

This Victory Day is especially auspicious

Let's live up to its true significance

It is a time to celebrate and to remember. Three million Bengalis made the supreme sacrifice in order for all of us to live and thrive in freedom. Today we recall the various odds we overcame in 1971 -- the opposition of the Nixon administration, the non-cooperative role of the Chinese government, the hostility of most Middle Eastern nations -- as we struggled to wrest freedom from the genocidal Pakistan establishment. We recall too the help and sympathy of our friends, especially India and the Soviet Union, and others across the world as we waged war against the occupation forces. We recall the decisive leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the wisdom and guidance of the Mujibnagar government in our determined war for liberation.

Victory Day comes as an especially auspicious occasion this year. It is so because later this month the nation will go to the polls to elect a new, democratic government for itself. It is our belief that through the elections of December 29, the people of Bangladesh will see an upholding of the spirit of the War of Liberation. That spirit is essentially one of a striving towards establishing an egalitarian society for all.

Thirty seven years after that decisive victory against the enemy, it is time for some self-assessment on our part. The truth is out there. We have stumbled and fallen and raised ourselves again and again all these years, for the spirit which led us into the War of Liberation has been an ethos we have never let go of. Yes, we have had our many bouts with political instability, with repeated changes in the political system, with the various instances of military and quasi-military rule. And for all our long struggle for democracy, we have observed since 1991 a gradual collapse of democratic government into a state of the dysfunctional. Obviously, therefore, it now becomes our responsibility, moral as well as political, to ensure for ourselves the kind of governance that will truly reflect the spirit of the 1971 war. It may be an irony that nearly four decades after liberation, we still must emphasise the old spirit, the need to hold the trials of war criminals and the great necessity of bringing to justice those responsible for the assassination of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders in 1975. Such issues ought to have been resolved long ago. It is time to remind ourselves that unless these nagging issues are resolved to satisfaction, our sense of triumph will remain incomplete.

It is, therefore, in the fitness of things that we today resolve to implement the dreams of the martyrs. Those dreams were based on the premise of our giving to ourselves a stable democratic system of governance, an economic order that would cater to the welfare of all citizens and a social system that would ensure the rights and dignity of every individual. It is a promise that we mean to keep, that our political leaders should strive strenuously to realise in our national interest. Let the general elections of December 29 be a first, pivotal step in that direction.

Political parties in campaign mode

Temper exuberance with sobriety

It seems that the country's politics has come to life since the withdrawal of restrictions on political activity. And that is as it should be. It is good to see that the political parties and their candidates have started campaigning to wean voters to their cause and get their votes. What, however, has been rather disconcerting is the inclination to revert to the old ways inasmuch as they have started occupying public places for rallies and political meetings.

Pictures speak more than a thousand words. And there is no scope of not believing the photograph appearing in this paper the day before, of a big podium being erected by the 4-Party alliance for a public meeting, plunk in the middle of Shyamoli link road. There is no gainsaying the hardship such acts cause. Needless to say, the suffering lasts from the time the roads are brought under occupation for the setting up of the stage, till it is dismantled after the meeting.

What is rather disquieting is that such a gross violation of electoral rules, codified under the amended RPO, has not caught the eyes of anyone of those that are supposed to ensure that the provisions of the representative order were not violated, and that appropriate actions were taken against the violators. Even the law enforcing agencies who should be doubly alert during the lead up to the elections have failed to notice this.

Rules and regulations can only be implemented efficiently if all concerned chose to willingly abide by those. For the political parties and their candidates to disregard the code of conduct, which they have affirmed to uphold in their nomination papers, conveys a very poor opinion about both.

But this is not a matter of following the rules only. Even if such provisions did not exist, we would still have expected a display of a modicum of civic sense, and even more, sensitivity to public discomfort, by those that are seeking the mandate of the people to represent them in the parliament.

