

Election expenditure report

Political parties' dithering could send a wrong signal

WITH the deadline for submitting poll expenditure reports to the Election Commission expiring today, only four out of the 38 political parties that took part in the December 29 general election have so far complied with the requirement. Worse still, none of the major parties figure in the first four.

Submission of election expenditure accounts to the EC, we believe, is a necessary exercise for making sure that the contestants kept within the stipulated expenditure ceiling for the sake of the integrity of the electoral process. It is no secret that candidates often spend staggering amounts of money to get elected, and thus the seeds of corruption are sown in a way from the very beginning. The credibility of the hearsay that in the past many lawmakers tried to recover the spent amount with interest, once they were elected, has never been questioned. Moreover, huge election expenditures also tend to create an uneven playing field, as the candidates with less money, but a lot more integrity and competence, find themselves at a disadvantage.

One would have expected the leading political parties to respond to EC's directive as a matter of top priority. The parties have to be driven by an urge to comply with the rules. It is the political parties, otherwise so vocal against corruption, which have to lead from the front by setting an example of transparency. Only rhetorical denunciation of corruption will carry little conviction.

The political parties are exposing themselves to criticism by dragging their feet on an important obligation. First, the issue of accountability, which is inseparable from transparency in all activities of the parties, seems to be sidetracked. Secondly, non-compliance with EC rules sends a wrong signal regarding the intent of the political parties. Obviously, people might begin to think whether the parties have anything to hide as far as those expenditures are concerned. Logically speaking, submission of such reports should not have been a particularly difficult job, if there was no violation of rules by the parties. Thirdly, there will be reason enough to believe that the parties are not at all interested in electoral reforms designed to pave the way for honest and educated people to become public leaders.

The EC will, reportedly, extend the time for submission of the reports by another 30 days. We hope the political parties will be awakened to the need for observing the rules and submitting the election expenditure reports within the extended time-limit.

Now we have the right to information

Set up the information commission quickly

THE government deserves our congratulations for passing the RTI bill. It was long overdue. Thanks must also go to those organisations and members of the civil society, teachers and journalists who had been relentlessly pursuing the matter. The erstwhile caretaker government should also be credited for drawing up the RTI ordinance 2008. This we feel is the first step towards establishing good governance and ensuring a regime of accountability in all government institutions.

Of note is the addition of several new provisions to the new bill, including the one that limits the blanket authority of certain agencies of the government to disclose information on 'sensitive' matters. The arbiter on such matters would now be the Information Commission which the Act provides for.

Now that we have constitutional guarantee for obtaining information from the government on all matters, except a few that deals with sensitive issues, it now devolves on all of us to ensure that the Act functions well and as intended.

The first task of the government now would be to set up the information commission, which it must do within the stipulated ninety days. We would like to see the commission headed by persons of impeccable integrity and it be given all the authority to be able to deal effectively with state institutions and agencies. This is essential for the commission to deliver.

An equally important task for the administration will be to make the RTI functional in the quickest possible time. It would be necessary to appoint a designated officer in every office who would be responsible for the task of providing the required information as demanded by an individual within the stipulated time. The sooner it is done the quicker will we be able to derive the benefits.

RTI Act is a new experience for us, and it may be well for us to draw upon the experience of the neighbouring countries, particularly India that have such an act already in place and is being implemented fully, in applying the provisions of the Act. Their experience including those dealing with the teething problems that might have been there may come in handy for us. We may also be able to get a good sense of how the provisions have benefitted an elected government.

The business of militancy

All over the country, out of sheer poverty, thousands of young people are joining questionable madrasas where money flows abundantly. Who cares where it comes from! The operators of those madrasas are getting rich overnight with foreign money that comes in the name of the madrasas.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

LOOK at those youngsters throwing bricks at the police in the name of Islam! Those pranksters are making a mockery of religion instead of doing anything good. And then read the hair-raising stories about another young man's castle-madrasa (literally with a moat, draw-bridge and dungeon) in Bhola where bullets and bombs were made to protect Islam! Now we hear that some of those weapons and bullets were sold to river pirates of that remote area. Good Lord! What do we hear next!

