bribery in a very large public service organisation.

The 1970 elections, glass houses and stones

GROUND REALITIES

It is not fair to question men and women of integrity. A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his colleagues have stumbled at times, but they have done a good job so far. And it is morally wrong to think that because you sense the winds and the gods might not be kindly disposed to your brand of politics, you can drag an entire country into the mud, take it down the precipice, as it were, with you. That is not politics.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE knives are out again, in all their sinister gleam, to stab us in the back once more. This time it is the very ethos of the People's Republic of Bangladesh that has come under assault. Hannan Shah of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Ali Ahsan Mujahid of the Jamaat-e-Islami have given us to understand that the general elections of 1970 were organised by the regime of General Yahya Khan to favour a particular political party. And, of course, that party was the Awami League, though they shy away from saying it.

In the event, Yahya Khan and his Election Commission manipulated the results and produced a winner. The winner was certainly the Awami League. See the ingenuity in the argument here? United Pakistan's last government presided over an electoral process that was aimed patently at ensuring the rise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to the palpable discomfiture of all other politicians in Pakistan. How insane can one get to be? And how insane can politics get to be?

And why should Hannan Shah and Mujahid be so upset? Ah, the

tragedy of our times is that every time someone talks about values, there is a horde of people ready to run him out of town. It is just that Chief Election Commissioner A.T.M. Shamsul Huda told the country a few days ago that the Election Commission wished to ensure as credible a general election as that of 1970.

Those of you who understand history and have been part of it will recall that the 1970 elections were the fairest, the most transparent and, therefore, the most acceptable in the history of either Pakistan or Bangladesh.

Despite all the bad moves made by military intelligence to produce a victory for the rightwing elements, despite every effort to deny progressive forces their natural triumph at the voting, the people of both East and West Pakistan knew what they needed to do.

They ended up voting the Awami League in as the majority in the new national assembly, with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party coming to occupy second place. It is, of course, an entirely different matter as to what happened in the

subsequent three months.

But the fact is that at the 1970 elections, the Jamaat-e-Islami was given a licking, in both the wings of Pakistan, a truth that the party has never forgotten. And so when Mujahid questions the results of those polls, he knows he is distorting the truth. You can ignore Mujahid, for you remain aware of all the sordid things he and his friends in the Jamaat did in 1971 as a way of demonstrating their love for the killers masquerading as the Pakistan army. But Hannan Shah? Are you not a trifle amazed that his voice now resonates with that of the old Pakistani collaborators, that he thinks there was something terribly wrong with the elections of 1970?

He feels, like Mujahid and everyone unhappy with the story of 1970, that those elections were geared to helping a particular party. And he does not stop there. He goes on to accuse the present CEC of having engineered the victory of the Awami League in his capacity as a sub-divisional officer somewhere in East Pakistan.

That, says A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, is not true because he was at the

time posted in the Punjab. But, of course, Hannan Shah has not apologised for his error and, given the tradition in this country, never will.

The bigger truth is that Shah has not seen the danger in his remarks on the 1970 electoral exercise. That was a referendum on the Six Points, as Bangabandhu kept reminding us (and we agreed with him). Is Shah, having been an army officer in the Pakistan era and having observed the circumstances that led to the liberation of Bangladesh, now suggesting that Bangabandhu and the Awami League ought to have lost the elections, that East Pakistan should yet have been part of our collective life, that Pakistani communalism should not have been replaced by Bengali secularism?

The Lord only knows what politicians without idealism will do in a furtherance of their parochial interest. Watch Khaleda Zia. She has persuaded herself into believing that no fair elections are possible under the Election Commission as it is constituted at present.

A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and the two election commissioners, she

says loudly, should resign because they have, in her unexplained opinion, been doing everything to ensure the electoral triumph of a particular party. She means the Awami League, though why she does not say so explicitly is rather inexplicable.

But that is not the point. Then what is? It is that Begum Zia and Hannan Shah have somehow not remembered that we remember what the M.A. Aziz experience at the Election Commission was all about. Ten million non-existent individuals made it to the voters' list on Justice Aziz's watch; and no fewer than Tk 600 million were wasted in the effort.

