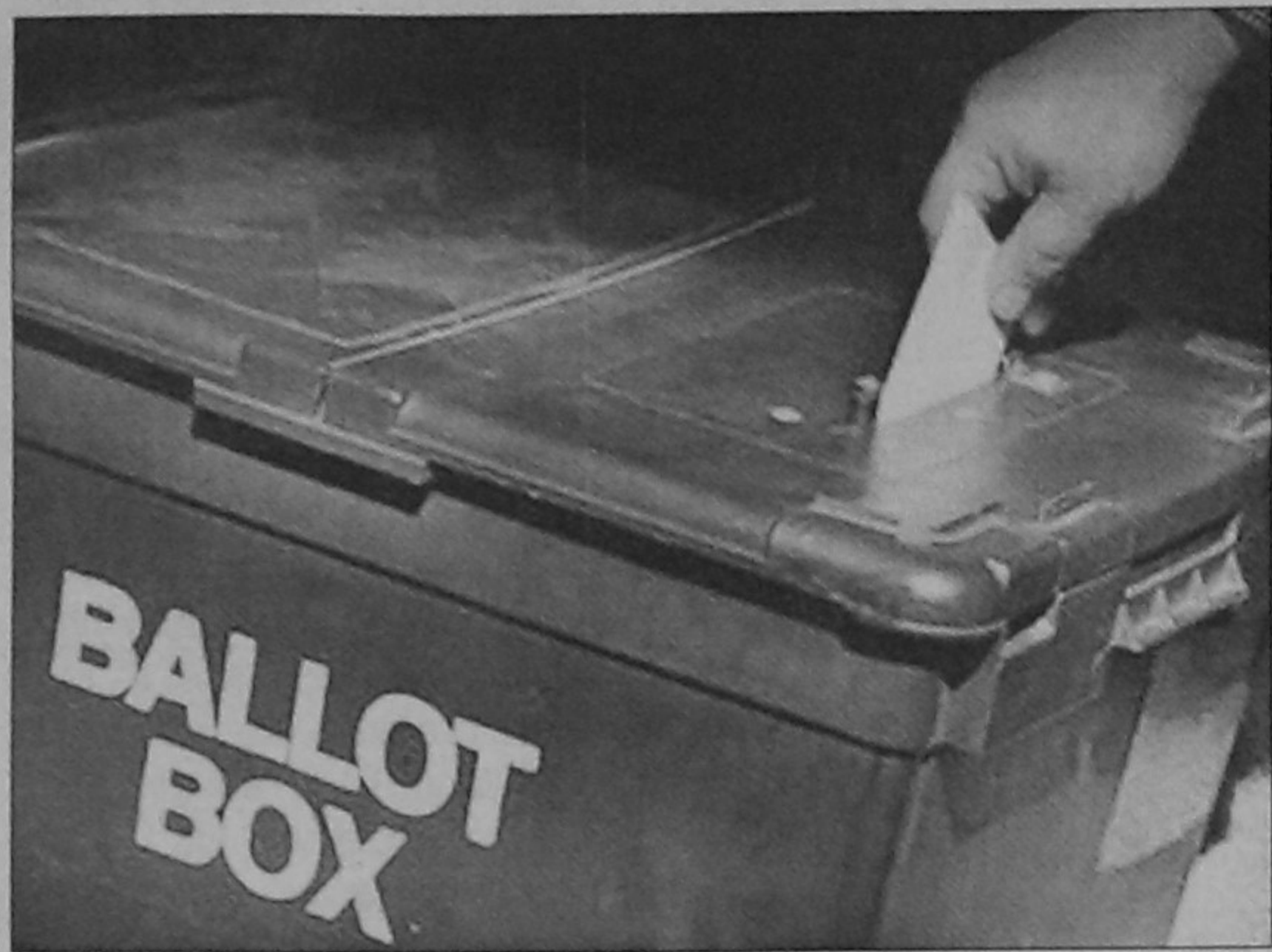


Towards a credible election

All said and done, the ball is now very much in the court of the government. Frankly speaking, in my opinion, it can totally disregard the BNP's 2-point demands and go ahead with the election on December 29. However, that said, the government would do no harm to accede to the demand of scrapping of the relevant section of the amended RPO, which empowers the EC to cancel candidature of any candidate for having furnished false information.



SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

It appears that we are now on the highway to a participatory and credible election in just over one month. This optimism stems from the fact that BNP led 4-party alliance has finally whittled down its initial 7-point demand to two points as pre-condition for participation in election on December 29. The two points are lifting of emergency from the last day of withdrawing nomination and scrapping of Section 91 (E) of the amended RPO.

Thus, with a bit of give and take by the three stakeholders -- the government, AL-led 14-party alliance and BNP-led 4-party alliance -- it now seems possible to hold the next parliamentary election with all political parties taking part in it.

Such a prospect looked bleak not so long ago, and people almost came to terms with the feeling that the election would perhaps go ahead as scheduled without BNP participating in it until this latest decision was announced on November 23.

To my mind, it is the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) factor, which has influenced the alliance decision. JI has always been upbeat about participation in election. Unlike BNP, JI is well organised and united as a political party. The party has not suffered from the trauma of corruption of the party rank and file to the extent that BNP has. That JI would participate in

the December election was never in doubt. But the fact that JI will gain more space politically if BNP is on board with it has finally defined the alliance attitude towards the election. This makes me further optimistic that perhaps the 4-party alliance will not eventually opt out of the December election even if its two demands are not fully met.

It definitely goes to the credit of the AL-led 14-party alliance and all other political parties except the 4-party alliance that, while they have raised similar demands like those of the 4-party alliance, they have not set fulfillment of their demands as pre-conditions for taking part in the election like the 4-party alliance has.

Moreover, in view of the fact that the AL-led 14-party alliance and all other political parties in the country, save and except the BNP-led 4-party alliance, have decided to take part in the election on December 29 without any pre-conditions whatsoever (the AL wants the upazila election schedule to be shifted, but has not made that a pre-condition for participation in the parliamentary elections), the 2-point demands of the 4-party alliance appear to be unacceptably obstructionist and deserve to be dismissed as such.

All said and done, the ball is now very much in the court of the government. Frankly speaking, in my opinion, it can totally disregard the BNP's 2-point demands and go ahead with the election

on December 29.

However, that said, the government would do no harm to accede to the demand of scrapping of the relevant section of the amended RPO, which empowers the EC to cancel candidature of any candidate for having furnished false information. This power can be misused by the EC, not necessarily by the present EC but by any politicised EC like the one under former CEC Justice M.A. Aziz.

But what this government must guard against is the armed cadres and unruly youth fronts of the major political parties, which may surface again on the eve of election after having lain low so long under the state of emergency. These elements are potentially very dangerous in that they would intimidate voters of their rival party candidates to either stay away from voting or vote for candidates against their choice if our past experience is any guide.

Demand for lifting of the state of emergency has to be considered in the perspective of voters' security and voters' peaceful participation in election. Emergency is in no way an impediment to holding free, fair, and credible elections, especially in countries like Bangladesh where the law and order situation invariably worsens with listed criminals and political thugs of rival political parties trying to subvert a fair poll.

With a non-political and neutral caretaker government and an equally non-partisan EC in place, there is hardly any reason to suspect that that emergency powers may be misused in favour of or against a particular political party or alliance.

Meanwhile, the government must relax relevant provisions of emergency rule to allow movement of political leaders and workers of political parties freely across the country to hold rallies and projection meetings and to organise door-to-door campaigning in support of their party or alliance candidates.

The AL-led 14-party's acceptance of the poll deferral to December 29 in a spirit of accommodation and tolerance because it will pave the way for full participation of all political parties in the parliamentary election, is a mature step. Had this alliance chosen to decide otherwise, it would definitely have impacted adversely our transition to democracy.