There are hundreds of such madrasas where thousands of youngsters are being given training on how to make and use firearms, swords, explosives etc., to protect Islam. Islam *Khatreimei hei* ... Islam is in great trouble ... and it needs to be rescued. And these wayward pranksters will rescue it! Who do they think they are? God sent saviours? Knights in shining armour? If they think they were serving Islam then why did they run away like common thieves when Rab raided their hideout in Bhola? Why didn't they challenge Rab if they hadn't broken any law?

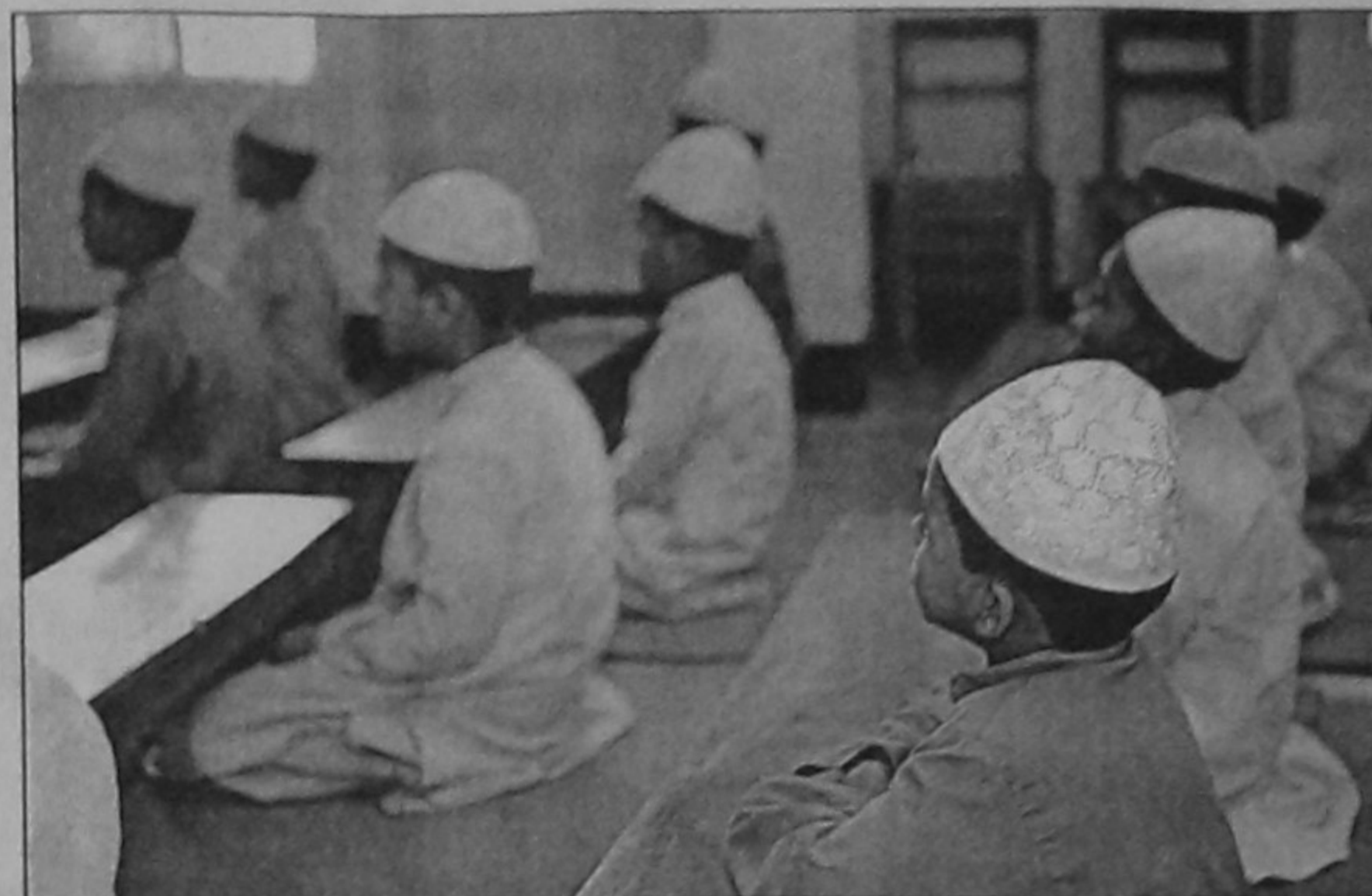
The steady rise in the number of youngsters in the militant groups is of utmost concern. And it is doubly disconcerting when we see young boys and girls in their late teens or early twenties coming from educated and well-off families joining the outfits. Their joining boosts the morale of the masterminds who feel happy to have