He held two offices consecutively, and he paid little heed to the gathering outrage about his acts across the country. He should have left the office of chief election commissioner on his own. He did not, until the Fakhruddin Ahmed caretaker government arm-twisted him into making for the exit. And should he not have been prosecuted for misusing taxpayers' money, for making a mockery of the Election Commission?

The BNP chairperson has said not a word about Shamsul Huda's predecessor. That is a pity. There are glass houses and there are stones. Why is it that some people keep gathering the stones and really begin to believe that their glass houses are the Great Wall of China? Ah, but that is again human nature. You cannot do anything about it. You do not see the dust and dirt in your courtyard. That does not stop you, though, from imagining the worst about your neighbour.

But away with all that! Focus, once more, on the 1970 elections. Hannan Shah thinks those elections were flawed because they favoured the Awami League.

That is an insinuation directed at the late lamented Justice Abdus Sattar, for he was Pakistan's chief election commissioner at the time. In all these years since the polls, no one has ever suggested that Sattar had ensured a triumph for the Awami League. Besides, Hannan Shah and his friends appear to have thrown to the winds the truth that Sattar eventually linked up with their own leader Ziaur Rahman in the BNP, was appointed vice president of Bangladesh and subsequently, in the post-Zia period, ascended to the presidency of the country in his own right. And there you have irony at work. There are men willing and naive enough to throw innuendoes at you, without remembering the skeletons they have in their own cupboards.

It is not fair to question men and women of integrity. A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his colleagues have stumbled at times, but they have done a good job so far. And it is morally wrong to think that because you sense the winds and the gods might not be kindly disposed to your brand of politics, you can drag an entire country into the mud, take it down the precipice, as it were, with you. That is not politics. It is premonition of a new nightmare: of the kind we painfully wriggled through - for the five years until October 2006.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Gayoom goes gracefully



HARUN UR RASHID

FORMER political prisoner Mohamed "Anni" Nasheed (41) routed Asia's longest serving leader, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (71), in the Maldives' first democratic presidential election. Gayoom has been defeated by a human rights campaigner who was thrown in jail by him. Nasheed was a former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience.

Nasheed received about 54.21 per cent of the votes compared to 45.79 per cent for Gayoom, the election commission declared after the final tally of Monday's run-off following the October 8 first round. He had a huge 15,000-vote lead and voter turnout was 85 per cent of the 209,000 electorate, the same as the first round.

Nasheed picked up 97,222 votes while Gayoom managed 82,121. The elections were the climax of an effort to bring political freedom to the Indian Ocean archipelago in the wake of pro-democracy movements and international pressure.

European Union observers and several local and international organisations monitored the voting. They noted that the first and second rounds went off reasonably well.

The result showed that the opposition had united to oust Gayoom with most younger voters demanding a change.

A formal announcement of the winner could take days, an official said, adding that the new president must be inaugurated by November 11.

President Gayoom ruled the country from 1978, bringing prosperity to the islanders. It is interesting that Nasheed was only 11 years old when the president assumed his power in 1978.

The per capita income of the Maldives people is around \$5,000, the highest in South Asia. But opposition parties say prosperity came to the islanders at the expense of democracy. For the president, it must have been a shock as he garnered 41 per cent of the votes in the first round as against 25 per cent by Nasheed.

However, President Gayoom was gracious enough to accept the defeat and assured Nasheed of a smooth transition. This gesture from the president demonstrated his democratic spirit, rarely found in defeated candidates among developing countries.

Nasheed also assured Gayoom that he would be provided all facilities to live peacefully in the country.

BOTTOM LINE

It has been amazing to see a president who imprisoned his democratic opponent actually being defeated by that former prisoner, and accepting the defeat calmly and with dignity. Analysts say that it does not get much better in politics.

Why did the president lose the election?

There are many reasons for the president's defeat, some of which are given below:

- The president ruled for 30 years, winning six straight elections in which he was the only candidate, but was removed the first time Maldivians were allowed to vote for somebody else. The people wanted a change.
- Although he was responsible for turning an impoverished fishing nation into an upmarket tourist destination, he ruled the country with an iron hand without tolerating opposition to his rule. As the saying goes "Man does not live for bread alone," which means that prosperity without freedom does not satisfy human beings, who are social animals. They have a yearning for freedom and choices.
- During the second round, supporters of other opposition candidates rallied around Nasheed.
- The prosperity that came to the Maldives was concentrated in only 40 per cent of the population, while 60 per cent remained poor. Nasheed promised to lift the standard of

living of the poorest citizens, and one of his vows was to turn the presidential palace into the country's first university.

