

Begum Zia's allegations

Alarmist words can only create confusion

WITH the election less than a week away, the question of atmospheric congeniality, which certainly includes avoidance of any misleading posturing by the parties and leaders concerned, is now very important for conducting the election and a smooth return to democracy. But we notice that Begum Khaleda Zia, the BNP chairperson, has been uttering some alarmist words regarding the way the election is being organised, or the government's "motive" behind it. And the Election Commission's role is what seems to worry her most.

Given Begum Zia's stature as a political leader and BNP chairperson, who was prime minister of the country for two terms in the past, people take her utterances, as they should, quite seriously. Begum Zia has expressed her concern that a conspiracy is on to bring a "puppet" government to power. While this could be, and in all likelihood is, an election posturing, albeit of the virulent kind, such an allegation can indeed cause great worries to people looking forward to a peaceful transition to democratic order.

If Begum Zia has any evidence to substantiate it, then it is her duty to reveal it to the public. And if the allegation has any substance, we must delve deep into the matter and dig out the truth. The political leaders are asking for fulfillment of all the conditions that may make the election free and fair and place it above any controversy. Begum Zia is not lagging behind anybody in this respect. And we do endorse her view that the elections must be acceptable to all and the disruptive forces, if any, be thwarted at any cost.

But what the leaders have to bear in mind is that avoidance of alarmist words and acts must also be ensured to create the ideal conditions for an election. Launching a psychological warfare against perceived enemies can only be counter-productive. And the onus here rests with the top leaders whose utterances do influence people and help mould public opinion. And even if all these are election gimmicks or preemptive acts aiming to cope with any situation that might arise in the future, we believe such tactics should be avoided.

Tehran goes tough on Shirin Ebadi

Iran's government is expected to uphold human rights

THE shutting down of the offices of a human rights group in Tehran is a matter of deep concern. The concern is heightened by the fact that the group is headed by the Iranian Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, who has for long been campaigning in defence of civil liberties in her country. Her strained relations with the government, which has seen her as a symbol of anti-Iranian propaganda in the West, have naturally made matters difficult for both sides.

The crackdown on Mrs. Ebadi's human rights group is unfortunate because it holds up the image of a government unable or unwilling to accept dissent. The fact that Iranian police did not even show a warrant for the closure of the group's office but only a number on the warrant gives out a wrong signal on the part of the government. There is little question that the Nobel laureate's relentless criticism of the government, which she has accused of systematically violating human rights, has riled the government. There are people, a very large body of them, in the country who see hardly any difference between what Ebadi has been saying and what governments in the West have been doing in terms of dealing with Iran. The sensitivities of the regime are therefore understandable. And yet there is a clear case for democratic expression that Ebadi's rights body as well as others have been making for years, especially since the end of the moderate government led by former president Mohammad Khatami.

The Iranian regime has been under international pressure over its nuclear programme for years. On top of that, its human rights record has drawn flak. Given such realities, it will do President Ahmadinejad and the administration he leads much good if human rights groups are allowed to work without fetters in the larger and long-term interest of the Iranian people and government.

Return of the Pirates of Golden Bengal?

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

We are eagerly waiting for the release of the sequel to *Pirates of Golden Bengal*. The title of the second part is *Return of the Pirates of Golden Bengal*, and know what? The same cast and crew have joined together to make this film.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WE are eagerly waiting for the release of the sequel to *Pirates of Golden Bengal*. The title of the second part is *Return of the Pirates of Golden Bengal*, and know what? The same cast and crew have joined together to make this film, which promises to be as entertaining as the first one, with horrendous scenes of rape, knifing, shooting, street violence, kidnapping, arson and what not. Along with these gory scenes there will be dialogues filled with lies and deceit, false promises and denials, denigration and disparagement, to keep the audience wondering.

Ah, you ask about the budget? Don't you worry, it is going to be a mega-budget movie and the money is coming from right, left, front, back, up and bottom. In fact, there is a constant supply of money -- black, white, red, green -- to spend on big time publicity, so that the movie becomes a box office hit, just as did the first one. It did run full-house for five long years. So, the sequel makers are quite excited that the second part, *Return of the Pirates of Golden Bengal*, will be another smashing hit and run for another five years.

You see, in this era of electronic communication boom, publicity plays the vital role in getting you to places you want to be. If you are good at having a number of electronic media under your payroll, you will be able to befoul a whole lot of gullible people in this country. Once dazed by a strong dose of publicity stunt, this whole lot of people will queue up to watch the sequel again and again, and clap at the ingenuity of the film-

makers and the cast and crew.

Their eyes will pop out at the incredible things the band of pirates will do right before their eyes. They will keep wondering, after leaving the theatre, when were they robbed of their money, land, water-bodies, homes, factories and graveyards!