penetrated one more stratum in society. What drives such young people, studying at prestigious institutes at home or abroad, to join a movement that is built on fantasies and is destined to turn bloody any time?

Here I would like to recount the "close encounter" of a student of Barisal Medical College with some recruiters. He said that soon after his admission some young men in Islamic dress and headgear came to his hostel room and wanted to talk. They asked about his parents and about his academic achievements so far. Then they invited him to attend prayers with them in the following week in a particular mosque and listen to the boyan (sermon) of their *hujur*. Two of the young men were senior students of the same medical college and two were madrasa teachers.

The foursome came again the following night and openly offered to send home-cooked food for him two times a day for the next five years since hostel food was not good. And they also offered to buy him all the medical books he needed. His other financial needs would also be met. All he had to do was join their group and support their "mission" of establishing Islamic sharia law in the country.

The young man was flabbergasted but was not in the mood to accept anything that came free, especially from people who came in the middle of the night. He politely told them to leave him alone. Later, he found out that these groups targeted brilliant students and offered them financial support in exchange of their commitment



Will they go the militant way?

for joining them.

All over the country, out of sheer poverty, thousands of young people are joining questionable madrasas where money flows abundantly. Who cares where it comes from! The operators of those madrasas are getting rich overnight with foreign money that comes in the name of the madrasas. Most of them blatantly cheat when they prepare the yearly reports and declare the number of students they have enrolled.

Many chain young students to pillars so that they cannot escape, and sexual abuse is not infrequent. In most of these madrasas, besides Bangla, students are taught to give their sermons in Urdu (why Urdu when their audience is Bangalis!). Reportedly, in one such madrasa, green and white are the colours of the *pajama* and *kurta*. We understand why.

Let us come back to the city-bred youngsters from affluent backgrounds joining militant outfits. Many educated youngsters are opting to become militants more as a fashion than anything else. They have

exhausted all avenues of having fun, like fast driving, rock music, dance parties, *yaba*, *shisha* etc., and are now "trying out" militancy as the new way to "chill." They find it "super cool" to play around with weapons, and it feels good to feel important. It is indeed a new dimension that needs to be studied with due seriousness by competent authorities.

The audacity of the pranksters to attack state forces or opening up militancy training centres in the country only reconfirms that it has become too easy to sell Islam in this country, all sorts of home grown versions, to the poor and credulous humans ready to swallow anything that comes free. If it comes with some bonus offer, like cash money, then it is even better. And if taking a few lives in the name of Islam would land one in heaven the quickest way, what can be more tempting? The administration has to wake up and do what it needs to do to avoid a bloodbath in the near future.

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A financial 9/11

An economic crisis does not kill and maim in the same way as do terror attacks. In the current case, its impact will be more diffuse, more long-term and less visible. But the effects may be just as far-reaching, stretching across more countries and covering more aspects of nations' lives, not just security.