Nasheed's election campaign was smart and well-organised, and kept harping on a change of leaders to suit the needs of the 21st century. This slogan of "change" resonated well with the voters.

Observers believe that an Australian campaign strategist, James McGrath (34), who worked for the British Conservative Party had run the campaign strategy for Nasheed as a volunteer since August. As Nasheed's campaign gained momentum the government attacked McGrath, portraying him as an outsider who was trying to introduce Christianity in the Maldives. The attack was counter-productive.

Brief profile of the country

The Maldives, officially the Republic of Maldives, is an island nation consisting of a group of atolls stretching south of India's Lakshadweep islands between the Minicoy and the Chagos archipelagos, and south-west of Sri Lanka in the Laccadive Sea of Indian Ocean. It is a nation of about 400,000 people, most of whom are Muslims.

The Maldives was a British protectorate under a Sultan. After independence, in 1965, the sultanate continued for another three years under King Muhammad Fareed.

In 1968, the monarchy was abolished and replaced by a republic. Gayoom became the president in 1978.

In November 1988, a group of Maldivians headed by Lutfee, a small-time businessman, used Tamil mercenaries from Sri Lanka to stage a coup against President Gayoom.

After an appeal by the Maldivian government for help, the Indian military intervened in order to reinstate Gayoom to power. In 1988, the Indian Air Force airlifted a parachute battalion group and flew them to the Maldives.

They helped to restore the Gayoom government at Malé within hours.

In 2004, the Maldives was devastated by a tsunami following an earthquake in the Indian Ocean. The total damage was estimated at over \$400 million, or some 62 per cent of the GDP. 108 people, including six foreigners, reportedly died in the tsunami.

The existence of the Maldives is threatened by sea water rise due to global warming. The president-elect, Nasheed, promised during the election campaign that his government would buy land in Sri Lanka and India to resettle the population if the inhabited islands of the country were submerged.

Today, the Maldives' largest industry is tourism, which accounts for 28 per cent of GDP and more than 60 per

cent of the Maldives' foreign exchange receipts. Over 90 per cent of government tax revenue comes from import duties and tourism-related taxes.

Fishing is the second largest sector. Agriculture and manufacturing play a lesser role in the economy, constrained by the limited availability of cultivable land and the shortage of domestic labour.

Most staple foods have to be imported. Industry, which consists mainly of garment production, boat building, and handicrafts, accounts for about 7 per cent of GDP.

Bangladesh and the Maldives have excellent diplomatic relations. Both countries have resident high commissioners (ambassadors) in each country. About 70,000 Bangladeshi nationals, mostly unskilled, have been working in different sectors in the country. The number may increase in the years to come. There is a direct flight from Dhaka to Malé.

It has been amazing to see a president who imprisoned his democratic opponent actually being defeated by that former prisoner, and accepting the defeat calmly and with dignity. Analysts say that it does not get much better in politics.

The people of the Maldives and political leaders have shown their spirit of tolerance and accommodation in the process and outcome of the presidential election, and they deserve congratulations and admiration.

Barister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

On the brink of bankruptcy



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistan has never practiced what its founding fathers preached: live an austere life individually and collectively. They wanted more taxes to be collected and government to spend only what it had. Trouble is that it continues to consume foreign goods that it cannot pay for with much fewer exports because it has enthusiastically implemented the deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation program too soon and too rapidly.

ment to spend only what it had. Trouble is that it continues to consume foreign goods that it cannot pay for with much fewer exports because it has enthusiastically implemented the deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation program too soon and too rapidly. Thus, imports today are more than twice the exports.

Pakistan governments have committed all the grave mistakes in the book: They have been spending more than their revenues, relying on borrowings to finance the gap. Secondly, their priorities have proved wrong because of food-grain shortages, and other agricultural produce are also selling at inflated

prices because of the private sector's talent for hoarding and profiteering. Even sugar, supposedly plentiful, continues to see local shortages and price rises.