It would need all concerned to ensure a peaceful run up to a fair and free election to which the EC and the political parties stand committed. While the EC must not fail to exercise its authority by ensuring that violators are dealt with promptly, it is equally important for the political parties to be obliged to play by the rules.

Promises, promises everywhere...

SHAHNOOR WAHID

SOME naughty Englishman had said "promises are made to be broken and lies are meant to be kept." What a wicked thought, indeed! When we the plebeians try not to break a pledge we so solemnly make on matters of personal or national importance, the power-mongers are quick to make promises and even quicker to break them. While our conscience is pricked at our own folly, theirs remain as healthy as that of a tiger that has just devoured a human.

When this ephemeral endowment, called "conscience," in many humans stands between them and acquiring temporal power, many others merrily throw theirs in the garbage bin to wield the baton of power until they are thrown in jails. Since the dawn of civilisation, power has drowned more men and women than the seven seas have done. And yet, power allures humans to their doom, just as the spirits on the Isle of the Sirens did when Odysseus sailed by.

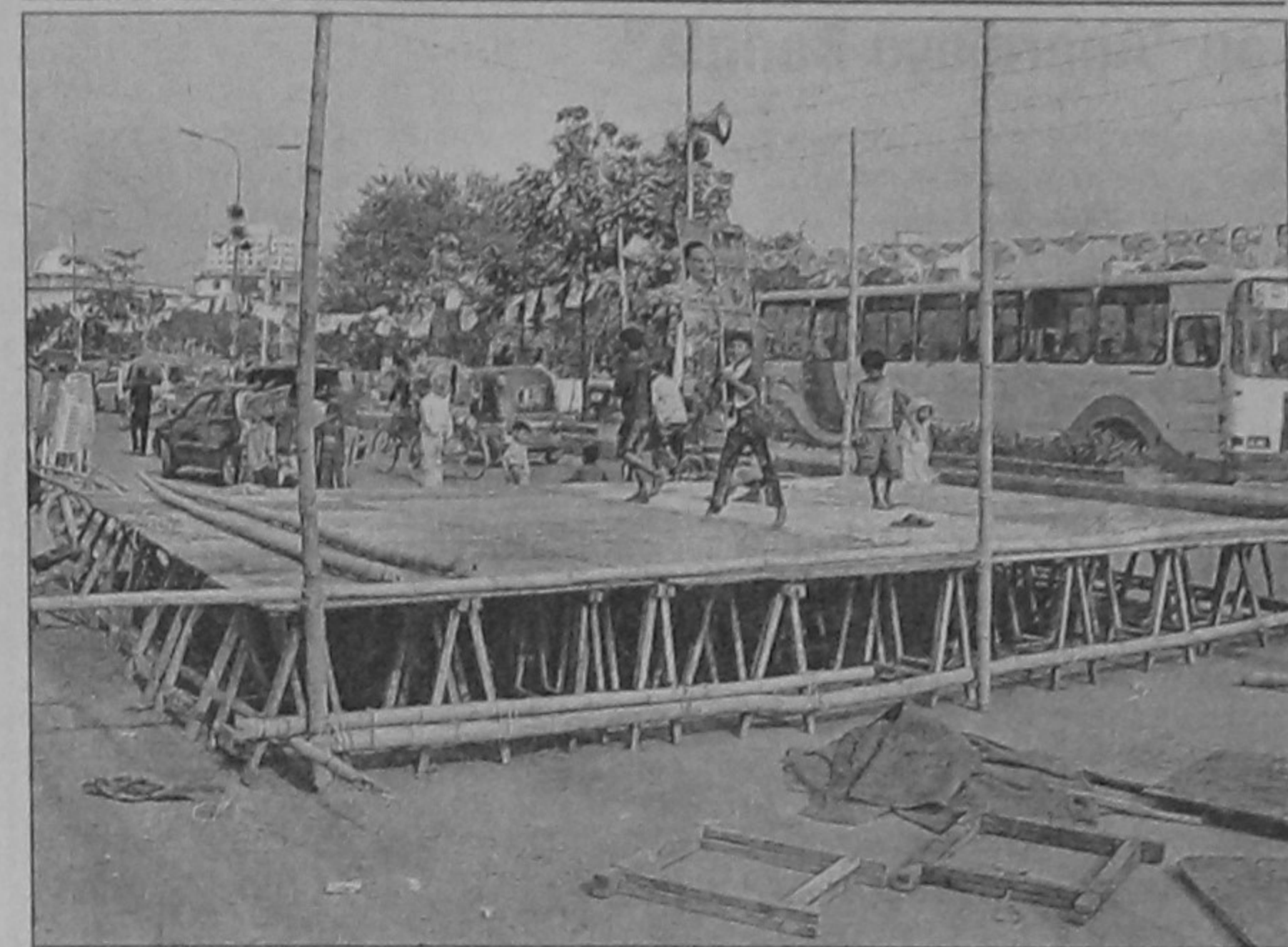
Power has been described by different men in different ways through the millennia and yet this English word remains more as a metaphoric euphemism than anything substantive in connotation. Thomas Jefferson said: "I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be." By golly! If he were alive today he would have hidden this quote under the bedroom rug. How could one use power less? Talk about how it can be used more, sir.