It is good to hear that AL (the largest and the oldest political party in the country) has left out many of its old guard against whom there were specific charges of corruption and has given nomination to relatively clean and competent candidates. If all other political parties follow the same trend while giving nomination to their party candidates, there will be a positive change in the quality of people who will be elected representatives of the people in the parliament.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (retd) is a former secretary to the president.

An end to hartal: A far cry

The reality is, an end to the hartal culture in Bangladesh is still a far cry. The business community will do well if they can convince the political parties to use hartal as the last tool to make the authority hear their voice. They will do better if they can, instead of worrying too much on the issue of hartal, pay more attention to a much more important issue: the bureaucratic tangle that has been undeniably the biggest obstacle to smooth functioning of business in the country.

HUSAIN IMAM

BUSINESS leaders have asked the political parties to include in their election manifestos a commitment to ban hartal, gherao and similar other programs -- if need be, by enacting a law in the next parliament. They have also decided to put up an economic program for the first 100 days of the elected government that is likely to take office by the end of the year.

Apparently, the business community seems to be worried about the economy, their businesses in particular, in the hands of the political parties. They do not want to go back to the days of hartal. There are genuine reasons for them to be concerned. Political activities in this country, especially of the opposition bench, are almost synonymous with programs like hartal, siege etc., which undeniably do a lot of harm to the business and the economy of the country.

If one may recall, in the wake of grave political turmoil centering the election to the 9th parliament scheduled to be held on January 22, 2007, the first call for declaration of emergency in the country came from the business community.

Whether it was because of their demand or not, President Iajuddin Ahmed, with the backing of the armed forces and support of the donor countries, the media and a section of the so-called *sushil shamaj*, declared emergency on January 11, 2007, postponed the election, and formed a new caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed the following day.

Since then, the country has been under emergency rules, suspending fundamental rights of citizens and banning all sorts of political activities including procession, rally, public meeting, or any sort of agitation or demonstration, not to mention hartal, siege and similar plans.

The business community has had 22 months to do business without any political disturbance whatsoever, let alone hartal. Yet, we haven't heard anyone saying that business has flourished or the economy picked up during this period. On the contrary, the soaring prices of food and other essential items, thanks to syndicates or market manipulation by dishonest traders, have made the lives of common people unbearable.

After all these months under emergency rules of a non political, un-elected

caretaker government, it is now agreed by all concerned, even by those who dislike politicians and miss no opportunity to malign them, that there is no alternative to a democratically elected political government for smooth functioning of trade and business.

The business leaders want an end to the hartal culture. They want the political parties to have business and economy as top priority in their political agenda. I, as an ordinary citizen, share their concern and appeal to our political leadership to pay due importance to their genuine concern. Hartal not only causes great harm to the trade and business of the country, it also causes immense suffering to the general public.

But let us not singularly target the politicians or their political programs (that at times turn violent and destructive) for all



Halted trucks = stunted growth.

the wounds that the business and the economy of this country has suffered. Let us not forget that in a third world country like ours, where more than half the population is still illiterate, where per capita income is less than \$500, one cannot expect a democracy of the type practiced in Europe or in the US, whose literacy rate is nearly hundred percent and per capita income around \$25,000 or more.

The reality is, in this part of the world, democracy is more prominent in the display of muscle power in the streets than by the strength of arguments in the parliament. Here, a half-day hartal or siege program in the capital city as a mark of protest can prove to be more effective than organising a human chain

from Teknaf to Tetulia.

The reality is, an end to the hartal culture in Bangladesh is still a far cry. The business community will do well if they can convince the political parties to use hartal as the last tool to make the authority hear their voice. They will do better if they can, instead of worrying too much on the issue of hartal, pay more attention to a much more important issue: the bureaucratic tangle that has been undeniably the biggest obstacle to smooth functioning of business in the country.

