

A glaring instance of governance deficit Why not computerise driving licensing system?

ONE other than the chairman, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has disclosed that 50 percent of the driving licences carried by motor drivers across the country are fake. What is more startling is the admission that those bogus licences were not issued by BRTA. Who were they issued by, then? Pat came the reply, albeit without any action plan to remedy the situation: the manufacturing racket is not all a private sector affair, a section of staff in BRTA and the ministry of communications are involved in the counterfeit licensing business.

The BRTA chief's disclosure is an underestimation of the malaise; for, we have heard it said from time to time by police authorities, independent traffic scene observers and road fatalities experts that the incidence of counterfeit licensing could be as high as 80-90 percent, particularly insofar as Dhaka Metropolitan area goes.

It was stated at the dialogue between the ministry of communications and the anti-corruption commission (ACC) that in the last five years government lost Tk. 20 crore in revenue income due to corruption at BRTA. This is again a gross understatement. The calculation on the basis of lost licence fees can only be misleading; because it does not encompass the whole range of losses sustained through putting untrained drivers on the steering wheel that cause lethal accidents. The toll taken of precious human lives, maiming of thousands and throwing thousands of families on the street is simply incalculable in terms of social cost, not to speak of the monetary.

Therefore, seeing the issue entirely through the corruption prism will not be an adequate diagnosis of what ails the system. It is very much a governance failure feeding on a heavy diet of corruption, malpractice and mal-administration. Unfortunately, the caretaker government's reform agenda didn't stretch to the area of road safety, nor do the manifestoes of political parties include this grave public concern.

All said and done, the obvious solution seems rather simple and eminently doable. Why not computerise the whole procedure of licensing from form-filling through fee submission to issuance of licence printouts? When the gigantic work of presenting voter registration cards could be accomplished so efficiently, the matter of turning out driving licenses should be a cake walk.

The observance of Christmas

It is time for a return to values

CHRISTIANS all over the world celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ yesterday. On a larger scale, people of all faiths recalled the birth and sacrifices of Christ as well as the values he espoused in his brief life. Like other prophets of old, Jesus Christ upheld the unity of men in a universe created to perfection by the Almighty. And like those prophets, he suffered for his belief and yet never wavered in his unshakeable faith in the ability of men and women to rise above self and dedicate themselves to the service of humanity.

Christmas this year has come at a time when much of the world happens to be going through some rather hard economic realities. The credit crunch in the West has led to people buying less simply because they cannot afford to spend as much as they used to. Christmas and New Year sales this year have been poor because of such factors, with the result that the celebrations have been quite muted in comparison to earlier times. There is thus a need for a renewal of hope, in the ability of nations and governments to tide over the crisis in order for global economic stability to return. An equally important point this Christmas season is the subtle return of values, in terms of rational thinking, that we have lately witnessed. The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States has been as much an acceptance of his mantra of change as it has been about a turning away by Americans from the neo-conservatism that has dominated the American political landscape in the last eight years.

In today's world, nothing suits us better -- and that irrespective of our various faiths --- than to turn around and return to the sense of ethics that Creation has been all about. Jesus Christ upheld the brotherhood of men. He knew, as the poet Archibald MacLeish once put it so succinctly, that we were brothers on the earth together, brothers who know they are truly brothers.

With apologies, a belated Merry Christmas to all our Christian friends and readers.

Democracy 3.0

STRAIGHT TALK

If we want people to vote for good candidates then all we need to do is to ensure that they are able to vote their consciences in safety and security. Believe me, the voters will take care of the rest. Have a little faith in the Bangladeshi people.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

SO here we are at long last. This is our third attempt at democracy since we gained independence in 1971. The first attempt lasted less than four years and came unraveled in 1975, and the second lasted fifteen years but ran out of steam in the early days of 2007.

I have written earlier that it is possible to divide Bangladesh's political history into four distinct periods, or republics, if you will: 1972-1975, 1975-1982, 1982-1990, and 1991-2007.

Each period has been longer than the one preceding it, if not always either more stable or more democratic. But each period came with its in-built limitations that inevitably led to its end, and each time we have had to go back to the drawing board as a nation to come up with something new and hopefully more durable than that which preceded it.

Now, after the unraveling of the Fourth

Republic in the early days of 2007 and after a non-democratic interregnum of two years, here we are looking at the dawning of the Fifth Republic. Democracy 3.0.

What have we learned over the past two years? The first thing we have learned (not that it was ever in question, but anyway) is that people prefer democratic rule to undemocratic rule.

They are willing, in extreme circumstances, to abide by an unelected government for a limited period of time, but only on the explicit understanding that such a government's tenure in office is finite and that it is in place only as long as is necessary for a good election to be held.

People fully understood that the situation in January 2007 was untenable and that extreme measures were necessary in order to safeguard their right to a free and fair election. That is why they initially welcomed the caretaker government.

Much of the sheen has worn off the government, for one reason or another,

these past two years, but people have shown themselves willing to put up with it and its foibles in the hope of getting a more functional polity.

