

Blemished Upazilla election

A bad start to local government regime

TO say the least the just concluded UZ election has been an anti-climax after the national elections of 29 Dec. We are distressed by the brazen use of political clout to influence the conduct of the local government election by the Awami League.

In this regard the rather rueful comments of the CEC deserve serious consideration of the administration. Among other actions of the AL cadres to manipulate the election, the activity of a minister and an MP to directly use the weight of their office to influence the election, demonstrated an unabashed arrogance by persons holding responsible government position.

This we are constrained to say, much as we abhor saying it, the start to the local government regime, that had been held in a limbo for nearly two decades due to the palpable disinterest of the political parties, has been rather frustrating, primarily because of the unwarranted and illegal interference of the Awami League party workers in a large number of Upazillas. Therefore, the responsibility for a less than a satisfactory election must also be shouldered by the party in power at the moment.

The UZ election has been a revelation for us and we would like to think that it is a revelation for Sheikh Hasina too. She must not fail to see the extent her party has been pervaded by indiscipline and the sway of the criminal and self-serving elements inside the party. The party chief must act decisively and without delay. She should have no illusions about who all are responsible for very nearly spoiling the election, and take them to task, whatever may be their standing in the party. She must do this so as not to spoil the gains of the parliamentary election.

We hope too that she will rein in the very overenthusiastic MPs whose unsolicited and unwise actions have helped only in brining bad name to the party. We feel that the more than the usual interest displayed by the Awami League MPs in the Upazilla election has much to do with the future role in local government matters by parliamentarians that the ruling coalition is contemplating to accord to them. In this regard we would like to refer to our yesterday's editorial and repeat that it would be a bad idea to get the members of Parliament involved in local government affairs.

However, in spite of the way the Upazilla election has gone, our faith in and commitment to the local government system remains unshaken. The AL is pledge-bound to strengthen the local government system. It has now devolved on Sheikh Hasina and her government to redeem her party's pledge.

Breaking new grounds in garment export

Let's concentrate on the new price calculus to reap benefit

IT is with cautious optimism that we greet the news of our garment sector maintaining steady growth in export, pretty much unruffled by the buffeting of global recession. This has been made possible by timely diversification involving addition of some new destinations to our export map. The process began in earnest since mid-2008 with our garment products penetrating Brazil and Mexico markets.

The other relatively new countries on our radar screen are Japan, Russia and South Africa. With a single country exhibition in Japan, participation of local companies in the Moscow Consume-2009 and a demonstrative vigour in South Africa, we may well have bypassed the horror of demand shrinkage in the aftermath of the global financial meltdown.

Therefore, our congratulations on the enterprise of garment manufacturers and exporters, the facilitation measures taken by the export promotion bureau (EPB), and the dynamism of the banking system and ports and custom authorities.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that we have had to mark down the prices to avail of the new market opportunities. Here we have some clear cut suggestions to offer before all those concerned with invigoration of our garment exports. We should try to keep our products competitive by redrawing the strategy for pricing. Let's not forget that the large segment of value addition that we have to provide to garment production through import of raw materials must now be a lighter burden on us because of the falling prices of inputs in the world market. Our diplomatic missions, BGMEA and EPB should adopt a strategy immediately aiming to reduce the cost of shopping inputs in the countries that we import these from. Simultaneously, we must insist on the shipping lines to negotiate best freight rates against the backdrop of free falling oil prices.

Above all, of course, all efforts need to be made to keep industrial peace.

Obama and a crisis ridden world

President Obama wants China, Russia and the emerging economies to view themselves as responsible global players. Such a view is welcome. However, to make this effective, these countries also need to be given a stake in the international system so that they can perform as significant stakeholders within the paradigm of crisis management rather than outside it. They could then be interlocutors of stability and peace.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ON January 20th history was created in the United States and the spirit of democracy vindicated. The world will now wait and watch how a transformed America, with its renewed emphasis on human rights and dignity, engages with crisis ridden situations under President Obama.

There exists a spirit of readiness for constructive engagement not only among the European leadership but also among others in Asia. All of them know that President Obama will have to take decisive action on some of the issues left behind by the Bush administration. They will also hope that "the tactics and tone" of the solutions will be different, particularly with regard to the three key challenges -- the economy, foreign policy and climate change. It is also being anticipated in this regard that there will be a more meaningful and non-unilateral approach on the part of the USA. This last factor assumes that much more importance given the need for close EU-US cooperation, particularly on regulatory issues, the "carrots and sticks" approach towards Iran, and getting in place a new international climate change agreement.

The Obama administration has hit the ground running because it set up policy working groups and candidates for key cabinet positions prior to his stepping into the Oval office. This has also included agreeing on personnel who would be retained or appointed in key positions in the State department. I believe that this will help the new team to quickly establish links with the outside world.