The gravest shortage is electricity shortage. It appears that during Musharraf's rule, while consumer financing was encouraged, no thought was given to producing more electricity; not one extra megawatt of power was installed. The same happened in the case of automobiles. All streets are chockful of private cars, raising the oil import bill.

Such economic management deserves a prize for economic stupidity. Even though the present

government has been in existence for seven months, it has taken no measures to relieve the situation. It can hire or buy small mobile generating sets that are being used in Middle East construction sites, thus public distress and a big constraint on industrial production could be removed.

The hallmark of governments in Pakistan during the last five decades has been to encourage the elites -- the political class, feudals, successful industrialists, financiers and professionals have been allowed to consume more without paying more taxes. Pakistan can raise three to four times more revenue if only the black market can be curbed. But

this has never been done, which is what distorts priorities.

The culprit is politically motivated action, which needs to be somehow reversed. There is the arms races in all relevant fields: conventional armaments, nuclear weapons and missiles. These things cost money, and the Pakistan army is now the sixth largest in the world. Pakistan economy does not provide enough revenues to finance its open and implied requirements.

The political class has carried on by virtually renting out this army to the US, that has, more or less, paid for its fore needs. The west has helped in achievement of some economic development with its aid. But that has increased Pakistan's liabilities beyond its ability to repay debts.

This year again, Pakistan is expected to default on its liabilities. For managing the economic and financial policies, President Asif Ali Zardari has appointed Shaukat Tareen, another of CitiBank's gifts to this country. Tareen began by saying there was no option to borrowing. But the difficulty was that no one came forward to give a loan. Even Saudi Arabia, the supposed benefactor of Muslim countries, has

refused to negotiate the renewal of its oil facility of deferred payment to Pakistan in Riyadh; it wants it to be negotiated in Washington, obviously in consultation with the Americans.

The US is tightening the screws on Pakistan following recent developments in Afghanistan, especially after the Indo-American nuclear deal and the growth of an Indo-American strategic partnership. Pakistan is being forced to do without easy loans for not doing exactly as the Americans want it to do; it's a punishment for its wayward tendencies in the Terror War. American agenda for this country is extensive: it wants it to make up with India -- no doubt in the holy cause of serving the US. Pakistan wishes to remain in the western sphere anyhow. It has to fight Islamic terror the way the Americans demand, and not the way the parliament wants.

In all this, no one talking of what Pakistan can do for its own economy. This government has taken only two significant steps: one was at the budget making when Prime Minister Gilani ordered that there would be no change of paradigm. In the war, Islamabad is doing exactly

what the Americans want it to do, except that the Pakistan army chief made political waves by insisting on shooting at intruding American soldiers if they set foot on Pakistan territory. His men did shoot on American helicopter-borne soldiers. After that, Americans have made no ground forays.

They continue to bomb the tribal areas and their reconnaissance planes are flying all over the place all the time. It is possible that the army chief's statement was meant to embarrass the government by undercutting it politically, showing that the army was more patriotic and braver than the politicians.

If so, the strategy continues. He goes on saying he is subordinate to the government; the army only carries out the government's orders. By this mantra he is recovering the political position of the army in Pushtoon areas in contradistinction to the civilian government's propensity for obeying the Americans. He is shifting the political blame in Pushtoon eyes from the Pakistan army to the government.

Whatever the truth, Pakistan has to find a resolution of its economic crisis largely by its own efforts.

Acting under specific guidance of IMF cannot be the ideal way. For seven long months, this government has not evolved any economic program of its own. Its only reliance is on the same old option of borrowing, no matter from where. This time, even China has refused to annoy the Americans.

The solution to Pakistan's economic crisis, in theory, is simple and certain. The government has to cut its coat according to available cloth and not borrow heavily from the central bank, which will be forced to print more money. It has also to cut the imports ruthlessly and import only what is vitally needed: food, or machinery for economic progress. It also has to cut the military's expenditures because there is no likelihood or need for any war with India. Therefore, the main mission of the army having been reduced, its size should also be reduced.

The world does not owe Pakistan either a nuclear program or a large army, or high consumption by its political class, which cannot be paid for by exports. Finally, the common man, the Aam Aadmi, has to be given something.

M.B. Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.