And our good old sage Plato has to say something that would send politicians rolling down the floor laughing. He is inviting philosophers to become politicians and politicians to become philosophers! In his own words: "There will be no end to the troubles of states, or of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands."

Ok, here is something interesting, rather

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

What new things have politicians to say to the nation? Haven't they said these same things again and again before every election? Let us take one case. Someone said the Special Power Act would be repealed. Bravo!



We promise not to block the roads!

thought-provoking, from someone we would not rate as a great philosopher. On the contrary, he is someone who has punched on others' noses to become rich and famous. Yet, contemplate as you read his words, and you might find it amazing how a man like him can think the way he did. "Only a man who knows what it is like to be defeated can reach down to the bottom of his soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win when the match is even." Well, these are the words of great boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Will someone please explain the esoteric

meaning to those who play with power and destroy innocent lives?

But, as always, the master, the maestro, the wizard, has the last word on every credible and incredible thing on earth. This uncannily un-matched and indisputable sage is none other than George Bernard Shaw, and he may sound a bit cynical, as you will read the following words. He writes: "Our laws make law impossible; our liberties destroy all freedom; our property is organised robbery; our morality an impudent hypocrisy; our wisdom is administered by inexperienced or mal-experienced

dupes; our power wielded by cowards and weaklings; and our honour false in all its points. I am an enemy of the existing order for good reasons." By Jove! Had Shaw been alive today and uttered these words in public he would have been charged under the Special Power Act! Perfidy, eh?

So, the season of promises has come to Bangladesh. And with it have come out the "birds of fair promises." They are dishing out promises of every hue before the credulous public. Right now, as I am writing this piece sitting in my room at Karwan Bazaar, my eardrums are being constantly pierced by high decibel sound emanating from the microphones all around. Yes, you guessed correctly. Some political leaders have chosen the office hours to scream at the top of their voices to let us know what is good for us. They are also constructing podiums blocking main roads right before the eyes of the EC. It has blind eyes, maybe.

What new things have politicians to say to the nation? Haven't they said these same things again and again before every election? Let us take one case. Someone said the Special Power Act would be repealed. Bravo! It had been said before by all the political parties. But have they ever talked about it when in power? No, sir, they never did. They are also talking about making the judiciary independent. Great! But, tell us, why didn't you do it when you were in power in phases in last fifteen years? So, why should we believe that you will do it this time around?

You said you will fight terrorism. But records show that terrorism was given shelter and support during the rule of the democratically elected governments in last fifteen years. You have created the monster, now you wish to destroy it when it has become too powerful. You are trying to get out of its grip, as it is about to devour you! Strange indeed that you never lent an ear when we cried hoarse about the manifest danger as it lurked behind bushes.