People, in general, get drawn to violence-filled pirate movies instead of something that talks about dignity, hard work, honesty, discipline, nation building or integrity. It is possibly because violence is deeply buried in our unconscious, which finds a release through watching those movies. We watch the looting, plundering, sword fights and murders in the films with great interest, unknowingly imagining ourselves in the role of those pirates.

We secretly want to be as strong, courageous, invincible and lawless as those pirates. We do not want to be as cool and composed as Tajuddin Ahmed; we do not want to be as wise as Amartya Sen; we do not want to be as patriotic as Martin Luther King.

Interesting observations

Lately, I have come across a plethora of thoughts of men and women who think deep about this country they love and want to see it placed high among the progressive countries. I could sense the underlying pain and frustration in each line, and thought of sharing these with you.

A letter writer wanted to know what his immediate past generation did to arrange the trials of the war criminals, and why are we shouting about it 37 years after the liberation! He was disturbed at the fact that some of the



Whose colours will be hoisted on December 30?

war criminals flew the flag of Bangladesh on their cars when they became ministers. He thought it was a mockery of our liberation war, and we gave those war criminals the opportunity to laugh at our inability to ensure justice for those who sacrificed their lives for our liberty. He goes on to say: "Our failure to punish these barefaced collaborators actually endorses the view once held by these traitors: 'the Bengalis are only good at talking, not at doing'."

In another letter another citizen said that both the major political parties have made controversial alliances. He strongly argued that "to save the nation from endless miseries, we must not vote for the corrupt candidates. And if we find no honest candidates we must cast 'no' votes."

Being frustrated and angered by the call of militants for chopping-off the heads of those who refuse to follow their beliefs, another letter writer stressed that Muslims were not permitted to kill a human, even an enemy soldier, unjustly. He said that there was no room for terrorism or terrorists in Islam. Therefore, "time has come when Muslims of the world should commission religious as well as moral instruments to fight against terrorism!"

Then I noticed an interesting letter in this

daily on the election manifesto. He believed that the promises of the two major parties included "all aspects and expectations of the people, from eradication of corruption to ensuring job for at least one youth from each family." But the writer has asked the pertinent question at this point. He asked: "When someone promises something, there should also be another clause telling what the promising parties will do in case they fail to fulfill the promises for which the people will vote them."

Each party can also add one more promise, that if it is voted to power but fails to fulfill 60% of its election promises within first three years of its tenure, the government will resign and handover power to the opposition for the remaining two years. This system will enable the people to decide easily the fate of the parties during the next general election.

However, to evaluate the performance/achievement of the party in power, there should an independent body, and that is the crux of the matter."

Now, aren't those great thoughts? Yes, they are. But, I wonder when we have such wise people in this country, how come *Altoos* and *Faltoos* get elected to come to parliament!

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Expectations

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We hope that the political parties will come to their senses and deliver the goods as expected. The fulfillment of these expectations in right earnest would serve political parties better, not to speak of people.

ABDUL BAYES

AT long last, the nation heaved a sigh of relief. I am, indeed, happy to know that a new government will take over next year. The overdue election was supposed to be held on December 29, 2008. But what are these "other things" that may not remain as they ought to be? These "other things" have two sources of origin.

First, the EC and the government and second, the political parties. In the recent past, the EC had failed to show that it was truly independent. Its reliance on government directives made a mockery of its credibility in ensuring a free and fair election. Occasionally, it has also shifted from its earlier position. For example, the RPO stipulates that parties will choose candidates from a panel selected by the grass-root levels of the organisations. To our knowledge, the

BNP-Jamat alliance did not adhere to this.

The EC had earlier declared that the dissident candidates would not be allowed to join another party and get nomination, but that has happened. Till now, we are not aware of any actions taken by the EC for these deviations.

Therefore, there could be ample scope to suspect that the EC has been changing its goal post to suit the interest of particular groups. We can only hope that it will be thus far, and no further.

On the other hand, the government came under fire with its baseless comment that the two major political parties had failed to reach a common stance on election date. Reportedly, both the parties reacted sharply to this.

The political parties should see that post-January 11 expectations of people are religiously upheld. What are the expectations?

First, money and muscle should not dominate nominations.

Second, political parties should display a sense of mutual respect throughout the whole process of election. Tolerance should be the key to their pursuit of goals.

Third, political parties should have the culture of accepting defeat. After all, only one side will win. The winner should also ensure that magnanimity comes from victory. Both winner and loser should work together in parliament.

Fourth, the parliament should become the heart of all national debates and centre of complaints. The nation does not want the street to be the centre of agitations anymore.

Fifth, institutions like ACC, PSC, and the judiciary etc. should be kept out of political interventions. They should be made more powerful, independent and credible. In the past, especially during the previous regime, these institutions were allegedly ruined under the boots of the politically selected cadres.

One of the greatest lessons of the recent past is that politicisation of institutions might bring in heavy casualty for the party that does so.

And last but not the least, rightly or wrongly, there is a notion that political parties do not want local institutions to be strengthened due to immense opposition from MPs. This government wanted to hold upazila elections before the parliament

election, but they will be held under a new political government.

