

## Lifting of state of emergency

Parties should now go full steam into campaigning

WE welcome the announcement by the caretaker government that it will lift the state of emergency on December 17 and allow unfettered public rallies with effect from today as a prelude to the holding of a free, fair and transparent general election on December 29. Indeed, it is a proper and fitting response to the demands voiced in recent weeks and months by the political parties as well as members of civil society for a withdrawal of the state of emergency in the interest of a full and enthusiastic participation of all citizens in the electoral exercise. The decisions reflect the general expectation that political activities will be conducted in a peaceful and purposeful manner by all political parties. That will entail an observance of the electoral code of conduct in its letter and spirit by all parties and candidates. We are constrained to say, however, that there have been instances where intending nominees at the election have violated the code of conduct. That should not have happened and we hope such acts will not be repeated.

Now that the emergency is about to be lifted, it remains the hope of the nation that the political atmosphere will not be undermined or the political course will not be blocked or slowed down by any niggling issues on the part of any of the stakeholders. With the country keenly awaiting the return of democratic, albeit honest and so incorruptible government, it is important that the parties now go full steam ahead into the campaign and present their plans and programmes to the public. Unlike the past, where campaigning was fundamentally marred by negativism --- and this was done by all parties involved --- we believe that the coming election is a chance for the parties to demonstrate their readiness for a clean break with the past. They can demonstrate this new outlook through making it a point to focus on their own manifestoes and offer them to the electorate rather than indulge in innuendo and insinuation against one another. Since politics is the art of the possible, the parties should remember that while they can be and in fact are adversaries in politics, there is surely little need for them to deal with one another as implacable foes. Modern politics has little time or space for myopia.

All said and done, it has to be pointed out that the kind of qualitative change people expected at the forthcoming election has not quite come about. Many individuals known for their bad deeds in the past already look set to take part in the election. We hope that despite such intimations of worry, the people will exercise their right of franchise judiciously and elect to parliament men and women of genuine, proven probity. Never before has Bangladesh been so much in need of honest politicians as it is today.

## Success stories in micro-entrepreneurship

Facilitate replication by all means

SABINA'S one person-led sun cap factory has made it big -- from a scratch. Driven by the sheer motivation to start up an enterprise of her own, she has managed to climb the steep stairway to a viable business concern with a rising export profile. Her caps made up of garment wastes are in demand in neighbouring India and Nepal. It won't be long before she achieves a humble niche in other countries because of the low, affordable cost of her products.

Quick to shed her worker status in a garment unit, but drawing upon her rudimentary know-how about the trade, she set up her tiny factory with a sprinkling of micro credit in 2003. Within five years, her hard work and persistent efforts, undeterred by constraints inherent in a male-dominated society, have rewarded her hugely, and the community immensely for being a reference point in the legacy of successes her breed of enterprising women have already created for their peers.

The Daily Star as a staunch believer in the value of recognising business talent and entrepreneurial creativity and bravado, felicitates the Citi Foundation of the Citigroup and Shakti Foundation for Disadvantaged Women for distributing laurels in four categories of micro-entrepreneurship.

The noticeable private sector trend in bringing up the microcredit success stories for social and professional recognition by way of encouraging more of it is a healthy one. Yet, so long as this is not complemented by the government's facilitating growth of marketing network, reliable energy supplies and a dose of fiscal incentives to the small exporters, the full potential of the microcredit sector would remain untapped.

The major benefits derivable from micro-entrepreneurship are employment generation, women's empowerment and poverty alleviation. Besides, what is of overarching value is that it is not only worthy of replication but also well within our means to replicate it.

## Vote free

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE recent death of Nurul Islam, president of the Ganatantri Party and nominee of the Awami League-led grand alliance for the upcoming parliamentary election for Noakhali-1, together with his son, both burned to death when their house was set on fire last week, comes as a timely and tragic reminder of all that ails Bangladeshi politics.