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Climate crisis

BOTTOM LINE

In this respect, political parties must have a strategy to grapple with global warming. The strategy should envision a future, which will be better than the current situation, and it should be achievable within a time framework. Vision is a bridge between the current state and a future optimum state.

HARUN UR RASHID

MOST environmentalists are disappointed that the political parties in their election manifestos have not touched on how to address the adverse effects of global warming in the country.

People do not realise that global warming will reduce agriculture production, increase infectious and bacterial diseases and submerge coastal areas. Health security and food security will become myths under changed climatic conditions.

The negative impacts of climate change on agriculture are already posing extra challenges to the survival of millions of the landless and marginal farmers whose livelihood almost entirely depends on agriculture.

The environment has degraded so much that, on bad days, airborne pollution lies like a thick veil blocking out sunlight over the cities. It is estimated that only 1% of the country's 40 million city dwellers breathe the air that could be considered safe. In addition, large areas of coastline are so polluted that they no longer sustain marine life.

A recent report of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) presents a bleak picture of Bangladesh by 2030.

The report predicts that the population will be nearly 200 million by 2020, with 40% under 15 years of age. An additional 6-8% of Bangladesh will be permanently under water and flood-prone areas will increase from 25% to 40% by 2050.

Furthermore, three-quarters of the Himalayan glaciers may vanish, with disastrous consequences for areas dependent on the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. Environmental refugees from rural areas will be flocking to the cities. Dhaka will be one of the world's largest cities, with 300 million people.

The report adds that environmental refugees from rural areas will come to cities where flood defence will be concentrated, and over 80 million people will live in urban slums. In rural areas this urban migration could mean that the countryside would be abandoned to the elderly, woman-headed households and to the very poorest.

Bangladeshis find themselves forced to confront the following environmental challenges:

- Melting of glaciers in the Himalayas;
- Massive deforestation in India and Nepal;
- Diversion of water from rivers by upper riparian countries;

- Dying rivers (about 100 have already died);
 - Intrusion of salinity into rivers and farmlands;
 - Arsenic contaminated underground water in more than 50 districts;
 - Reduction in agriculture, livestock and fishery because of intrusion of salinity.
- Increased temperature has added more problems. While a torrent of melt-water from the Himalayan glaciers flows to the rivers, causing soil erosion, coastal zones are being gradually flooded by rising sealevels.

Bangladesh's rivers are both snow and rain-fed, and if there is no snow in the Himalayas, the 56 major rivers will die during winter. It is a dreadful scenario.

Besides these, population growth and poverty added to the degradation of the environment in the country.

In simple terms, the more people there are, the more land is cleared and the more soil is eroded. The country is losing 1% of its agricultural land every year because of human settlements, according to experts.

Population density is increasing in the most vulnerable coastal regions. It is reported that greater numbers of people are moving to areas with less climate risk for economic reasons.

Poverty leads to activities that pollute the environment; for example, fuel in the countryside comes from forests. Unhygienic living conditions in the slums of the cities and in the countryside lead to pollution of air, soil and water.

Bangladesh is in a dilemma: promoting economic growth without degrading the environment in these days of soaring food prices, global financial crisis and climate change.

Bangladesh's survival is dependent on appropriate policies to cope with the threats of global warming. Much depends on the government, NGOs, academic institutions and the people, who must work together to combat the effects of global warming with the assistance of the international community.

It is the poor who will suffer most when the deleterious consequences of global warming hit the country steadily and surely.

In this respect, political parties must have a strategy to grapple with global warming. The strategy should envision a future, which will be better than the current situation, and it should be achievable within a time framework. Vision is a bridge between the current state and a future optimum state.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Corrupticians

NO NONSENSE

This commentary should be eye an opener for our politicians, that political corruption in America compared to that in Bangladesh is like a mole-hill next to a mountain. Here, imprisoned corrupticians are considered as political prisoners, and their supporters treat them as heroes and even reelect them while they are in prison.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

MUCH to their elation, corrupt politicians (corrupticians) of Bangladesh know that they have their counterparts in America also -- differing not only in degree but also in the consequences of being corrupt.

