

Political party manifestos

Time for them to be meaningful documents

THE major political parties are in the process once again of preparing their manifestos in advance of the coming elections. We hope that this time around that the procedure is a meaningful one and that the manifestos truly serve as roadmaps for how each party will comport itself over the next five years, and that the parties will hold themselves accountable for their promises.

First and foremost, we would like to endorse the suggestion put forth at a recent seminar that the manifestos should encompass not only what policies the party will follow if it wins the election, but also set out its own plan for how it will conduct itself if it loses.

Most importantly, we would like to see the manifestos affirm that the parties will gracefully accept the verdict of the polls. Furthermore, we would be gratified if each manifesto were to pledge that the party, if it loses, will not boycott parliament and will strive to play a productive role in parliamentary politics.

A strong, loyal and conscientious opposition, and one that is an integral part of the democratic process and not trying to bring the process down, is as crucial to a successful democracy as the government. To this end, we would also like to see a pledge from the parties that they will eschew hartals and any other kind of coercive, violent, and disruptionist measure when in opposition.

Furthermore, we would like the parties to take their manifestos seriously, something they have never done in the past. It would be heartening to see the manifestos be considered as solemn promises to the public that the parties pledge to uphold.

If a party, either in government or in opposition, veers away from its promises in the manifesto then we would expect that it would admit its failure. In fact, the party should have an internal mechanism to periodically review the progress of implementation and take corrective measures wherever necessary in order to avert loss of public face. Here the media must also play a role to objectively monitor the performance of the parties in light of their manifestos and give them reminders to keep to their commitments.

If the parties take this stance, then their manifestos will at long last be meaningful documents, and the public can make an informed choice based on what it sees therein. We sincerely hope that the parties take this notion to heart and we especially second the proposal that manifestos should encompass a code of conduct for parties if they lose in the upcoming election, as well as if they win.

Food safety concern

Organising an effective response mechanism

THE commerce adviser has aptly suggested that our import policies be reviewed to incorporate health and hygiene issues. The point is highly relevant as consumers are still in confusion about the melamine-tainted milk powder which has cast a shadow of doubt on the whole array of dairy products. Confusion persists.

Making import policies in light of our health and hygiene needs is no doubt an objective that should have been attained long ago. We can feel it the hard way when our own exported food items have to undergo a wide range of tests and rigorous scrutiny abroad. So, it is only logical that the government and other agencies would demonstrate the same kind of concern and alertness while clearing imported foods for public consumption.

The crisis that the melamine-tainted imported powdered milk triggered made it amply clear that the facilities available locally for testing the quality and reliability of imported foodstuff are far from satisfactory.

So, installation of modern testing facilities is long overdue. Similarly, it is not enough to be on guard against the imported spurious or substandard commodities only; it is equally important to keep a watchful eye on the local producers, at least a section of them, not known for the highest standards of business ethics and honesty.

The area where vast improvement is required is coordination among the agencies overseeing food safety. BSTI, the government agency in charge of ensuring quality, is under the commerce ministry, while the Public Health Institute is placed under the health ministry. These organisations never achieved the desired level of coordination and their overall performance suffered. The discovery of melamine in milk, which many believe to be a belated one, is a case in point. Obviously, the involvement of the health ministry with such public health concerns should be much greater and effective. Without question, issuing statements after the damage is done is not enough to protect people from the racket of dishonest producers and sellers of adulterated or substandard commodities.

The melamine scandal has shown that no particular organisation shoulders the responsibility of handling such matters and keeping the consumers informed. Too many cacophonous voices were heard, and it was not easy for the consumers to draw any conclusion. Therefore, a single agency with clearly defined responsibility and authority should be designated to deal with such issues impacting public health.

The price of political indifference

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
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This, if I may make so bold as to assert, is the result of sloth and extremely lackadaisical attitude of, on the one hand, the successive governments over the years since the adoption and coming into force of UNCLOS III in 1994, and on the other, the inability of our foreign ministry to convince the political leadership of the significance of the issue, one that was of a paramount national interest, and the need to address it on an urgent basis.

THANKFULLY, a conflict situation with Myanmar has been avoided, for the time being at least. The incident had the making of a protracted naval deployment with the potential of a conflict. The maritime issue has unfortunately spilled over onto the land, with the BDR being now confronted by a heavily reinforced border security force of Myanmar along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

The Korean exploration rig, that encroached into our territorial waters in the area of block-13 backed up by two Myanmar man-of-war, has been withdrawn inside Myanmar waters, and whatever reason they would like to cite for doing so, undoubtedly the major motivation was the physical demonstration by the Bangladesh Navy of our resolve to protect our national interest and our territory at all cost.

