

Reading between the lines

For the first time Bangladesh has four elected leaders of consequence at the *upazila* level. Each one of them has to find out and secure his/her niche in the *upazila* by using wits, intelligence, services to and acceptability by the people. It will be interesting to see how these elected leaders build up the governance equations.

SAADAT HUSAIN

THE results of the *upazila* elections should not be taken lightly. Read with the results of the national elections, they have far reaching implications for governance at the district and *upazila* (sub district) level. The *upazila* results should be considered as a package, they should not be confined to the list of elected chairmen only.

The female and the male vice-chairmen along with the chairmen will form the caucus of *upazila* administration. They will be supported by many government functionaries, of whom the UNO (*upazila nirbahi officer*) and the OC (officer in charge of the thana) are the most important. The elected representatives will provide the leadership of the *upazila* administration.

The Bangladesh Constitution unequivocally provides for elected leadership at each tier of administrative units. With a unitary government at the centre, the need for autonomous and powerful local bodies as buffer organisations to safeguard the rights of individual citizens can hardly be over-emphasised. The creation of the

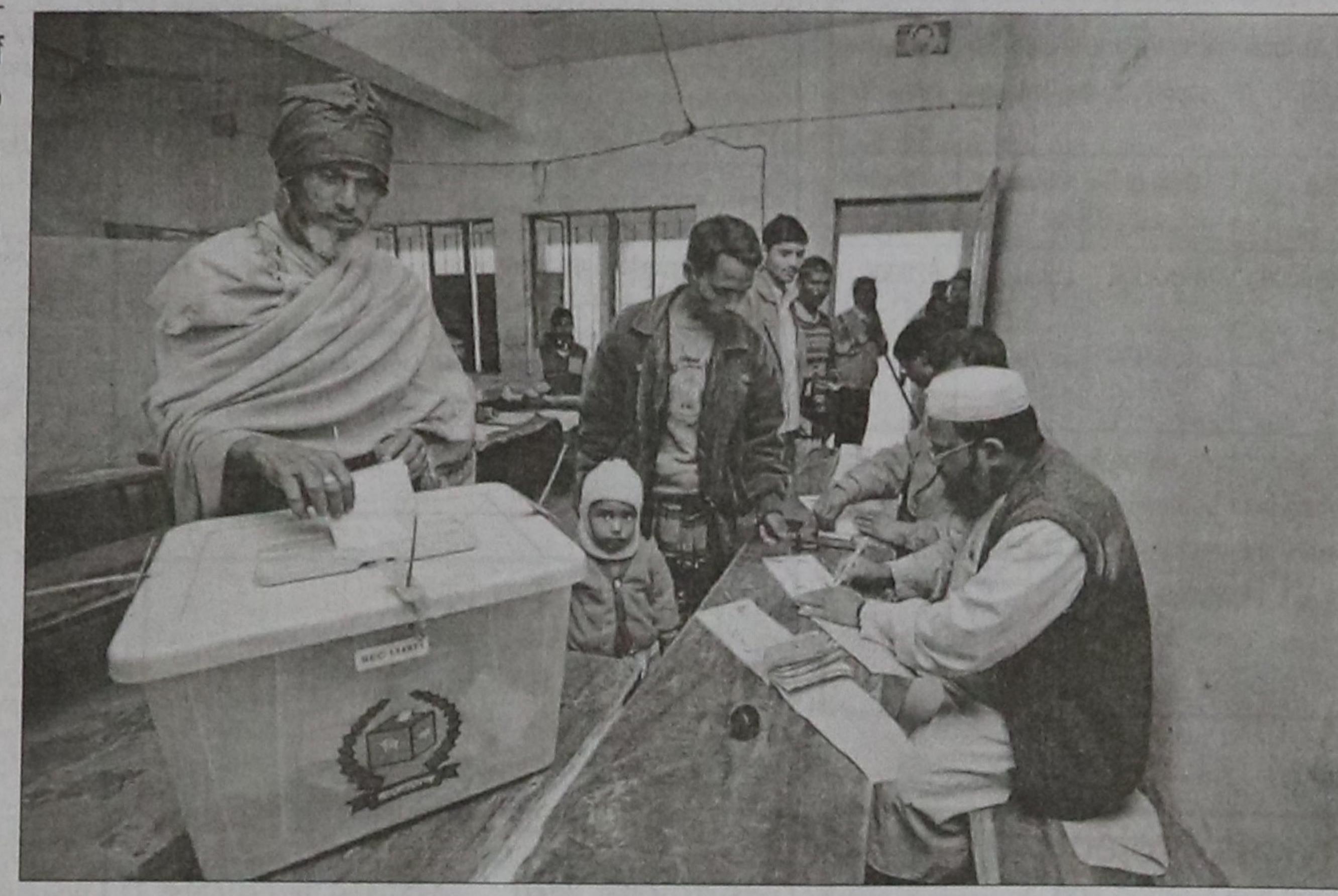
upazila parishad was theoretically sound.