The business leaders have decided to prepare an economic paper for the next elected government. I doubt that it will be of interest to the general public or be able to draw the attention or sympathy of the political government. Let me explain why.

As has been seen in the past, such initiatives often end up with demands highlighting their own interest more than the overall interest of the country. One can be almost sure that they will ask for more tax holidays, more cash incentives, lesser tax rates, reduced interest on bank loans, easy availability of bank loans, leniency for loan defaulters, and so on and so forth.

One can also be sure that their papers will not say even a word about why they cannot afford to pay the bank loans or pay their workers even half the wages given to a worker in India, China Vietnam or Sri

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Mohan Mia

ENAMUL HAQ

If any politician of this country is to be remembered for uncommon qualities of head and heart for nearly half a century of dedicated and selfless public service, the name of Yusuf Ali Chowdhury, known as Mohan Mia, comes to the fore. He died on November 26, 1971 at the age of only 66, with his dream of making a significant contribution to building the new country of Bangladesh remaining unfulfilled.

He knew from his own commitment to the cause of Bengali language and the issue of political, economic and social justice for the Bengalis that liberation was imminent, and that it would need all the wisdom and efforts of the people and the political leaders to reconstruct the shattered land and take it on to the path of progress and prosperity. Post-liberation Bangladesh surely needed the services of extraordinarily wise, selfless and incorruptible politicians like Mohan Mia.

From an early age, Mohan Mia grew up in the district town of Faridpur as a courageous and visionary person. Instead of letting the riches of the family zamindari spoil him, he fixed his eyes on ways to lift the Muslims from the morass of social and economic backwardness. Compared to the educated, more affluent and influential Hindus, the Muslims lived almost as outcasts with no voice to ask for their rights. He soon found that their aversion to education, particularly to the English education under the British colonial dispensation, was the prime cause of their downslide in the society. When he was at Ishan School, he was one of 25 or 30 Muslim students out of a total of a thousand.

Undeterred, he fought, and succeeded in establishing their right to hold annual milad in the school in the same way as the Hindu students observed Saraswati Puja. Similarly, when he became mutawalli, or custodian, of the zamindari, he decided to hold a grand feast for thousands of their

tenants in memory of his father. He decided to sacrifice 25 cows, although he knew that cow slaughter was banned in the town. He took up the issue with the authorities and persuaded them to lift the ban.

That proved his mettle as a Muslim standing up for a cause, although he was never a communal zealot. In fact, during his 17 years of chairmanship of Faridpur District Board, he succeeded in keeping the entire district free from any communal violence although the whole of British India was affected by this scourge. His pioneering efforts at establishing educational institutions in the district, and a multi-sector vocational training centre on the outskirts of the district town, spoke eloquently of his foresightedness for social progress.

In politics, Mohan Mia was an ardent adherent of high principles and moral values. He was a prince among politicians, as he was in personal look and conduct. His love for politics often threw him into personal debt, forcing him to dig



Yusuf Ali Chowdhury

into the estate coffers for money. He himself led a very simple life, with almost ascetic habits in eating and dressing.

Because of his close association with Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Nurul Amin, he could become a minister any time but,

instead, he opted to become a king maker and not a decorated member of the king's court.

In 1933, he decided for the first time to contest for a seat in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. But from where? Despite stiff opposition from his family members and friends, he gave away his own safe and secure constituency within his zamindari in favour of Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan, regarded by him as his political guru. This was a rare gesture, demonstrating his large-heartedness and respect for a person who he thought was more qualified to serve the people. He chose the Shibchar Sadarpur Bhangra, constituency to challenge powerful zamindar Chowdhury Shamsuddin Ahmed, known as Badshah Mia, of Duttapra.

Mohan Mia won the seat and Fazlul Huq formed the government in Bengal in coalition with the Muslim League. But in 1941, Fazlul Huq severed his ties with the Muslim League and formed a new government in association with the Congress. Mohan Mia

stayed on in the League and played a significant role in the party. Fazlul Huq was angry, but Mohan Mia did not budge from his stand.