But one would like to ask whether the situation should have come to such a pass at all. This, if I may make so bold as to assert, is the result of sloth and extremely lackadaisical attitude of, on the one hand, the successive governments over the years since the

adoption and coming into force of UNCLOS III in 1994, and on the other, the inability of our foreign ministry to convince the political leadership of the significance of the issue, one that was of a paramount national interest, and the need to address it on an urgent basis.

That we need leaders capable of comprehending issues of long-term strategic significance is borne out by the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zone Act 1974, a very timely and appropriate move on the part of the leaders of the time, and in contrast, by the indifference with which the issue of delimitation, particularly after we had ratified UNCLOS-III in July 2001, was handled at the political level. Needless to say, in the dynamics of our bilateral relations with Myanmar the nub of the matter is the UNCLOS-III and maritime boundary delimitation.

There was very little, if any, political guidance as to how to go about handling the matter of encroachment of our territorial waters and at the same time get our two neighbours to agree on an

equitable resolution of the delimitation issue before the cutoff date for Bangladesh, i.e. July 2011. It may be mentioned that the lines, that India and Myanmar are using to define their territorial waters, if accepted, would completely block Bangladesh's access to the extended continental shelf.

Bangladesh needs to lodge claims over its maritime boundary to the International Seabed Authority as per UNCLOS-III by 2011. As per the convention, Bangladesh will be required to submit necessary documents to the UN to validate its claim of territorial water, EEZ up to 200 nautical miles and continental shelf up to 350 nm from the baseline, which we had declared through the said act of 1974, or else lose the right over an area, as large if not larger, than mainland Bangladesh.

To whose failure should one ascribe the fact that since the last more than 20 years Bangladesh could not sit with either of our two neighbours for even once? May one ask the status of the expert committee and what have its

inputs been since it was formulated in 2004? And can we be fully assured by the statement of the foreign ministry, given on the eve of General Mung Mung's visit to Dhaka in September of this year as leader of the Myanmar delegation, that Bangladesh was in the final stage of preparation to put forward its claim to the United Nations?

About the recent development, it can be said with some certainty that the matter did not brew up in a day or a week. Firstly, when we delimited the gas blocks in our EEZ, both Myanmar and India protested, claiming that Bangladesh had encroached into their territory. On the contrary, one is not aware of any official protest lodged from our side when Myanmar went for production sharing contract of gas blocks, some of which were in Bangladesh claimed EEZ.

Between 2005 and now the Korean company had been conducting survey of the area, and yet there was no protest from our side. It appears as if the foreign ministry had switched off completely

insofar as this issue is concerned, till November 1 happened, or that Myanmar paid little heed to our diplomatic moves thinking that we would not go so far as to precipitate a situation where, given the severe imbalance in naval strength weighted in favour of Myanmar, we would be prepared to employ force to uphold our territorial integrity, more so at a time when we are going through a political flux. The fact is, we had failed to initially deter an aggressive posture of our neighbour.

One needs to go into the reasons why Myanmar chose this moment to conduct oil and gas exploration inside our territory when only in the month of September a high level delegation from that country had been in Dhaka to discuss delimitation issues, and also appreciate the strategic and political implications of the act.

It is well to remember that 2009 is the cut off year by when Myanmar has to submit its claims to the UN under the provisions of UNCLOS-III. Apart from establishing its right by possession, planting a rig in areas claimed by Bangladesh would provide them a strong basis to register their claim on the extended continental shelf. This was perhaps also to test Bangladesh militarily in view of our less than firm diplomatic position vis a vis Myanmar that the past governments had taken. This might well have prompted India, with whom too we have unresolved maritime issues, to resort to a similar venture, taking this as a precedent. The ensuing situation would have impacted

severely on our national interest.

At the end of the day a strong diplomatic posture, backed up by the Bangladesh Navy who gave the message that it meant business, saw the resolution of the issue. But I feel that it is only temporary. How can we be sure that Myanmar will desist from similar ventures in the future? We cannot guess others' intention, but what we can certainly do is to ensure at our end certain objective conditions that would deter others from harming our interest.

Firstly, we must gather all the relevant data and have them verified by international agencies. That will help us establish our right on the maritime areas that we have staked our claim on.

At the same time we must register our objections to claims made by the other co-littoral countries on our EEZ. While we must never abjure the path of friendly and peaceful way of settling differences, the recent incident has reinforced the fact that our forces must not only be strong but their deterrence capability must be credible.

Needless to say, our navy lacks the resources even to maintain vigilance on our claimed EEZ, not to speak of protecting it. Time has come to seriously get down to planning the physical defence of our country. Notwithstanding the budget crunch, our military expenditure can be so rationalised, and acquisition of weapons and equipment prioritised, so as not to unnecessarily burden the soft sectors.