It did not take off because a martial law government introduced it. Major political parties did not participate in the elections held in 1985 and '90. The elected chairmen were considered social pariahs and opportunists who, in most cases, had a walkover in the absence of formidable opponents.

The elected chairmen never commanded the trust and respect of the common people of the *upazilas*. Citizens all over the country looked down upon them as they were elected through dubious elections conducted by the dictatorial martial law regime.

Elected chairmen of the *upazila parishads* were removed in 1991, soon after the democratic government took over. Since then, there was no elected head of the *upazila* administration -- it was officially run by the executive officer appointed by the central government.

Despite specific directions of the higher judiciary elections to *upazila parishads* were delayed indefinitely on lame excuses. Influential members of both the ruling and the opposition parties joined forces to scuttle any move to install elected chairmen at the *upazila parishads*.



Upazila resurrected.

With the extinction of the elected chairman's position in the *parishad*, the *upazila* turned out to be the exclusive preserve of the executive officer (UNO) or the local MP. In the democratic dispensation the ruling party MP with his popular support base at the local level and hefty clout at the centre gradually arrogated into the jurisdiction of government functionaries and

office bearers of community organisations.

The opposition MPs were often ignored by the *upazila* officers, except in cases where consultations and approval by them were mandatory. The ruling party MPs, in effect, exercised the power of a fief without formally assuming the office of the local administrator. The officials were at his beck and call. In some *upazilas* the power of the lawmaker was stretched to an

untenable limit.

A new structure of power equation is likely to emerge with the restoration of elected chairman's position along with the creation of two vice-chairman's positions. The position of the local MP will be exalted, but three other persons will be juxtaposed to share power with him at the *upazila* level.

By design or by default, the executive position of the chairmen and vice-chairmen, so long held by the local MP

or the UNO, will bestow some administrative power to them. The results of the *upazila* elections present interesting and complicated features in this respect.

Contrary to headline impressions, a careful examination of the results will reveal that they do not throw a monochromatic shade so far as party affiliations are concerned. Though the chairmen overwhelmingly belong to the ruling party, in many *upazilas* the chairman and the vice-chairmen are affiliated to three different parties. If the local MPs are included in the blending, they will construct a more tessellated setting.

If the MPs, the chairmen and vice-chairmen of the *upazilas* assemble in a seminar room at the district headquarter to speak out their minds, one is likely to hear the voices of all the major political clusters of the country. Seen from this perspective, the 300 MPs, the chairmen and vice-chairmen of about 465 *upazilas* (withheld and cancelled results excluded) constitute a highly valuable resource pool in the country. Policy planners can greatly benefit if they use this resource to assess citizens response on important issues.

For the first time Bangladesh has four elected leaders of consequence at the *upazila* level. Each one of them has to find out and secure his/her niche in the *upazila* by using wits, intelligence, services to and acceptability by the people. It will be interesting to see how these elected leaders build up the governance equations in the *upazila* for the welfare of their existing and potential constituents.

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Market over schools in Chittagong!

Chittagong City Corporation now manages these two schools. Does that responsibility, however, give the corporation the license to do whatever it wishes with them? Enlightened people of Chittagong are unanimous on the point that the corporation just cannot do so.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

CONSCIOUS people of Chittagong are now passing anxious days due to the adamant stance of Chittagong City Corporation's Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury regarding erection of markets over Aparnacharan Girl's High School and Krishnokumari Girl's High School situated in the heart of Chittagong city.

And, therein lies the danger of the matter being hushed up by the ones who hold the sway in terms of political supremacy in the port city. Reportedly, these two schools were built nearly eighty years back on the land donated by a great personality for expansion of girls' education in this region of the Chittagong city.

