

So far, a job well done

Armed forces deserve commendation for professionalism and competence over National ID and voter list

THE Chief Advisor's call to the armed forces to discharge their election duties with total neutrality and transparency is timely and necessary. So far, the armed forces have done a creditable job of ensuring that a proper election takes place, which was earlier rendered totally impossible with a partisan EC and voter list that contained the names of 13 million false voters.

We note with satisfaction that for all the record of the military in the past --- coups, counter-coups, assassinations --- the forces have this time round clearly understood and shared the aspirations of all citizens towards building a political edifice that will ensure stronger and more accountable democratic politics. It is against this background that we today expect, along with the Chief Advisor, our armed forces to put a proper finishing touch to the tasks they set out to do when they decided to back the emergency and the resultant caretaker government in its programme of giving the nation a credible election.

We realise, even as we expect the armed forces to carry out their last leg of duty to ensure a free, fair election, that there have been some missteps taken along the way. The minus two theory relating to the chiefs of the two major political parties, attempting to break up established political parties and setting up new ones, etc., did not earn the military any credit. Its handling of the Dhaka University incident, which started well, ended disastrously especially with the arrest, internment and treatment of some teachers. Besides, there have been reports of corrupt dealings indulged in by members of the armed forces at the lower rungs of the hierarchy. We can also mention the destruction of village bazaars in the initial stage, an act that dealt a heavy blow to the rural market place.

This newspaper believes, though, that by and large the military has done a creditable job so far, especially in areas like the preparation of a credible voter list, streamlining the overall roadmap for a return to pluralistic government, etc. We also commend them for their role during Sidr and the two floods and that of the BDR in the face of an abnormal price rise and shortage of essentials. Our faith about the commitment of the armed forces and their senior officers has been vindicated. In this regard, we particularly commend the role of the army chief of staff, General Mueen U. Ahmed, who from day one committed the armed forces to ensuring a transition to democracy through a credible election and has lived up to public expectations.

These remaining few days before the elections are crucial. We expect the armed forces to demonstrate the same degree of high professionalism, political impartiality and respect for democracy they have shown in the past nearly two years. Through helping the election process and creating an environment where all voters can exercise their right of franchise without fear, the armed forces can perform their last act of helping to put in place a truly representative government and thereby earn the gratitude of the nation.

Metropolis development plan

City dweller' interest must take precedence

IT is disconcerting to note from a report appearing in this newspaper that the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) for Dhaka metropolitan area is all but ready to get the government nod despite having some serious flaws. Experts in the field have expressed their reservations about the plan, and although the ministry contends that the matter has been given a public hearing, such matters deserve serious examination rather than being publicly debated, a procedure that in itself can at best be termed as perfunctory.

There are several aspects of the plan, which have been expounded upon by the experts, that raise concern, and which we suggest the government give a serious rethink.

It is a matter of concern, given the capital's flood prone character, because of the utterly shoddy way construction has taken place in Dhaka in the last two decades or so, causing a large swathe of the catchments area to be filled up by not only the land developers but also the administration, that the city's land use categories have been reclassified and the flood flow areas have been designated as residential areas. If that were so there is no denying that it will bring a windfall for the real estate developers at the expense of the city dwellers and the environment. Equally disconcerting is the fact that productive arable lands will be brought under urban development, enhancing the adverse impact of urbanisation on agriculture even further.

The capital lacks adequate open space for the people of Dhaka. While it would seem pointless to talk about open-space-to-man ratio for Dhaka city, hardly a locality in the city has room enough for the people of that area to get breathing space in the midst of the concrete jungle that Dhaka has become. In view of that, the idea of converting the area now occupied by the Dhaka Central Jail, into a housing and shopping complex, is an ill considered idea. That area should be converted into a park in the mold of the Ramna Park for the dwellers of old Dhaka.

We understand the need for a comprehensive plan for Dhaka area to arrest indiscriminate urbanisation. However, it appears that there is an undue haste in getting the plan through. No development plan can be at the expense of the environment or the comfort of the people living in the area. We suggest that the government recast its mind to the plan before giving it approval.

Alliances have consequences

STRAIGHT TALK

There can be little doubt that in the absence of its electoral alliance with BNP, JI would be confined to the margins of Bangladeshi politics, in line with the extent of its support among the public.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

IN between elections, it seems as though the country is firmly united against both the elements that were opposed to the liberation war in 1971 as well as those who would try to misuse religion for their own political gain.

Thus, we regularly see meetings and seminars and (in the days before emergency) demonstrations and rallies protesting the rehabilitation of war criminals and demanding the ouster of anti-liberation elements from the political sphere, if not their prosecution for war crimes.

The newspapers are filled with condemnatory op-eds and editorials and a chorus of talking heads on television denounces the anti-liberation elements in unison.