Suspensions loom large about holding of that election, based on the past performance of political parties. The expectation this time is that all these assumptions would be incorrect and the new government would duly hold upazila elections on the due date. The reason for our backwardness -- or poverty -- is the lack of local voices in project planning, monitoring and implementation.

This is an age of decentralisation of power, where local level institutions should have elected bodies so that the voices of local people heard can be heard. No matter how many projects we chalk out to help people in rural areas, only the presence of strong institutions at local level could yield fruit.

The expectations that we described above are not new, but have never been fulfilled. We hope that the political parties will come to their senses and deliver the goods as expected.

The fulfillment of these expectations in right earnest would serve political parties better, not to speak of people. After all, a modern society cannot live without politics and political parties. Politicians must realise that the time has come for abandonment of the past mindset and beginning of a new era.

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One week to go

BOTTOM LINE

Corruption and other ills of society cannot be removed by law or by force. Unless people elect honest and competent people to the parliament, corruption or abuse of power cannot be totally eliminated.

HARUN UR RASHID

BANGLADESH stands at a crossroads, and the path to a new, invigorated Bangladesh depends on how the new political forces that emerge after the national elections on December 29 accept an environment characterised by mutual tolerance and respect, rule of law and accountability to people.

It is reported by NGO Sujon that Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has nominated 4 convicts, 16 accused, 12 loan defaulters, 7 relatives of top party leaders and one corruption suspect, while Awami League (AL) nominated 10 accused, 1 convict, 8 loan defaulters, two relatives of top party leaders and one corruption suspect. JP nominated 1 convict, and 4 loan defaulters, while Jamaat-e-Islami nominated 3 accused and one corruption suspect, and other parties nominated 10 loan defaulters (The Daily Star, December 4, 2008).

Observers and some media have pointed out that the nomination of candidates shows that leaders of major political

parties have not changed their old mindset, and rejected many persons who advocated reforms of parties.

The major parties -- AL and BNP -- released their election manifestos on December 12 and 13 (AL in English and BNP in Bangla), respectively.

When comparing the AL 23-point manifesto with the 35-point manifesto of BNP, observers say that many of their promises for good governance, accountability for their actions, independence of judiciary, strengthening of Anti-Corruption Commission, and political decisions on consensus basis on important national issues are similar.

Direct election for women, instead of reserved seats in the parliament, has been delayed until 2021 by both major parties. Women rights groups view it as disappointing.

According to some analysts, there appear to be three major differences between the two manifestos. AL's manifesto provides a vision for the country for 2021 and deals with day-to-day issues,

while BNP's manifesto enumerates primarily contemporary burning issues.

Second, BNP's manifesto criticises the caretaker government while AL's manifesto states that the caretaker government has ruled "with various limitations, weaknesses, lapses as well as some successes."

Third, and most importantly, there is a difference in the way the two parties end their manifestos with slogans.

AL concludes with three slogans -- "Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu and Long Live Bangladesh," while BNP ends its manifesto with "Let Allah provide strength to serve the country for benefit of people, Allah Hafez, Bangladesh Zindabad, and BNP Zindabad." (English translation is mine)

If one analyses the slogans, it appears that AL's slogans are primarily based on pro-liberation ethos and separation of religion from politics, while BNP's slogans attempt to emphasise the link between religion and politics and uses non-Bangla words such as "Zindabad."

Some observers said that major parties have not taken a clear stand on the issues of hartal and siege programs. Furthermore, many political analysts argue that major parties did not say what they will do if not voted to power.

It is reported that there are more female voters than male voters. 33% of voters are reportedly first-time voters. About 5 million voters who are prisoners in 67 jails across the country will be, for the first time, eligible to vote through postal ballot. Furthermore, there is a provision for "no" vote in the ballot paper.

A total of 49 women candidates will contest the national elections, although 82 women candidates submitted nomination papers from 88 constituencies, compared to 38 women candidates during the 2001 national elections from 46 constituencies and 36 women candidates during the 1996 general polls from 48 constituencies.

A few innovative voter's awareness programs have commenced for publicity, asking voters not to vote for convicts or accused people, or loan defaulters. The programs explain who to vote for, who not to vote for, how to vote and how to identify the right person to vote for, and why voters should not vote for certain people.

During the presentation of a short film-sketch in one of the programs, a wife requests voters not to vote for her criminal husband, and a son asks people not to vote for his father as he is a loan-defaulter. Each of the programs ends with a jingle, *Amar vote ami debo, dekhe shune, chinney debo* (My vote belongs to me and I will vote after due consideration and after identifying the right person). Some of the film-sketches are shown through various media across the country.

Corruption and other ills of society cannot be removed by law or by force. Unless people elect honest and competent people to the parliament, corruption or abuse of power cannot be totally eliminated. There is a saying: "People get the government they deserve."

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