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The contribution of these two schools towards betterment of women education has been immense. Many students of these schools are serving in the government and the country in

various capacities. It bears special mention that Prilita Waddedar, a great martyred anti-British revolutionary of the subcontinent, was once headmistress of Aparnacharan School.

Interestingly enough, a good number of old markets of Chittagong -- New Market, Reazuddin Bazar, Rifle Club Market, Shah Amanat Market, and Jafur Hawker Market -- are positioned around these two schools. Thus, one more market and, that too, over the original school buildings and adjacent playgrounds of the schools will be redundant.

Moreover, the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), the building-design approval authority of the port city, has not yet approved the proposed design of the market building due to defects in the design. The question of propriety will, however, not evaporate even if CDA goes for approving the design any time because the all-important "public interest argument" will remain as strong as it is now.

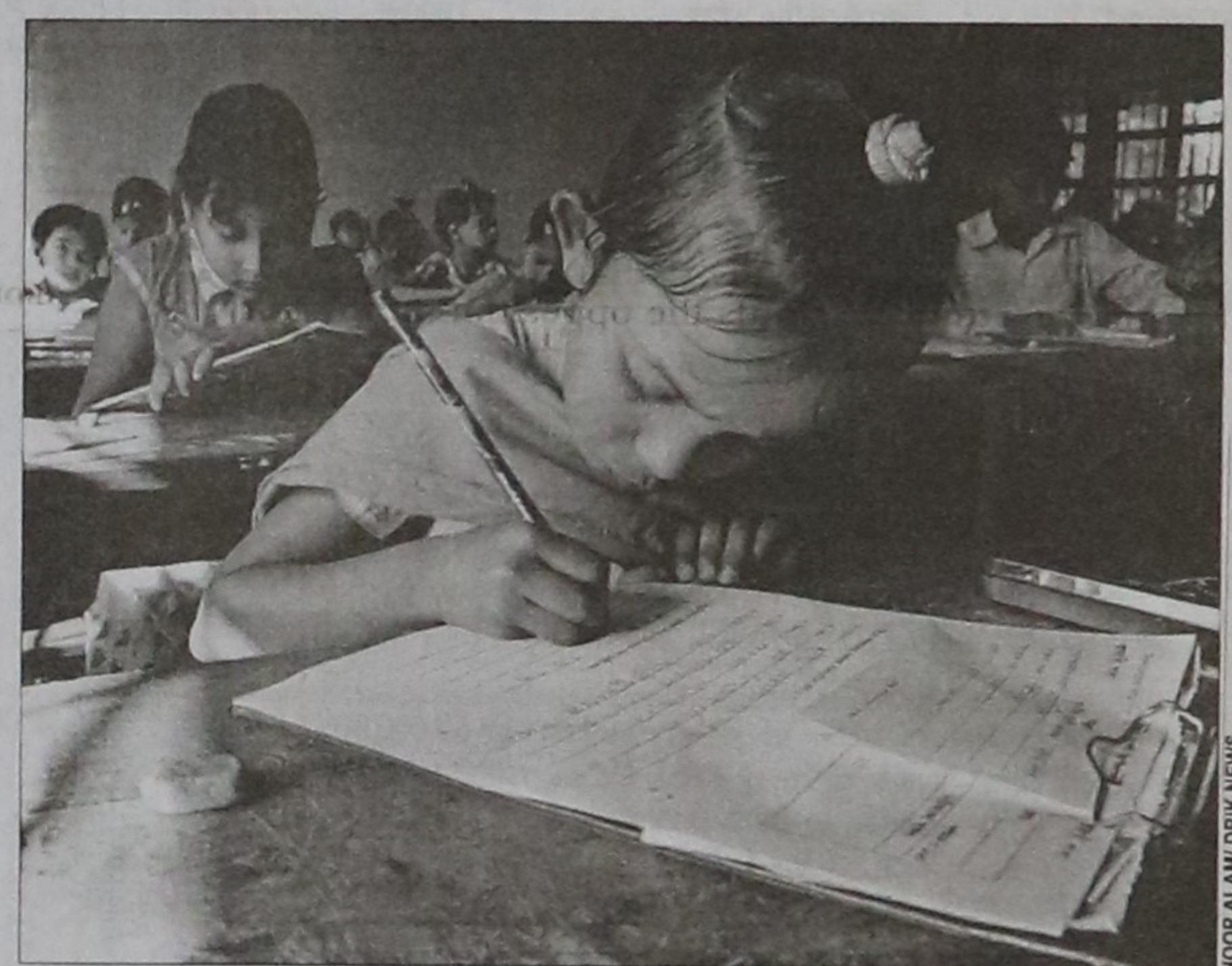
The argument on behalf of the mayor is, reportedly, accumulation of money for development work. Concerned citizens of Chittagong have, however, rejected it outright. They are of the opinion that this is sheer commercialised thinking. It is quite natural that