It is the same with pseudo-religious hucksters trying to abuse the people's religious sentiments for political advancement. When they rallied to force the authorities to remove five baul sculptures from in front of Zia International Airport, the outraged backlash was genuine, and the counter-demonstrations dwarfed the original protests by the Islamists.

People well understood that there is nothing un-Islamic about statues per se and that the obscurantists were misusing religion for their own ends: to demonstrate their political muscle and to strike a blow against Bangladesh's indigenous, syncretic Islamic tradition that the bauls represented.

The affection among the Bangladeshi public for events such as Pohela Boishakh and for activities such as jatra, much hated

by the pseudo-religious obscurantists, is similarly widespread and genuine.

Nor is this merely an elitist point of view. Television shows do voxpop segments and there are any number of opinion polls out there that will confirm that large majorities of Bangladeshis have no sympathy for those who were opposed to our liberation war and that they are also opposed to the politicisation of religion.

Indeed, any random stroll down any middle-class or working-class neighbourhood, urban or rural, will turn up evidence that these concerns are shared in every section of our society.

One could be forgiven for concluding, therefore, that any political alliance that encompasses either unrepentant and unreconstructed anti-liberation elements or pseudo-religious confidence men, to say nothing of both, as core constituents, would be consigned to political oblivion at the polls.

Certainly, when the Jamaat-e-Islami runs independently on its own steam, its record is unimpressive. The last time it faced voters without the protective umbrella of the four-party alliance was in 1996, and the party was almost wiped off the face of the earth.

Indeed, if we look at the JI's share of the popular vote, we see that it has diminished steadily since 1991, when the party secured over 12 per cent of the vote, to 1996 when its vote share had diminished to around 8 per cent of the total, to 2001 when its vote share was below 5 per cent.

In 1991, the party's 4 million plus votes translated into eighteen seats in parlia-



A vote for BNP is a vote for Jamaat.

ment. In 1996, the party's share of the vote shrank by around half a million, and the number of its seats in parliament plummeted to three. In 2001, the party's vote shrank even further, to less than two and a half million, but, due to being in the four-party alliance, it received seventeen seats in parliament, which it was able to parlay into two cabinet seats.

There can be little doubt that in the absence of its electoral alliance with BNP, JI would be confined to the margins of Bangladeshi politics, in line with the extent of its support among the public. What alliance with the BNP has allowed the party to do is to leverage itself into a position where it can wield influence and power far in excess of its popularity.

It has allowed the party to place its people throughout the civil administration and the police services. It has allowed them to steadily move the centre of political gravity in the country to the right even though there is little support among the voting public for such a shift.

How has this been possible? It is possible because many people who would never dream of voting for the JI turn a blind eye to the fact that it is a key component of the

four-party alliance when they vote for the BNP.

Surely, the time has come for those who profess to be opposed to anti-liberation elements and religion-based politics to put their votes where their mouths are. It is time to accept the hard truth that in the world of coalition politics a vote for BNP is a vote for JI.

There are many BNP voters who are appalled at this, as there are many AL voters who are appalled by the AL's alliance with the JP. These BNP voters are pro-liberation and pro-secularism and are very opposed to JI. So what should they do?

If BNP voters want their party back they need to make a stand against the alliance with JI. They do not need to vote for the AL, which would be anathema to them. There are other parties to vote for, there are independent candidates, and there is the no vote, signifying lack of confidence in any of the names on the ballots.

I would suggest that any of these options would be the more conscientious one for those who do not wish to empower the JI any further.

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Projection politics

In social science, "projection" is used to denote a source of prejudice and discrimination in a multi-racial society. Many people have personal traits that they consider undesirable. They wish to rid themselves of those traits, but they cannot always do it directly either because they find the effort too difficult or because they are unable to admit to themselves that they possess those traits.

M. SAIDUL ISLAM

OVER the last few decades, Bangladesh has developed some unique forms of political culture, which have not only retarded social and economic developments as expected but also have driven the whole nation towards backwardness. "Projection" is one of the conspicuous political traits practiced in Bangladesh.

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are unable to admit to themselves that they possess those traits.

They may relieve their tension by attributing the unwanted traits to others, often members of another group. This makes it possible for them to reject and condemn the traits without rejecting and condemning themselves. Since the emotional pressures underlying projection can be very intense, it is difficult to counter them with rational arguments.

An example of projection often cited by many social scientists is the white attitude toward black sexuality in the United States. Historically, many whites saw blacks as extremely promiscuous and uninhibited in their sexual relations, and there was much concern about protecting white women from sexual attacks by black

men. Actually, white men enjoyed virtually unlimited sexual access to black women, particularly slaves.

White society, however, regarded overt sexuality as unacceptable, and it is likely that white men felt some guilt about their sexual desires and adventures. To alleviate their guilt, they projected their own lust and sexuality onto black men much easier course than admitting the discrepancy between their own values and their behaviour.