Despite political difference with many, Mohan Mia never kept anyone away or denied anyone his family's traditional hospitality. Many famous politicians of India and Pakistan, including Congress and Muslim League leaders, visited Faridpur on different occasions and enjoyed the generous hospitality at Mohan Mia's family house "Moiz Manzil."

His dream of setting up a jute mill in Faridpur has been fulfilled by his able sons. His other dream of setting up a sugar mill became a reality thanks to the efforts of his elder brother Muazzem Hussain Chowdhury (Lal Mai), who was once a well-known Congress leader and, later, a minister in Pakistan. The most important legacy of Mohan Mia still remains the Halima Student's Home in Faridpur, bearing the memory of his mother.

Captain Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

Yes, they're back again

NURY VITTACHI

THERE was an article in the press the other day saying that the world's first piece of humour had been found: an ancient riddle composed in Sumeria, now called Iraq.

What rubbish. A riddle is an intellectual puzzle. Humour is a completely different thing altogether. It is a situational exchange and grows out of relationships. (Remind me to write an academic paper on this.)

To set the record straight, we hereby publish below the real oldest jokes in the world.

The very first piece of humour ever:  
God: "Good morning, Eve. Fancy a joke?"  
Eve: "Sure."

God: "See that thing over there?"  
Eve: "You mean that hairy creature amusing itself by lighting its own gaseous emissions?"

God: "Yeah. Well, you're married to it."  
The very first piece of husband and wife humour:

Adam: "Ow! I feel like my guts have been ripped out."

Eve: "Hello, my name's Eve, and I'm here to tell you that you better get used to that feeling."

The very first piece of cave-dweller humour:

Early cavewoman to another early cavewoman: "Men. They're just a load of bloody Neanderthals."

Neanderthal Men: "We can't help it. Really."

The very first joke in China:

Confucius: "Now I want you to write down everything I say and hand in your papers at the end of each day."

Disciple: "You're not thinking of publishing our work and making yourself immortal, are you?"

Confucius: "Hey! Would I do a thing like that?"

The very first animal joke:

Noah: "Now if you dinosaurs don't stop larking about, I'm going to leave you all behind."

Dinosaurs: "Oh yeah? You're full of it, Noah. You wouldn't dare."

Noah: "Oh yeah?"

The very first joke in Africa:

Pharaoh: "How's the skyscraper going?"

The First Architect: "The foundations went down fine, but inflation has caused havoc with our estimates for rocks and slaves. We may to taper the design as it goes up."

Pharaoh: "Meaning?"

The First Architect: "Listen, Ramses. How'd you fancy a pyramid?"

Pharaoh: "I don't know. Will it still have a duplex penthouse on the roof?"

The First Architect: "Well, best I can do is a flattish rock up top where you can sit and have a nice view of the dunes, and

the other dunes, and the other other dunes."

The very first joke in the Middle East:  
Moses: "Look, I've got these ten commandments."

The First Lawyer: "Hey, hang on, you'd better let me take a look at those. I might want to add a line or two."

The very first joke in India:

Buddha: "Ouch. I got cramp."

Mrs Buddha: "Not surprising, the way you sit on the floor all the time. I'm getting you a proper office chair for your birthday."

The very first Jewish joke:

Abraham: "I am going to have as many children as there are stars in the sky."

Sarah: "Good luck, buster, I am so

outta here."

The very first joke in America:

Running Bear: "Good morning, Big Chief Sitting Bull -- hey, what happened to your hair?"

Big Chief Sitting Bull: "Damn. Must have left my wig in the wigwam or toupee in the tepee."

Now I know that historians among you may be saying: where's the proof that these people above originated humour? Well, the proof is the fact that where there are people, there is humour. With only four exceptions: US airports, Australian airports, Singaporean sitcoms, and China.

Visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.