Many things ail our political culture from the feudal and inegalitarian make-up of society, to our winner-take-all mindset that does not permit the opposition space for dissent, to an oppositional culture that prefers to disrupt a sitting government than try to work with it.

But none is so corrosive to the establishment of a functional democracy as our long-standing culture of political violence, and the death of Nurul Islam demonstrates that as hopeful as we all are for good elections on December 29, there is still a long way to go and lots of loose threads to be tied before we can truly believe that democracy is safe in Bangladesh.

The death of Nurul Islam calls to mind the assassinations of Ahsanullah Master and Shah A.M.S. Kibria. If these kinds of political killings remain on the cards as possibilities, if they remain potent tools in the political tool-box to deal with opponents one does not like, and if there is nothing that can be done to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice, then where exactly does this leave us as a

## STRAIGHT TALK

But I hope, more than anything, that in the run-up to the elections, that the government has the law and order situation under control, emergency or no emergency, and is able to ensure that the goons do not come out of the woodwork and recommence their reign of terror. Otherwise, what kind of an election will it be?

democracy?

Fear of political violence was a principal concern of the then opposition two years ago and it seems that the current government has only limited power to ensure that candidates for office are safe to run (to say nothing about the rest of us).

The bottom line when it comes to elections in Bangladesh is always violence. If you are not practicing it, you at least have to ensure that you are not victimised by it, and that you can protect your voters.

Some people say it that it's all about money, but it's not about money except insofar as you need money to pay for muscle. Money spent to feed voters Eid lunch or to hold rallies or build pandals is neither here nor there and will do no good in the absence of either a good candidate or well-organised intimidation apparatus.

To the extent that we can keep muscle out of elections, then we are well on our way to a functioning democracy. I have no

doubt that when and where Bangladeshis have been permitted to vote their consciences, they have, by and large, made the best choice for themselves.

The problem arises when they are not permitted to make that choice, when intimidation gets in the way of their exercising their right to vote for the candidate of their choosing.

This can be accomplished in the crudest of ways, by simply killing a popular political leader, as seems to be the case with Nurul Islam. You can't vote for someone who's dead. Not coincidentally, perhaps, it seems as though it is only politicians from one side of the political aisle that get killed these days.

But beyond killings, which is intimidation and violence taken to the extreme, the political landscape is rife with all other manner of intimidation against the party candidates and workers, and against the voters themselves.

Voters are not stupid. The most important thing for any voter, as for any person anywhere, is to ensure the security of himself or herself and his or her family. If one cannot give one's vote free from fear of the repercussions, one will not give it. If one needs to vote for a certain candidate to ensure one's own personal safety, one does that.

There are other considerations, but until we can protect our voters from the threat of actual physical violence, we cannot call the political system that we have in place democracy. It is that simple.

So, if we are to have elections that are good, there are many things that I would like to see. I would like to see the election code of conduct adhered to. I would like the EC to ensure that candidates who do not qualify or have been convicted are kept away from the polls.

But most important of all is to ensure that the polls do not belong to the musclemen.

The state of emergency is about to be lifted. Well, you don't necessarily need emergency to protect people and emergency didn't protect Nurul Islam either.

But I hope, more than anything, that in the run-up to the elections, that the government has the law and order situation under control, emergency or no emergency, and is able to ensure that the goons do not come out of the woodwork and recommence their reign of terror. Otherwise, what kind of an election will it be?

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## Two-nation theory has bred practice of hatred

M. J. AKBAR

WHY has Pakistan become synonymous with terrorism? The vast majority of Pakistanis surely find terrorism as repellent as Indians do. Why then does Pakistan breed an endless flow of suicide missionaries?

Practice has been shaped by theory. A theory of separation created Pakistan in 1947; over time, this has been converted into a culture of hatred by some self-appointed ideologues.

Pakistan emerged out of the notion that Hindus and Muslims could not live together. The threat perception was raised into the claim that Islam itself would be obliterated in a Hindu-majority India. The Muslim League's slogan was: "Islam in Danger!"