But at the end of the day there can be no question in anyone's mind that the Bangladeshi people want, and will accept nothing less than, the right to freely vote and determine their own destiny.

The second thing that we have learned (not that it was ever in question, but anyway) is that when it comes to the dysfunction in our democracy, the people are not the problem.

The people do not want lousy candidates. They do not want to vote for criminals and the corrupt. To the extent that their choice is between lousy candidates and an unelected government, they will take the lousy candidates.

But no one should misinterpret this to think that they are content with the choices before them or to think that they are not capable of appreciating good candidates when they are given such a choice.

It is up to the political parties to now start putting more and more meritorious candidates before the people and trust in the people to make the right choice, rather than nominating the same old compromised faces on the incorrect and patronising assumption that voters are not interested in anything better.

To the extent that meritorious candidates often lose to locally renowned criminals, it is not because the voters have some affinity to or admiration for the criminal.

It is because the voters make a rational

calculation based on their own personal safety and security considerations and whom they think is likely to be able to serve their interests better in the next five years.

If they vote for a corrupt or criminal candidate it is because they either believe that it is not safe for them to vote otherwise or because they believe that such a candidate, for all his or her corruption and criminality, will better represent their constituency's interests.

If we want people to vote for good candidates then all we need to do is to ensure that they are able to vote their consciences in safety and security. Believe me, the voters will take care of the rest. Have a little faith in the Bangladeshi people.

So, as we move to democracy once again, let us hope that the political parties will give the people what they deserve. The people deserve good representatives and competent government that is responsive to their needs and demands. Surely that is not asking too much.

If ever any people in the world deserved more from their leaders than they have received, it is we Bangladeshis. The people deserve far better than they have got so far. I am sure no one would disagree with this statement.

Perhaps this time around, they will get what they deserve, and this iteration of democracy will be the foundation stone for a truly democratic country.

What's the saying? Third time lucky? Third time's the charm? Let's hope so.

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Meet the Marginal Man

CROSS TALK

The Marginal Man contradicts himself margin by margin. He says one thing, but does something else; he loathes practicing what he loves to preach. He shines in the margin, dimmed in essence, never too serious, forever mysterious, staying off the center, grazing on the periphery, enamoured with style, averse to substance.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HERE is a man inside every man. The Rain Man lives inside an autistic person who is either mentally or socially impaired, or both. The Renaissance Man, or Homo Universalis, is someone who is a polymath, whose reach of knowledge goes to more than one topic. Then Francis Fukuyama introduces the Last Man, who is the product of capitalist liberal democracy, his needs for wealth and recognition satisfied in the final stage of social synthesis. Which man lives inside a man in this country? One that fits the bill is the Marginal Man, a wedge-like entity caught in his own contradictions.

Throughout history there have been other kinds of men. Feudal Man, Capitalist Man, even First Man, each man for a particular stage of social progression, shaped by a set of human values suited to it. But the Marginal Man is quite a phenomenon; first identified by Robert E. Park in 1937. This

man is one, whom fate has condemned to live in two antagonistic cultures, "whose mind is the crucible in which two different cultures may be said to melt, and, either wholly or in part, fuse."

For example war criminals participating in our national election is one contradiction. When a deposed autocrat turns into the guardian angel of democracy, that's another. We have mourned for Nur Hussain and we have mourned for Dr. Milon, but in the same breath we have also chanted slogans for their killer in this election season. The last two years have been one helluva stint of contradiction. All that time we waited for the reformers to reform politics, the reformers were reforming themselves.

The Marginal Man is an oxymoron. We are the only nation on earth whose national struggle started with its love of mother tongue. Yet more English language schools have opened in this country since 1971 than ever before. Our urban dialect is

becoming increasingly spiked with foreign words from the English, Hindi and Arabic languages.

More contradictions, the most glaring of them is the plight of freedom fighters in this country. We call them the greatest sons of the soil. And we never worried why they lived and died unsung, even pulled rickshaws or begged for a living while this nation owed its freedom to their blood.

A recent campaign for HIV/AIDS has exposed a fresh contradiction. The man has been made so big on the billboard that the message almost fell off the frame. One billboard looks crowded with spines of books stacked in a bookshelf. It projects the man's credentials all right, but makes it difficult to figure out the campaign.

In fact, this is one unmistakable symptom of the Marginal Man. He is magnified to embellish the message. In the end one contradicts another while both are undermined in the process.

The National Board of Revenue has recently disclosed that 46% of car owners reported fake Tax Identification Number. The Marginal Man does this kind of things. He enjoys life but hates its responsibilities. He is an opportunist, a hypocrite, who wants the best of both worlds because neither world is adequate for him.

Now you see what I mean. The Marginal Man contradicts himself margin by margin. He says one thing, but does something else; he loathes practicing what he loves to preach. He shines in the margin, dimmed in essence, never too serious, forever mysterious, staying off the center, grazing on the periphery, enamoured with style,

averse to substance.

The Marginal Man marginalises everything. He turns into a ceremonial man, his emotions confined to specific dates or events. He is a language martyr in February, a booklover as well. In March he is a freedom fighter, a nostalgic liberator in December. In Boishakh he is a Bengali, a Bangladeshi rest of the year. More than often, he loses his sight of the forest for the trees.