DAVID MILIBAND

AFTER 2001, the foreign policies of many countries were shaped in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, which had wrenched minds back to the imperative of national security. Today those foreign policies are again being reshaped -- but this time by the economic crisis. And the changes will be as profound as those wrought by 9/11.

An economic crisis does not kill and maim in the same way as do terror attacks. In the current case, its impact will be more diffuse, more long-term and less visible. But the effects may be just as far-reaching, stretching across more countries and covering more aspects of nations' lives, not just security.

The history of past crises shows that our fate will be determined less by the event itself than by how we respond. The U.S. Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930 is an oft-quoted example of how a mismanaged recession was turned into a depression. By contrast, the financial crashes and panics of the early part of the 20th century sparked a wave of institutional innovations, with changes to central banking, labour and competition laws, and consumer safety

regulation.

In the current case, the wrong response is clear; to pander to protectionism, defer action on climate change, turn inward and succumb to extremism. Such warnings a year ago would have sounded alarmist. Today, with governments struggling to hold on to power -- those in Latvia, Iceland, Hungary have already fallen -- they feel all too real.

But while the crisis is giving new momentum to the politics of fear, it is also giving new energy to the politics of hope. What the legal scholar Roberto Unger calls "false necessities" no longer constrain our thinking. Old orthodoxies have crumbled, leaving space that either progressives or reactionaries can fill. To ensure they prevail, progressives must address the deep economic, environmental and political imbalances that gave rise to the current mess.

Economic imbalances between rich and poor created the market in sub-prime mortgages as banks lent to people who could not afford to repay loans. Growing global financial imbalances between countries with surpluses and those with deficits depressed interest rates and created the demand for risky securities.

Americans are now beginning to save more. China is boosting domestic consumption. Certain risky financial services look less attractive. But some imbalances will not correct themselves. In fact, the gaps between rich and poor, within and between countries, may be exacerbated. That is why governments need to rebalance the relationship between the state and markets to create a fairer, more equal distribution of rewards. And the developed world must not abandon its commitments to increasing aid to poor countries, achieving the Millennium Development Goals and completing the Doha round of trade talks.

The second imbalance is environmental; between the resources we consume and the capacity of the planet to replenish itself. This mismatch between demand and supply -- the resource crunch -- exacerbated the credit crunch. With oil imports representing about a third of the U.S. current account deficit, the increase in energy prices added to the financial imbalances.

Addressing this imbalance is made both more possible and more necessary by the crisis today. It has become more possible because the various fiscal stimulus packages have created a major opportunity to step up investment in low-carbon energy, transport and housing. And it has become more necessary because when the economy begins to recover, a return to 2008 oil prices of \$140 dollars a barrel will pull \$800 billion per year out of the U.S., the EU and Japan -- about half the value of their current total stimulus packages.

The final imbalance is political. It concerns the location of power; not just within countries but between the national nature

of politics and the global reach of markets; between Western-dominated multilateral institutions and the eastward shift of economic wealth. The weakness of multilateral institutions is making it hard to deliver adequate concerted policy responses appropriate to the scale of the problem. The crisis, however, is creating a new impetus to strengthen multi-lateralism and share power and responsibility.

Instead of theological debates about whether we need new institutions to include the new economic powers, the G20 format has been created to address this economic crisis at the highest level. The IMF is being strengthened with greater financial capacity and a more representative structure. Governments are coordinating as never before on fiscal responses, interest-rate cuts and regulatory reform.

U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has set out the demands of a "global society." One is a new and effective multi-lateralism -- rights and responsibilities that are enforced. That is important not just on the economy, but regarding nuclear nonproliferation, conflict prevention and human rights as well.

The economic crisis has unleashed competing forces, both progressive and reactionary. In today's interdependent world, imbalances create insecurity and make us all poorer. Now is our chance to find a new equilibrium.