Neither history nor theology could have sustained such a slogan, but Muslim elites in British India manipulated the incipient ideology of the Muslim League, and fuelled it with incendiary sentiment in order to create a state where they could protect their vested interests. They were not really afraid of "Hindu Raj"; they were terrified of land reform and socialism that the Congress would enforce. It is no accident that there has been no serious land reform in Pakistan. Gandhi's honest faith in Hinduism was maliciously exploited to spread the perfidy that India would never offer an equal place to Muslims.

The idea of Islam being in danger was particularly attractive to a section of the ulema but not to all of them; the Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Hind, unlike the Jamaat-e-Islami, was very clear-headed about the potential pitfalls and opposed the creation of Pakistan. The pro-partition ulema, however, discovered a unique opportunity for power. If Islam was going to be the *raison d'être* of the new nation,

then who else could be its true guardians? The elites took control of the economy and politics; the upper middle classes dominated the administration; and the two shared authority in the armed forces. The clergy gradually took control of educational and legal space.

What united these elements, who had separate agendas and could be culturally antagonistic, was Kashmir. The first important decision taken after Pakistan's birth was to convert the two-nation theory into a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan created the Kashmir problem when it decided to seize the Valley by armed force in the last week of October 1947. If this incursion had not taken place, there would have been a peaceful resolution to both Kashmir and Hyderabad, with Lord Mountbatten as referee. Perhaps, apart from his sense of self-importance, this was why Mountbatten wanted to be named governor-general of both India and Pakistan, but Jinnah told him to stick to Delhi.

India, Pakistan and Britain were in full agreement that no princely state should be permitted independence. The two holdouts, Kashmir and Hyderabad, could never have survived in their frozen condition. Mountbatten has left on record a note from Nehru in which he suggested

that the resolution of Kashmir could be left to spring 1948.

Instead, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan and Pakistan's freshly emboldened leaders were convinced they could pray at the main mosque in Srinagar on the Friday following the invasion. They failed. The failure sponsored a lie, that the invasion was a "popular uprising." Shuja Nawaz has exposed this falsehood effectively in his history of the Pakistan army, *Crossed Swords* (Oxford University Press). The October 1947 invasion was armed and supported by the Pakistani administration.

Six decades of Fridays later, the rulers of Islamabad are still waiting. If they want to enter Srinagar on tanks they are welcome to wait another six decades. If they want to come to Srinagar in peace, they can come and pray tomorrow. But it will be difficult for them to do so as long as they believe that Hindus and Muslims cannot live together. The two-nation theory might have been abandoned in 1971, when Pakistan itself was partitioned. But it remains the official doctrine of the Pakistan state, sold to generations in millions of school textbooks.

Pakistan's support for Sikh secessionism in the 1980s was clear evidence that it did not need only a "Muslim" cause to become pro-active. If it could

destroy India's integrity through another religious module, it was equally happy to do so. If General Zia ul Haq had spent as much energy on the construction of Pakistan as he did on the destruction of India, Pakistan might have had a rising economic story to tell by now.

Kashmir became the implicit sanction for the emergence, under Zia's beneficial watch, of terrorist groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (the Army of the Pure). Zia's successors did little to contain these terrorists. When India protested, Pakistani diplomats were polite across the table, and probably had a good laugh behind Delhi's back. Since Zia's time Pakistan has been asking for "evidence" or proof, and encouraging scepticism or conspiracy theories (dutifully lapped up by sections of the Indian media).

Well, this time there is a canary singing in custody, and a satellite phone abandoned by terrorists with five logged calls to members of the Lashkar. It is the declared intention of the Pure Army to fly the Pakistani flag on top of the Red Fort. Its leader, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, certainly gets a wink if not a nod from the Pak establishment.