movement of the girls, too, will become highly hazardous, as the proposed multi-storied building will have a market and girls' schools in the same complex.

Admittedly, big cities of our country are becoming densely populated these days, Dhaka and Chittagong being the worst affected. Most of the newly set-up educational institutions, ranging from kindergarten to university, have no real infrastructure now, let alone a playground, which is a necessity for any educational institution.

It is really unfortunate that the mayor of the second largest city of Bangladesh is out to snatch the playgrounds from the two schools. Such an initiative by the elected mayor, not by an ordinary person, has thus saddened rather than infuriated the city dwellers. If the obstinacy persists, however, it might not take too long for the current peaceful movement to be transformed into an insistent one.

Though it was initially a plea of the students of the two schools, it is becoming a major city issue rapidly because the people feeling the prick of conscience just cannot exhibit inertia at such a move by the city father and his corporation. I hope that the mayor will soon permanently move back from his



Shoppers, not scholars?

position of building the proposed market over the said schools.

Should the mayor remain intransigent, however, the government will have no option but to swing into action to dissuade him from doing so, more for its own interest than for the interests of the students of the schools. If the government opts for sidelining the

issue, treating it a local concern, it will not take too long to become a national issue by courtesy of the ever-vigilant media, the outcome of which will hardly be pleasant for the fledgling government.

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The VC merry-go-round

The government, therefore, can and should deal with the problems of the universities without any political consideration. If the government can make the appointments in the universities on personal and professional qualities of the appointees, it would be good for the country as well as for the government.

M. SHAH ALAM

FOR many reasons, public universities, especially the universities of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Jahangirnagar, have always drawn the attention of the nation. Home of the bulk of university students, these four autonomous universities (run by separate laws) have not only provided the intellectual foundation of our nation, but have also played a major role in its political development. The role of the students and teachers of these universities up to the War of Liberation and in the war itself was remarkable.

One of the problems of the public universities is the appointment to the top positions. After a change of government in Bangladesh, the changes in the top positions in the universities, the scramble for these positions

that the VC is to be appointed under the university law from a panel of three elected by the university senate has almost been forgotten.

These positions are being contested by very respectable persons whose status and position as university professors should in no way be considered lower than the top university executive posts. University professorship in North America and Europe, and in

many countries of Asia, is a symbol of honour and dignity as well as scholarship. Unfortunately, we have failed to ensure such quality in our country.

Had we been able to do so, and provided for high academic standards and uplifting of the image of teaching, the race for the executive jobs, I believe, would have disappeared. We need a situation where senior and capable teachers will not pursue these jobs,

rather the jobs will pursue them for the good of the universities.

For the above dream to come true, we need to improve the academic standards of the universities. This would require reforms in university education, entailing not simply amendments to the university acts or ordinances, but also measures to be undertaken by the university authorities as well as by the government, which, inter alia, ought to include rationalisation and containment of student politics; reduction of frequency of elections to various university bodies and appointment of teachers to such bodies on seniority and rotation; improvement in the academic and research facilities; and incentive for professional brilliance.

That change in the top positions in the public universities follows a change of government is becoming a sort of convention. Let it be. However, let it be done systematically. More importantly, let the new appointments be made on objective criteria. I am sure no party in power will ever be in dearth of academically sound and competent persons amongst its own sympathisers for such appointments.