The incoming Administration has drawn up an 'American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan' to restart the US economy and save jobs. This plan is designed to create jobs through investment in green technology, improved infrastructure and

tax cuts. It is clear that critical aspects of the drive to rebuild the US as well as the world economy will require not only US-EU cooperation but also a more active engagement between the USA and the other members of the G-20. Such an approach can underline the need for strong action to address the crisis, strengthening transparency, reinforcing international cooperation and strengthening international financial institutions.

The crisis in Gaza and Israeli obduracy has reiterated once again that the Middle East (finding a just solution in Palestine, gradual withdrawal from Iraq ('responsibly leave Iraq to its people') and curbing renewed growth of the Taliban presence in Afghanistan) will remain the greatest challenge for the new US Administration from day one. Former General Jim Jones, as National Security Adviser in the new team, will have to work very closely with Secretary of State Clinton to show to a sensitive world that there has been a clear shift in focus from the unilateral approach. A participatory and multilateral emphasis will be desirable. The United Nations must be made an essential instrument of US foreign policy.

In Palestine, for example, after the horrible and disproportionate response by Israel on unarmed Palestinian civilians, the US can regain the moral threshold by re-establishing parameters of US policy -- based on the two-state solution with the US committed to discussions that will help to build better lives and institutions for the Palestinian people on the one hand and also provide the Israeli citizens living within Israel the right to live in peace on the other. It might be useful in this regard to persuade the Arab League to create a peace-keeping force under the UN flag to help monitor peace in Gaza. At the same time pressure must be brought to bear on Israel to vacate occupied territory and cease building settlements in total violation of international law.



tion of international law.

Similarly with regard to Iran, Obama could pursue a meaningful engagement by showing the regime the advantage of adopting a different approach. I know that the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act was co-sponsored by the then Senators Obama and Joe Biden in 2007 but now there needs to be a "sticks and carrots approach" with direct diplomacy playing a central role. The EU could play a big part in such a scenario. Iran has direct trade ties with Europe and Iran's growing reliance on Euro as the preferred currency may create that extra nudge.

Afghanistan is another key US priority. The country has moved forward a long way since 2001 in terms of access to health care and education. Unfortunately, however, the security within that country continues to deteriorate due to poor governance and serious corruption among its leadership. This is alienating the population in many parts of Afghanistan and also assisting the Taliban. President Obama is on record that his Administration will be prepared to send in more troops to Afghanistan. That will however not solve the problem. Seven years after Karzai's coming to power, civil society activists and media in Afghanistan are both citing the need for democracy being practiced in the country. They are also pointing out to the absence of economic and employment opportunities outside Kabul. It might be useful to take a fresh look at that war-torn country and to identify common denominators which will help to create local government partnerships and regenerate the economy aided by the collective commitment from Europe that is already in place.

The next key policy issue that will require committed engagement from the new US Administration is climate change. The US must not act as an obstacle towards the achieving of an international agreement on this matter. There has been some progress on creating a framework and this has to be continued.

The new US government will also have to focus not only on India, Pakistan and China but also on the building of relationships with the emerging democracies in Asia through the Asia-Pacific Democracy Partnership (APDP). There is need to widen this initiative through meaningful engagement with moderate democracies like Bangladesh (greater access in matters of trade). This can be undertaken through the Millennium Challenge Corporation which gives economic support to countries which have undertaken internal reforms.

President Obama wants China, Russia and the emerging economies to view themselves as responsible global players. Such a view is welcome. However, to make this effective, these countries also need to be given a stake in the international system so that they can perform as significant stakeholders within the paradigm of crisis management rather than outside it. They could then be interlocutors of stability and peace.

Today, we have an incremental chance for change and a new relationship between the United States and the rest of the world based on mutual respect. This is an opportunity that should not be lost due to prejudice or narrow self-interest.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Stamping out terrorism

Extremism of the fundamentalist variety can be countered by a joint strategy of persuasion and tough action, with political direction being conspicuously pronounced. Political sagacity and patience are needed to fight the long battle against extremist depredations. If it is a political battle with armed support, and not the other way, we will definitely overcome the present predicament sooner than expected.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

SHAIKH Hasina has emphasised the urgency of stamping out terrorism, and has reportedly instructed the Home Ministry to take immediate steps in that direction. The government also intends to launch fresh investigation into the terrorist activities perpetrated during 2001-2006, and identify the masterminds and their national and international links.

We need to be clear about the threat perception. This is crucial because one cannot possibly treat a disease by denying its existence. So, if one has to venture into meaningful specifics one has to refer to our constitution, because it is the supreme law of the Republic. Article 11 says: "The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed."