Pervez Musharraf was the only Pakistani leader to ban the Lashkar after Vajpayee mobilised troops along the border in the wake of the December 13 attack on Parliament. Passions cooled, and Lashkar simply reappeared under another name. Hafiz Saeed does not live in hiding. He gives interviews to Indian publications.

Asif Zardari's latest alibi is: these are non-state actors. They certainly preen around on the Pakistani stage. If the Pakistani state cannot stop this blood-thirsty drama, the world will have to.

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## Bangladesh polls: The world is watching

SOMSRI HAN-ANUNTASUK

UNCERTAINTY has loomed over the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh for nearly two years.

International observation groups were initially unsure if the December 18 elections, rescheduled for December 29, would be held in 2008. Regardless, a large number of international observers are being deployed throughout the country, their spirits bolstered by increasing signs that there will be no more delays to the polling date.

It is this very uncertainty which makes Bangladesh a compelling case study for the international community. One of the more unique features in Bangladesh politics is the caretaker government (CTG) system.

The CTG system was introduced in 1996 by an amendment to the constitution, and had the agreement of all key political parties. The CTG provisions stipulate that an interim non-party government is to facilitate the transition of power by preparing the country for elections. New elections must be held within 90 days. Meanwhile, the CTG is to carry on the routine functions of government, although it is supposed to refrain from making policy decisions.

In 2006, the CTG was activated for the fourth time, with President Prof. Iajuddin Ahmed assuming the position of chief advisor. This was followed by a period of civil unrest, leading to the proclamation of emergency on January 11, 2007.

To its credit, the CTG has put in a significant amount of effort to ensure a credible election. Now it is up to all the stakeholders to ensure a significant reduction in polling irregularities and violence. This will allow the Bangladeshi people to play a meaningful role in shaping the country's future through the ballot box.

Iajuddin resigned, paving the way for Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, who soon appointed ten advisors to look after the 34 ministries.

Bangladesh stands out as the only country in Asia that practices a constitutionally established CTG. Foreigners might regard the concept of a CTG as an undemocratic and unusual practice, as the advisors of the CTG are not appointed by or accountable to the people.

Voters seem to have another take on the CTG. Preliminary findings from our organisation, The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) indicates that people support the CTG system as it helps to ensure a safe environment and, thus, free and fair elections. However, our preliminary findings also indicate that the current CTG has been in existence for too long and should be replaced by a democratically elected government as soon as possible.

Concerns with the CTG are in part also due to its army backing. In view of the suspension of constitutional rights, some worry that the army may have some influence on the election and institutions in

Bangladesh.

Credibility at stake

While some may question the legitimacy of the CTG, there had been significant steps taken by the government to improve the integrity of the elections and contribute towards the return to democracy.

For instance, the new photographic voter list system is drawing keen interest from foreign observers who want to gauge its effectiveness in stamping out voter impersonation and multiple voting. Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia and the second country in Asia, after Philippines, to have such a system.

Foreign observers will also be looking for any political violence during the election period. It has been almost two years since any major act of political violence took place in Bangladesh, and the continuity of this violence-free atmosphere is crucial for a free and democratic process. Hopefully, the two major political parties will familiarise themselves with non-violent political rivalry.

Refraining from political violence will

be even more crucial when campaigning begins, followed by the expected lifting of Emergency. Democracy can only be allowed to flourish if people and candidates are allowed to express their views freely without fear of violence or threats.

Although the necessary laws are in place to discourage political violence, the Election Commission (EC) can still take precautionary steps, such as requiring participating parties to sign a pledge of non-violence. This is not a new practice in Asia. In the December 2006 governor and mayoral elections of Aceh, Indonesia, all major party leaders were compelled to swear in a mosque that violence would not be used during the election period.

Another step the Bangladesh authorities and the EC could take to avoid clashes is to keep political parties apart during their campaign activities. For example, permission for the use of popular venues to hold rallies can be rotated between contesting candidates. This practice is common in Indonesia and Thailand.

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