The problem is that he can only sustain his emotions stint by stint. He lives his life in piecemeal, never the whole man, chopped and sliced on the cutting edge of conflicts. What Napoleon said about the Bourbons is true for him. He learns nothing and forgets nothing. He commits mistakes, which he is condemned to repeat.

If we wonder what is wrong with us and why we are still stewing in our own juice thirty-seven years after independence, the Marginal Man has the answer to it. Man marginalised himself, which marginalised government, which marginalised the country. It has been one unbroken vicious cycle of living from edge to edge.

Lined up in sequence, these edges are three original sins: corruption, coup and conspiracy. In three days time, the Marginal Man awaits yet one more margin call from destiny. If he adds more contradictions, he will get more conflicts. If he resolves a few, lucky him will turn from the edge of an abyss.

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Keep them out!

The 2008 election is special because it marks a critical transition and highlights efforts to make the public more informed and engaged in the political process. It is also critical in that communities are working together to emphatically declare that people with blood on their hands do not have the legitimate right to govern, let alone run for political office.

TAZREENA SAJJAD

HAS Bangladesh ever institutionalised a comprehensive vetting process, either in terms of war criminals or in terms of eligibility of political candidates for elections? No, and the absence of a sustained policy has ramifications in the 2008 elections.

Let's begin with the issue of war criminals. It must be noted that while governments did not take the responsibility of weeding them out from the process, particularly post-1975, several key initiatives from private individuals and institutions tried to keep individuals out of the political process.

First, in the context of 1971, the 1972 Collaborators Act identified individuals guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and outlined 11 tribunals that would be held against them. However, a general amnesty released 26,000 of the 37,000, and the remaining approximately 11,000 were freed following the repeal of the Collaborators Act on December 31, 1975.

In the 1990s, Jahanara Imam launched "Gono Adalot" which had widespread public support and which tried Golam

Azam, but the initiative did not translate to any subsequent government policy. The People's Inquiry Commission led by Sufia Kamal was yet another effort to identify the complicity of the members of Jamaat-e-Islam in anti-liberation activities, although this effort too did not translate into a comprehensive government initiative.

Today, growing public outcry demanding that war criminals of 1971 should not participate and garner votes for the 2008 elections highlights continued public demand for accountability. Simultaneously it underscores that despite institutional and bureaucratic reluctance to vet political aspirants, people's voices, if organized in a sustained and strategic manner, can contribute to barring such individuals from entering the political process.

The absence of political will to vet candidates for culpability in large-scale atrocities effectively is not unfortunately limited to the inadequate government measures of the past, but also current decisions which have determined the participation of individuals with murky records in the upcoming elections.

Consider, for example, the recent decision by special chamber judge Joynal

Abedin in the Supreme Court which allows former ministers Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir and Lutfuluzzaman Babar to run for political office even after being convicted for corruption.

It may be noted that it was the same judge who back in 1996 gave a precedent-setting verdict stating that while the election process is going on, the judgment of the of the Election Commission returning officer is final and the higher court cannot interfere in anyway.

In the murky political realities of Bangladesh where large-scale human rights abusers can still exercise their decision to participate in politics without sanction and where the legal process can be subverted and easily politicised, how can vetting processes continue and most importantly, how can they be effective? A few points need to be made given the context of the current elections.

First, what must be recognised is that there is a notable effort for the upcoming elections to collect the records, assets and background information of political candidates; the Election Commission has been primarily responsible for vetting the most questionable of candidates. A few local organisations too have taken up some of the responsibility of collecting information about candidates' backgrounds and assets for public record.

Less, however, is being done to ensure the information collected is readily and easily accessible to the public. Here, the responsibility is three-pronged. First, the Election Commission and local organisations working on clean candidates need to ensure that the information is easily available to the public. Second, media outlets are responsible for creating the venue for the information to be readily

accessible. Third, of course, is the responsibility of the electorate in actually reviewing the information and making informed choices.

The 2008 election is special because it marks a critical transition and highlights efforts to make the public more informed and engaged in the political process. It is also critical in that communities are working together to emphatically declare that people with blood on their hands do not have the legitimate right to govern, let alone run for political office.

Finally, the initiative to demand information about aspiring candidates by the EC should be lauded. In the end, an institutional demand for records of finances and connections can go a long way to ensure that only qualified and "clean" candidates can participate in the political process.

Outside of muscle-flexing by political candidates and the problems of politicisation of the judiciary, the obstacles remain in terms of candidates themselves providing complete and true accounts of their records; the information collected is disseminated timely among the electorate; and the rationale of why war criminals should not be voted in resounds with the public.

Let us forget, in elections, the electorate comprises the final and most important leg of the vetting process. Whether seeking alternatives or exercising the right to the "no" vote in a strategic fashion, in the absence of a comprehensive vetting process, and given the peculiarities of the election process itself, we get to underscore that the final call on who gets to govern is made by us, the voters.

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