American corrupticians receive kick-backs mostly through campaign contributions, gifts and travel, while Bangladeshi corrupticians indulge in corruption in every conceivable way.

In Bangladesh, the more corrupt you are the more powerful you are, and the more difficult it is to hold you in prison. Your party, leadership, and party supporters will stand behind you through thick and thin. But in America, no one will come to your rescue except your family and your lawyer.

On October 27, Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska was convicted on seven counts of making false statements in the Senate disclosure form about gifts and favours received. His forty years as a politician ended in humiliation. Only four other senators in US history were convicted on charges of corruption -- mostly influence peddling.

Joseph Burton, (R) Kansas, 1904. Charge: influence peddling; John Mitchell (R) Oregon, 1905. Charge: taking \$2,000 for influence peddling; Truman Newberry (R) Michigan, 1919. Charge: conspiracy for spending too much money to win his seat -- overturned by the Supreme Court later; Harrison Williams (D) New Jersey, 1981. Charge: conspiracy and bribery etc; resigned in March 11, 1982 to avoid expulsion; David Durenberger, (R-Minnesota, 1993, charges: conspiracy to submit Senate reimbursement claims).

Instances of corruption and other scandals by congressmen, governors and big city mayors are numerous. However, the horrendous gubernatorial corruption spree that was unearthed on December 9 has overshadowed all past corruption episodes.

Illinois's 51 year old two term governor, Rod Blagojevich, has been indicted by a Federal prosecutor on charges of allegedly trying to sell president-elect Barack Obama's recently vacated US Senate seat, "like a sports agent," according to US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald. He was arrested and then released on bail.

Like all corrupticians, "Blagojevich knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Even by Illinois standards, where the path from the statehouse to the jailhouse has the footprints of numerous governors, is breathtaking.

Maybe the governor should try the "insanity defense," said Mark Brown in the

Chicago Sun-Times. "As a product of Chicago politics, he could argue, he just couldn't help himself. Nobody ever taught him the proper way to govern. All his role models were crooks."

By Illinois law, the governor has the sole power to fill an open US Senate seat. As wisdom would dictate, the state Senate and House look poised to impeach him and change the law to select a new senator by special election. And even if he has the insolence to name someone before state lawmakers step in, the US Senate can reject the appointee constitutionally.

Blagojevich has been under investigation for allegedly indulging in public corruption and "pay to play" deals in the clubby world of Illinois politics.

According to the affidavit, Blagojevich wondered whether he could strip a Chicago children's hospital of \$8 million in state funds after a hospital executive declined to make a \$50,000 campaign contribution.

He also threatened to hold back state assistance to financially stressed Tribune Company, which owns The Chicago Tribune, unless the newspaper dismissed writers critical of him.

The affidavit claimed that Blagojevich discussed with an aide if he could get the job of Health and Human Services secretary or Energy secretary in exchange for making a Senate appointment that Obama approved.

He wondered if Obama would ask Warren Buffett to give \$15 million to a charitable organisation that Blagojevich could head. He even suggested that, in exchange for the Senate appointment, his wife be placed on corporate boards with a salary of \$150,000 a year.

The print and electronic media are having a field day with the story. Obama's Republican opponents are smelling a rat, although Obama categorically said: "I had no contact with the governor or his office, and so I was not aware of what was happening."

Prosecutor Fitzgerald confirmed that there was no indication that Obama was aware of Blagojevich's alleged attempts to use the governor's power to appoint Obama's replacement for financial gain.

This commentary should be eye an opener for our politicians; that political corruption in America compared to that in Bangladesh is like a mole-hill next to a mountain. Here, imprisoned corrupticians are considered as political prisoners, and their supporters treat them as heroes and even reelect them while they are in prison.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.