

BNP's dithering on commitment unfortunate

Election Commission must hold its ground

As the deadline draws close for political parties to submit their amended, ratified constitutions to the Election Commission, questions have cropped up about the inability of some parties to comply with the EC's instructions vis-à-vis the deadline for amending and ratifying their constitutions by July 25. The Awami League has gone for a council meeting on July 24 to ratify the changes in its constitution before meeting the EC deadline. We understand that some other parties are also on track to meet the deadline. But what is certainly galling for the nation are the delaying tactics employed by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party regarding bringing about changes to its own constitution. Of course, there can be no denying the fact that problems within the party have detracted it from holding a council meeting to ratify the changes in its constitution. But that cannot logically explain away the BNP's negative attitude towards standing by a commitment it has already made. Prior to the December 2008 elections, the party along with other parties pledged to go through a democratization of its constitution within six months of the polls.

On Wednesday, the BNP secretary general did not help matters when he wondered aloud if it would not be possible for the EC to extend the time frame for amending and ratifying the party constitution by another six months, meaning till December. To make matters even more worrisome, the party now sees in the Awami League's move for a council meeting on July 24 a conspiracy, indeed collusion between it and the EC to marginalize the BNP. Such an assessment is not only regrettable but plainly puerile. And by coming forth with this kind of attitude, the BNP has not demonstrated the sagacity expected of a major political party that has previously, and more than once, been in power.

Such an episode reflects concerns about the future functioning of the EC as an independent and otherwise fully empowered election body. In such circumstances, it is critically important that the Election Commission keep itself focused on what it originally set out to do, namely, getting the parties to register themselves and then following it up by ensuring internal democratic practices within themselves. Under the rules, the EC has no jurisdiction to extend the time frame for parties to amend and ratify their constitutions unless an amendment is brought to the Representation of People Order. We fail to understand under what rationale the BNP is placing the EC in a constitutional dilemma.

We would have been sympathetic towards BNP's effort to get a time extension, if the party were seen by now to have initiated any serious move to abide by the self-committed obligation.

We are, however, in favour of a limited relaxation of the deadline on the basis of a public undertaking given by the party/parties concerned to the EC that it/they will meet the RPO requirement unflinchingly within the extended time-limit.

Child labour in extremely hazardous circumstances

Enforce the rules of safety at any cost

THE more we hear of a malady or scourge, our sensibilities about it tend to dull. There comes a point when we might feel resigned to its recurrence. That may be the case with newspaper readers, radio listeners and TV watchers. But when the authorities whose responsibility it is to contain or eliminate the malaise should themselves show an attitude of resignation that can hardly be condoned.

This is what seems to have happened with the revelatory reports of the recurring child labour abuses. Where it gets particularly abhorrent is when underage children are engaged in physically and mentally hazardous avocations with routine regularity. That too, without registering their names so as to evade any accountability if that will be enforced at all. On paper, children below 14 years of age are prohibited from employment. Any industry or factory owner taking underage children in will be in breach of law, basically committing a punishable offence. But has anybody heard of any recalcitrant employer being punished. Even given the fact that in our economic conditions, child labour is perhaps an evil that we cannot rid ourselves of too easily, but at least, what we can do is to stymie child labour in life-threatening professions.

The children have been slogging for 12 to 15 hours a day without mandatory eye glasses, hand gloves and masks for an outrageous sum of Tk 250-300 in a week. The ethical and health issues are intertwined here. Why must they be subjected to such inhuman treatment taking advantage of their economic privations?

That, as many as 25 factories could spring up at Keraniganj to produce stove burners largely through the labour of children handling dangerous acid solutions is a ringing indictment on the incompetence of the regulatory authorities. We think, the directorate of labour and the office of the inspector of factories should be directed to take stock of the situation and report to the higher authorities for instructions in a bid to make sure that at least all safety precautions are in place with an added provision for literacy and skill training among the youngsters thereby grooming them up for future employment.

The potato man

The "Potato Man" is a man who drives a vegetable-and-fruit cart, and who is catcalled and jeered at by the neighbourhood boys. The boys go through a life-transforming experience when they realise that they should treat others as kindly as they would like to be treated by others.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NEVER kick a man when he is down, and I don't mean to join the fray when there seems to be no dearth of people who would like to pound on the former army chief since he left office in June. One embittered politician has already taken him to court, filing a defamation suit of Tk.100 crore against him. Others are hissing around the corner, waiting to swoop down. The former strongman is in trouble. He is likely to spend some time in court.

Not to say, it's going to cost him a great deal of money. But that's not why I am writing about him. Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. As it looks, this particular head has tough luck. His uneasiness won't go away even after he has doffed the crown.

I am mainly writing because I am curious about this man. What was he thinking before and after he took upon his shoulder the burden of hoisting "a derailed train back on track?" We, however, shouldn't forget the timing of his advent. It was a time of chaos and conflict. Any conscientious citizen with the power to stop that madness would have done no less than what he did.

So, it's not about what he did, but how he did it. We know he has published fat tomes telling us about what was on his mind. He wanted to have a special kind of democracy for us. He had a busy mind, continuously

searching for solutions to our problems. When the country was faced with potential threat of food shortage, he introduced potato as an alternative. Didn't he?

And it worked. Suddenly the country was buzzing with potato talks, and people got innovative with recipes. It seemed anything was possible with potatoes, and tables were being laid with potato dishes in many government offices.