The above position pitted against the programme of the extremists leaves no room for ambiguity. Field-level operatives, both in uniform and plainclothes, must have clear directives and plan of action for preventing violent subversive actions.

The enforcement apparatus should separate an act of violence from its politico-social context and thus criminalise a certain mode of political expression. This line of action would be appropriate because there is a need to reject the religious extremists' right to legitimise violence as part of a larger social movement.

The jihadists must not be bracketed with political dissenters, although such differentiation is difficult from an enforcement point of view. Enforcement of laws for dealing with religious extremists should distinguish them from constitutionally oriented political elements.

In order to apprehend and punish the extremists, the definition of terrorism should be expanded to an act of association with an extremist group. The authorities should make a list of "proscribed organisations" to which membership, funding or support within the territory of

Bangladesh shall be banned. There must be a list of acts that would constitute support to a "banned organisation."

The process of identifying an extremist should be discreet and transparent. However, those who use violence to propagate their ideology cannot be treated as political dissidents even though the roots are socio-political.

The government should attach greater importance to proscription and should designate the extremist organisation, to sap its material base, stop routes of material replenishment and seize its assets.

The attack on poet Shamsur Rahman, the planting of extremely high-powered bombs at a meeting place and helipad in Kotlipara, the discovery of bomb making materials in Sonar Bangla Soap Factory owned by Mufti Hannan (now in custody), the attacks on a Communist Party meeting and at the Bengali New Year cultural function at Ramna Park, were evidence of the growing mischief making potential of the extremist groups.

There was information about some charitable and voluntary bodies which were receiving funds from abroad for activities that could not be satisfactorily explained. That some such bodies were asked to close their activities in Bangladesh, and that the expatriates working in those organisations had left, is testimony to their association with Bangladeshi elements believing in unconstitutional ways of achieving their socio-political objectives.

Whether extremist elements have flourished due to the support of the establishment may be a matter for investigation, but the reality is that they have not been under surveillance. The attacks on the state apparatus were adequate proof of the growth of terrorist organisations.

Maybe a perception has developed among the terrorist groups that Bangladesh is incapable of meeting their challenge. We have to ascertain if any parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing



GRENADE ATTACK ON AL MEETING, 21 AUG, 2004

to organisations that serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the regional or international terror network?

Since terrorism of the so-called Islamic extremists has increased, thereby demanding changes in the strategy to counter it, are we ready to seriously study the problem? We do not see any attempts to examine links between terrorist groups, the conditions in which they had spawned, the politician-militant nexus, the kind of patronage they receive, etc. The question is, are we trying to appreciate all the factors that contribute to the "quality and extent" of internal security threats? Another question is whether our failure to deal with terrorism is attributable to the inefficiency and corruption of the law enforcing machinery.

What kept the state apparatus in a deep slumber while the bigots carried on virtually undisturbed? There is a suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. Was there no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity and our independent national existence? These questions should bother us because patriotic citizens of Bangladesh must know what the answers are.

The pernicious culture of playing to the tune of unscrupulous political masters or pandering to their unholy wishes by the state investigating agencies has not occurred all on a sudden. Spells of unconstitutional rule, particularly during 1982-90, have substantially damaged the ethos of our public service, including the investigating agencies. While leadership deficits account for some malfeasance, the real damage was done by an insensitive and myopic dictatorial establishment that was hell-bent on screwing all regula-

tory and corrective institutions. The unwholesome effect of such institution-bashing is now being felt by a concerned citizenry.

Extremism of the fundamentalist variety can be countered by a joint strategy of persuasion and tough action, with political direction being conspicuously pronounced. Political sagacity and patience are needed to fight the long battle against extremist depredations. If it is a political battle with armed support, and not the other way, we will definitely overcome the present predicament sooner than expected.

One would not be far from reality in saying that Bangladesh polity is being challenged by extremist groups that profess a philosophy of life and of government that is inimical to the beliefs and life style of the mainstream. We are now facing an adversary who is armed enough to commit widespread violence.

Democracy has to allow the interaction of different shades of opinion or divergent views to ensure the vibrancy of a pluralist society. However, that does not mean that there will be freedom to convert the entire country into a theocratic dispensation by application of force and intimidation and, the litigant public has to approach the clerics for resolution of disputes and judgment, as demanded.

There is a challenge to our way of life. This must be understood by the mainstream political parties, which are pledge-bound to uphold, protect and preserve our constitution. Therefore, the visible enemy must be caught by the forelock and be dealt with under the law. A sovereign Republic, born out of a historic struggle entailing epic human sacrifices, demands that. We must not fail.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.