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Burma's military moves to silence all opposition

Nine other leaders of the group, including the top three -- Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Htay Kyaw -- were recently sentenced to six months in prison for contempt of court. They continuously interrupted the court proceedings by shouting down the judge. They refused to accept the court's authority and insisted they would continue to oppose the judicial system using Gandhian tactics of non-violent civil disobedience.

LARRY JAGAN

BURMA'S military rulers have revealed their intentions to eliminate anyone who opposes their authority in the lead-up to the planned elections in two years time. Anyone who poses a challenge to the regime is being targeted in what maybe the biggest crackdown on dissent in Burma since the massive pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988 which brought the country to a standstill for months before the army seized power in a military coup.

The courts in Burma have been very busy in the last few weeks, as hundreds of dissidents have been put away for decades. In the latest case earlier this week, fourteen leading Burmese political activists, including five women, from the 88 Generation Students group were each sentenced to 65-years in jail for their involvement in the monk-led uprising in Burma last year.

These jail terms are only the latest in a series of harsh sentences the Burmese authorities have doled out to many artists, activists, bloggers, journalists and lawyers in the past few weeks.

"The Burmese junta is clearly conducting a major crack-down on all dissent in the country," Zin Linn, a leading Burmese dissident and former political prisoner based in Bangkok told the Daily Star. "They want to silence all opposition before the planned elections in 2010," he said.

A military-controlled court, inside the Insein prison compound, sentenced the fourteen key student leaders to long prison sentences for their support of last year's mass protests, dubbed the Saffron Revolt, against increased fuel prices and rising food costs. Most of them had been detained before the brutal crackdown on the demonstrators in September 2007.

The United Nations says at least 31 people were killed when the former Burma's military rulers sent in troops to end the mass demonstrations led by columns of saffron-clad, shaven-headed Buddhist monks -- the biggest challenge to the military since it seized power twenty years ago.

The fourteen included Ko Jimmy and his wife, Nilar Thein, who had to abandon her four-month-old daughter when she

went into hiding during the September military crackdown on the protesters. Nilar Thein was eventually arrested two months ago after being on the run for more than a year.

The sentences were handed down behind closed doors -- members of their families and the groups' defence lawyers were barred from the court. "Is this [65 years] all you can do?" one of the activist, Min Zeya, reportedly shouted at the judge.

Nine other leaders of the group, including the top three -- Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Htay Kyaw -- were recently sentenced to six months in prison for contempt of court. They continuously interrupted the court proceedings by shouting down the judge. They refused to accept the court's authority and insisted they would continue to oppose the judicial system using Gandhian tactics of non-violent civil disobedience.

Since the contempt of court conviction, the nine have been moved to Maubin prison in the Irrawaddy Delta, west of Rangoon -- an area devastated by the cyclone in May. "We fear they will now face harsh treatment at

the hands of the authorities there, because it is more isolated and family visits much more difficult," a Burmese activist, Khin Omar, based in Chiang Mai told IPS. "The conditions in the prison for political prisoners are getting worse and worse," she warned.

The group faces more charges in the coming days, with a further 20 members likely to be also given heavy sentences for the activities during the protests. "These convictions are only the tip of the iceberg," Benjamin Zawacki, the Burma officer for the UK-based human rights organisation Amnesty International, told the Daily Star. Most of them have been held for more than twelve months without trial -- and in some cases without being charged, he added. "This is probably only the start of a season of trials and convictions," he said.

Many of the group's members were at the forefront of the mass pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988, and were tortured and given lengthy prison terms after the military coup twenty years ago. The activists resumed political activities after they were freed in November 2004, and have spearheaded the protests against the junta -- usually focusing on the country's deteriorating economy.

Many analysts believe that the junta fears the students even more than the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, which convincingly won the 1990 elections but was never allowed to form a civilian government. Aung San Suu Kyi

has spent most of the last twenty years under house arrest in her home in Rangoon.

"They think they can handle the NLD, but they know they cannot control the students," said a western diplomat in Bangkok who deals with Burma. These sentences will leave them in prison well past the election.

Burmese courts have also been handing out harsh sentence to other dissidents this week. The prominent labour rights activist, Su Su Nway, was sentenced to more than 12 years in jail for her political activities. She served nine months in prison more than two years ago for her work to stop forced labour. Ten members of the NLD from Bogalay in the Irrawaddy Delta were also sentenced to between eight to 24 years in prison, according to an NLD spokesman, Nyan Win.

"These sentences are a clear signal to everyone that the regime will not tolerate any opposition in the lead-up to the elections in 2010," said Mr Zawacki.