We often find a similar pattern in Bangladesh politics. The mainstream political parties spend much of their time and energy projecting their political opponents with various negative connotations and labels, but unfortunately they themselves are the best examples of those labels. When the leaders of a political alliance, for example, label their political opponents with various negative images such as corrupted, looters, gangs, violent cadres, vote-thieves etc., all these labels apply to the projectors too. They cannot, in reality, escape from those negative images.

The purpose of projection politics is clear: first, they want to erase their guilt by projecting others in a similar fashion. Secondly, they want to divert people's attention from their own faults to their political opponents'. Finally, when the leaders do not have much to say about their

achievements and future vision of progress, they indulge in projection politics.

Though some political leaders the most corrupted bunch of individuals attack their opponents with the same traits that they already have and thereby feel relief from their guilt, they cannot hide themselves from conscious people. They only make themselves laughable and ridiculous.

The practice of projection gradually becomes an uncontested norm, and political opponents gradually turn into political enemies. The normalisation of this deviant practice turns the nation towards hatred, division, concoction of lies, silly-mentality, and deterioration of self-esteem. The political leaders can, therefore, be easily used as trump-cards by the imperialist foreign powers.

Surprisingly, some political traits are so normalised and embedded in the mainstream political parties and its supporters that problematising those traits is sometimes regarded as abnormal. Bangladesh politics is unfortunately witnessing a resurgence of various dirty practice, including projection politics, before the general election.

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Winter, war and refugee camps

We were having great difficulty in getting supplies through to the refugee camps because the roads in the border areas were choked with Indian military supplies in November and early December. Sometimes we used aircraft and flew supplies from Kolkata to Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur, but that was quite expensive.

JULIAN FRANCIS

"SO, what were you doing in December, 1971?" asked a colleague the other day. Every year at this time, as well as in the month of March, I remember vividly the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. In charge of Oxfam's refugee relief program covering 500,000 refugees, I was very worried about the onset of winter as many of the camps in which we were working were in very cold areas of North Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.

We were having great difficulty in getting supplies through to the refugee camps because the roads in the border areas were choked with Indian military supplies in November and early December. Sometimes we used aircraft and flew supplies from Kolkata to Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur, but that was quite expensive. At the beginning of December 1971, we were

expecting an aircraft from Oxfam-America with medical supplies worth about \$900,000, but at the last moment it was diverted to Madras because of the outbreak of war and we had to clear the supplies through customs and transport them to Kolkata.

A few days after the war started, I managed to get the Pakistan Radio's English news, and the propaganda machine said that the Pakistan Air Force had scored a direct hit on the Kolkata telephone exchange and that the Howrah Bridge was floating down the Hooghly! I remember that it was on December 7 that we learnt with horror that President Nixon had ordered the US 7th Fleet to the Bay of Bengal in an effort to prevent the Indian and Mukti Bahini forces from defeating the Pakistanis.

Officially, this super flotilla "the most powerful force in the world" was said to be going to evacuate a few American citizens

from Dhaka, but the intention was clear. I remember how a well-know American doctor working with us in the refugee camps, Dr Jon Rohde, broke down in tears when he heard the reports about the 7th Fleet coming to the Bay of Bengal.

As the fighting intensified, my main concern was not only to keep relief supplies moving to the refugee camps but also to ensure the safety of all our staff. The young doctors from the Kolkata and Bombay medical colleges and the Gandhian workers from Orissa and Gujarat had to be withdrawn for their own safety.

We were sure in those early days of the short war that it would be over very soon and that Bangladesh would be free, but we were very aware of the great relief and rehabilitation needs for the future and so we were already calculating what sort of assistance Oxfam could provide and through which organisations we might be able to work. I see from a telex which I sent in December 1971 that it was estimated by some that Bangladesh would need half a million tons of rice per month, and that there was an immediate need of 1,000 trucks and 500 buses, and that most shelter materials such as bamboos had been destroyed by the Pakistan army.

Oxfam was one of the first donors of Brac, which is now probably the largest NGO in the world, and also supported the early work of another outstanding NGO, Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

We were also able to procure 3 truck-carrying ferries, and to assist in the repair of many others. I remember that the Bangladesh Inland Waterways Authority wanted to name the ferries after Liberation War martyrs, but after my experience of getting to know the flora and fauna of Bangladesh and how they are part of the country's poetry and music, we requested that the vessels be named after flowers. And so, Kamini, Kosturi and Korobi were so named, and they continue to ply across the river at Goalondo to this day, some 37 years later.

As soon as Bangladesh was free and the refugees started streaming home, we had to close down our work in an orderly way. One day in early February 1972, I was called out of the Oxfam office and there in the garden were about 300 people. I was worried that they had come with some grievance, but soon the reason for their visit was clear. From some waste wool and some wire these people, from a camp called Digberia, had fashioned some "woollen flowers." These were presented to me in a roughly made bamboo vase as a token of their thanks to Oxfam. They had come to say goodbye. It was such a moving moment.

These, then, are a few of my memories.

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