The Search Committee formed by

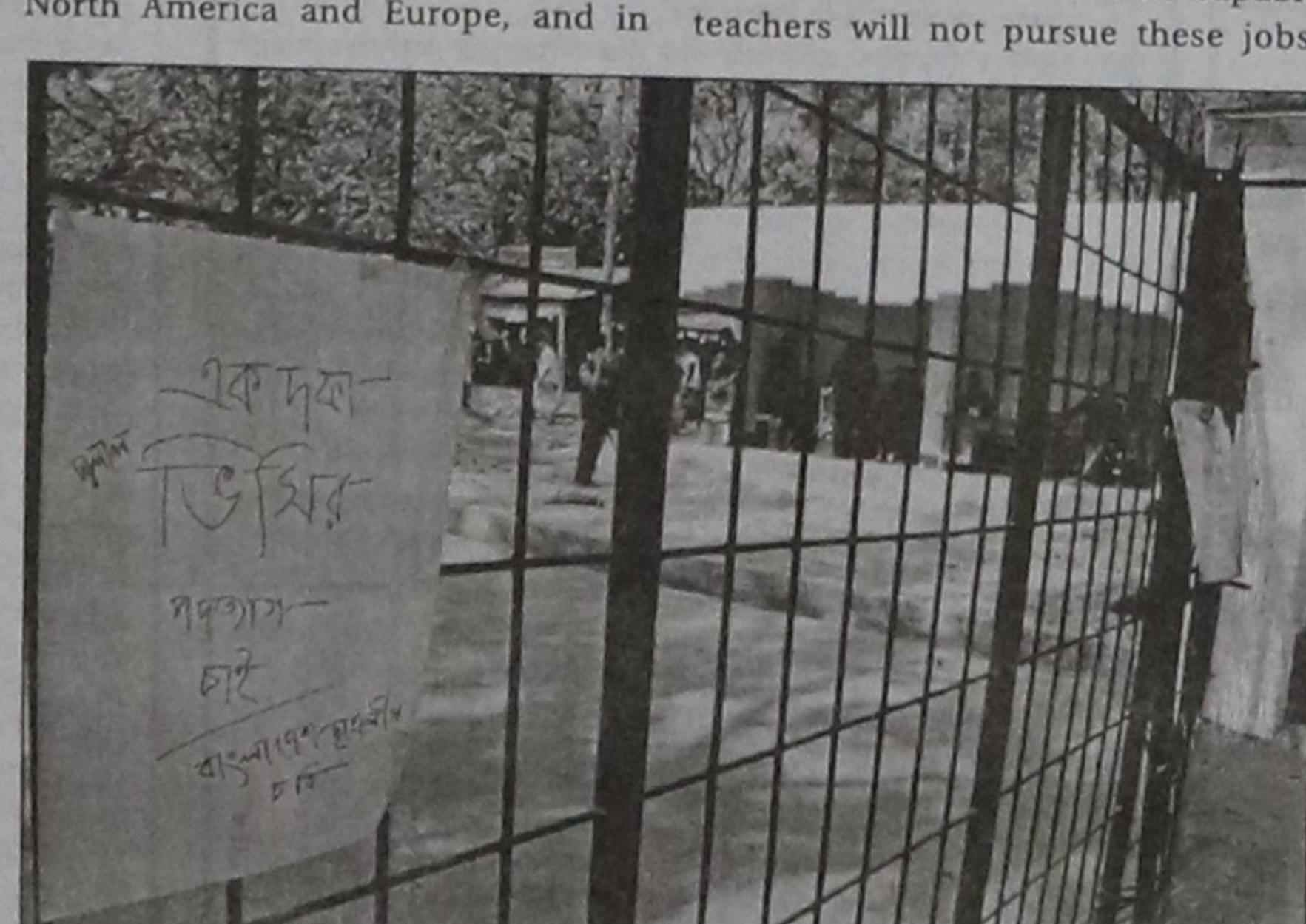
last the caretaker government for making recommendations for appointment to the key positions in the public universities other than in the four mentioned above, is also not free from criticism. Inviting applications for the jobs may not be always appropriate.

Under the present scheme, many deserving and competent persons may not apply at all. The committee may be broadened, and given the task of looking for better candidates for the jobs.

In any case, the government's role, whether in appointing the members of the search committee or in endorsing its recommendations, would be decisive. We must understand that students' or teachers' politics do not have any impact on national politics or on general elections.

The government, therefore, can and should deal with the problems of the universities without any political consideration. If the government can make the appointments in the universities on personal and professional qualities of the appointees, it would be good for the country as well as for the government.

Dr. M. Shah Alam is Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Chittagong.



One goes, another comes!