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Chicago, Shahidul and 'Three Cups of Tea'

Last August, the Pakistan government announced that Pakistan's highest civil award, Sitara-e-Pakistan (Star of Pakistan) would go to Mortenson for his courage and humanitarian effort to promote education and literacy in rural areas.

BEENA SARWAR

I love how connections sometimes just "happen," criss-crossing the world, spanning generations, borders and continents. This particular stream traverses Pakistan's early progressive struggle to Chicago, an inspiring book by an American who recently received Pakistan's highest civilian honour, and a Bangladeshi photographer who came to Pakistan to document that moment.

In Chicago for a seminar in May 2007, I stayed with Daniaal Noorani. He is active with *Apna Ghar*, a domestic violence shelter for immigrant, primarily South Asian women. His late parents Malik and Mumtaz Noorani were close friends of my parents, active in the Communist Party and city goings-on.

Tall, jovial Malik Uncle ran a publishing house, *Jan-e-Man Phuphi* (as we called the bright-eyed Mumtaz Noorani because of

the endearment she used for us children) was active with *Anjuman Jamhooriat Pasand Khawateen* (Democratic Women's Association, headed by Tahira Mazhar Ali, still going strong in Lahore).

There is some symbolism about meeting their son in Chicago. I remembered hearing of Dr. Eqbal Ahmad's disappointment when he found a monument to a policeman rather than the Chicago workers who were killed by police fire in 1886. Ironically, the US does not observe May 1 as Labour Day.

Before I left, Daniaal gave me a paperback titled *Three Cups of Tea* by someone I had vaguely heard of, Greg Mortenson. I couldn't put it down. It is mandatory reading for anyone interested in education, Pakistan and the "war on terror."

Mortenson builds schools in Pakistan's remotest areas. The book, co-authored by David Oliver Relin, is sub-titled *One Man's Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time* -- a mission as endangered by the

Taliban as by the militaristic policies of the US and Pakistani governments operating without a political roadmap.

It started in 1993, when Mortenson was recuperating in a tiny, unmapped village, Korphe, after being injured while climbing the world's second highest mountain, K2, in the Karakorams. Shocked that the village school was a patch of land where children sat in the open, scratching their lessons with sticks on the ground, he vowed to build them a school.

Back in the US, he saved rent by sleeping in his car and not taking his girlfriend out to dinner. Not surprisingly, they broke up. Mortenson kept trying to raise funds, manually typing letters to seek help. Two years later he was back at Korphe with a truck-load of building materials.

But he was in for a shock. The villagers told him that they first needed a bridge across the ravine that isolated them. Mortenson nearly went off in a huff. Then he thought about it and realised they were right. An important lesson for aid organisations; ask people what they want and need instead of giving them what you think they should have.

Besides making Korphe more accessible to the world, the bridge enabled the village women to make short trips to visit family on the other side rather than investing days as they used to. And yes, the school was also

built. Mortenson has since helped to build some 78 schools in Pakistan (and Afghanistan), providing education to over 28,000 children, including 18,000 girls.

The second part of the book tells a grimmer story; the impact of the mushrooming Wahabi madrassahs and the war on terror following 9-11. Mortenson recalls an invitation to the Pentagon to talk about his work, only to realise that they were not really interested. If they had listened to him, perhaps the world would be in less of a mess.

Last August, the Pakistan government announced that Pakistan's highest civil award, *Sitara-e-Pakistan* (Star of Pakistan) would go to Mortenson for his courage and humanitarian effort to promote education and literacy in rural areas. The Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam mentioned it when we met last month in Kathmandu. He flew in from Bangladesh especially to record the moment. On March 23rd, he was in Islamabad with friends of Mortenson watching the awards ceremony live on television.

These are, as Salma Hasan Ali wrote on Shahidul's blog: "Kernels of hope that remind us that all will not be lost to violence and a distorted mindset."

Beena Sarwar is an eminent Pakistani journalist and filmmaker.