The sentences for the 88 group came the day after the jailing of Burma's best-known blogger, Nay Phone Latt, for more than twenty years for publishing a cartoon of the country's top military leader, General Than Shwe on his website. His trial was also held behind closed doors in Insein prison special court, a well-known poet, Saw Wai, was jailed for two years after he published a poem mocking Than Shwe. Titled "February 14," it was published in the Ah Chit (Love) Journal. The first words of each

line of the poem spelled out "Power Crazy Senior General Than Shwe."

In recent weeks, there has also been a spate of lawyers being convicted for contempt of court. At least ten lawyers who tried to defend these dissidents have ended up in prison -- either for challenging the court on their clients' behalf or because their clients had dismissed them because they were clearly unable to do their job.

"It's complete intimidation," said Amnesty's Mr Zawacki. "Lawyers are being punished for being the messenger. The lawyers are clearly being warned -- you must play by our rules and not any accepted rules of procedure," he said.

There are more than fifteen journalists -- reporters and photographers -- still in detention awaiting trial, according to the Burma Media Association. Most of them are accused of publishing material on the conditions in the cyclone-devastated area, and pointing out inadequacies of the relief effort. Several other bloggers are also awaiting trial.

"The sentencing of the 88 activists and the further arrests in recent days -- of journalists, bloggers and forced labour complainants -- is further evidence of the extent to which conditions in this country are deteriorating in terms of basic political freedoms," a western diplomat based in Rangoon said on condition of anonymity. "It clearly shows what we can expect in 2010," he said.

Larry Jagan writes from Bangkok.

Obama's third way



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

In the early 1930s, economic and political realities also suggested that the United States was poised for a new era. But such an era happened -- and took the particular shape it did -- only because of the skill and ambition of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. If he truly wants to mold the future, Obama will have to demonstrate similar leadership.

-- was the left's steady progress toward greater comfort with free markets and traditional values, in order to appeal to mainstream voters. The second was the ideological decline of conservatism, a movement now riddled with contradictions and corruption, as personified by George W. Bush's big-government, Wilsonian agenda. These two trends have intersected in 2008.

Of course, more Americans still identify themselves as conservatives than as liberals. There is a

big, red America out there. But that's a reflection of the past three decades of conservative dominance, not a forecast of the future. "Among democratic peoples," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "each generation is a new people."

Conservatives were ascendant in the 1980s and 1990s because they offered powerful prescriptions for the problems of the 1970s -- stagflation and social unrest at home, and Soviet expansionism abroad. Arguing

for less government, traditional values and a tough response to Moscow worked.

Ever since conservatives have trotted out the same answers to every successive crisis. Consider John McCain's response when asked how he would handle the Wall Street meltdown. McCain vowed to end earmark spending, which has absolutely nothing to do with restoring confidence and credit to the markets.

Over the last two decades, the United States has produced an

extraordinary burst of prosperity, some of which has reached a broad cross section of the society.

We have the biggest houses and the flattest TVs in the world. But we have not been able to tackle a series of other, crucially important problems -- affordable health care, good education for the poor and energy efficiency to name three.

In all these areas, the solutions cannot come solely from the private sector. They will have to involve a large measure of government efforts.

As free markets, an open society and a diverse population gained strength, the traditional order that conservatism defended has been overturned in dozens of ways by working women, divorce, immigration, and minorities. People began working, living, marrying, and

making families in varied ways, and the old structures of society seemed old.

Margaret Thatcher's free market reforms slowly upended Britain's settled, class-based society -- upon which the British Tory's political dominance had rested. Something similar is at work as red America's youth slowly but surely turn blue.

And yet, this doesn't reflect a return to old-school liberalism either. The world has moved on from the 1960s. Few believe that the government should own the commanding heights of the economy that central planners should allocate resources and that protectionism will save jobs in the longrun.

Look at the left in power, from Britain to Australia, and you see pro-market, pro-trade policies aimed at promoting growth. The

difference is that they also encourage government efforts in certain areas where the private sector isn't sufficient.

The present crisis presents an opportunity for Obama to recast the traditional divide in American politics. Rather than the usual left-right split over the size and role of government, he has to address himself to the greatest problem most Americans have with Washington: they see their government as predatory and corrupt.

They look at the tax code and worry less that it "spreads the wealth" than that it institutionalizes corruption through loopholes and special deals. True reform will mean attacking predatory policies and corruption, from the left and the right.

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gested that the United States was poised for a new era. But such an era happened -- and took the particular shape it did -- only because of the skill and ambition of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. If he truly wants to mold the future, Obama will have to demonstrate similar leadership.

His favourite thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in 1841 that "the party of Conservatism and that of Innovation... have disputed the possession of the world ever since it was made... Innovation is the salient energy, Conservatism the pause on the last moment." To create a new governing majority, Obama must now embody the idea of innovation.

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