It showed that he couldn't pull the wool over our eyes. People knew all that time that he was calling the shots. Even after the former chief advisor of the erstwhile caretaker government went to the press to claim that he was in charge, people knew who in the 1/11 family was wearing the pants.

Somehow I am not convinced he should have played that hide and seek with us. People wanted him to take over, and they gladly expected him to finish what he started. They didn't mind that he emerged as a political thinker. They didn't mind that he wrote a scholarly book to tell us about a specially stitched democracy, custom-made for us.

Then he proclaimed himself a crusader against corruption. People were impressed. Thereafter, he sounded like the chosen one when he wrote his memoir. He claimed he had twice dreamt of the Holy Prophet, an auspicious sign of being a devout man. People believed.



Lasting legacy?

With so much trust reposed in him, what has he delivered? I am not sure what was his plan and how good of a plan it could be. Did he have a plan A, or did he have a plan B? If he was aiming at a credible election, did it have to take two years? If he was aiming at a cleanup of the country, was two years enough time?

This is where the first full general of the country loses me. If he were to plan his battles the way he planned 1/11, good riddance he is no longer going to command our forces. But it was obvious that the plan went on an ad hoc basis. He was biting more than he could chew until he choked on it. In the end, he was so busy planning the exit that he exited the plan, if he had one.

May be, life does its own reckoning. He pretended he wasn't in charge so that nobody could point fingers at him. May be, he was pulling the strings behind the scene, while someone else was pulling the strings

behind him. What he evaded before is catching up with him now.

The title of this column has nothing to do with our general's predilection for the potato. I have borrowed it from Megan McDonald's story about what happens when bullies get their comeuppance. The "Potato Man" is a man who drives a vegetable-and-fruit cart, and who is catcalled and jeered at by the neighbourhood boys. The boys go through a life-transforming experience when they realise that they should treat others as kindly as they would like to be treated by others. They apologise to the "Potato Man," who forgives them.

Will the general please come forward? Someone needs to apologise for 1/11. Not for why it was started but for how it was ended.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.
E-mail: badrul151@yahoo.com

UK low carbon transition

We also like to think we've learnt from others who have found success -- such as the success in Germany helping people generate their own clean power. Like them, we will start to pay guaranteed rates for households, businesses, farms and schools to feed unused clean power into the grid.

ED MILIBAND

GLOBAL talks don't have a great reputation for achievement. But last week's G8 climate change talks in Italy broke new ground, and offer an opportunity to prove the doubters wrong. The collective commitment by countries such as United States, Japan and the UK to cut emissions by 80% by 2050, and work to avoid temperature increases above 2 degrees Centigrade, is important.

What now matters is that countries such as the United Kingdom show that we mean it when we say we will cut our emissions.

In combating climate change, we have already broken new ground ourselves in the United Kingdom. We're on track to save

twice the greenhouse gases we promised under Kyoto. We've tried to tackle some of the toughest environmental dilemmas head on, such as coal -- where we have proposed conditions that will mean no new coal-fired power stations can be built without capturing a substantial proportion of their emissions and locking them permanently underground.

We also like to think we've learnt from others who have found success -- such as the success in Germany helping people generate their own clean power. Like them, we will start to pay guaranteed rates for households, businesses, farms and schools to feed unused clean power into the grid.

But every country needs to step up its efforts to stay on track. So the low carbon

transition plan I launched [this week -- beginning July 13] has five-year limits on the country's total emissions, set in law.

This plan has at its heart a focus on new jobs and new business opportunities, as well as increasing our energy security. We're taking this action now because we firmly believe that there's an overriding economic and financial imperative to cutting carbon. And even during a global recession, it's this choice that will determine our path to economic prosperity and sustainable development.

The plan goes sector-by-sector to see how savings can be made. It includes a massive increase in renewable energy, greener transport and a firm focus on helping businesses make the most of low carbon opportunities.

It is a national plan, but this is a global problem and needs a global solution. We've published our manifesto for a global deal -- to make clear that we are on the side arguing for ambition, effectiveness to make sure countries stick to their commitments and money goes where it makes most difference; and fairness, with both private and public finance to help the transition in the poorest countries.

But not all countries are able to finance

the actions needed to reduce emissions, and adapt to the impacts of climate change that are already being felt. That's why Prime Minister Gordon Brown recently proposed a way forward for developed and developing countries to agree new mechanisms to pay for tackling climate change. He urged countries to work together on a global figure of around \$100 billion per year by 2020 to help developing countries reduce their emissions, tackle deforestation and adapt to the climate change already being experienced.

With the joint commitment last week from the biggest developed countries and the biggest developing countries, agreeing that the goal of any deal should be limiting climate change to two degrees, we know that a global deal is a step closer. There are less than 150 days to go before the world gathers to agree a new global climate change deal in Copenhagen.

Fulfilling the deal, and preventing the worst of dangerous climate change, will take not just a transition from every country, but from every community and every business. The time for transition is now.

Ed Miliband is UK Energy and Climate Secretary.

An opportunity for Tehran

His case is an opportunity for the government of Iran to show that it is a well-intentioned member of the family of nations, a country to be taken seriously and on its own terms. It is an opportunity, we respectfully submit, that should not be missed.

JON MEACHAM

MAZAR Bahari is a Newsweek reporter, a documentary filmmaker, playwright, author, artist, and, since June 21, a prisoner being held in Iran without formal charges or access to a lawyer. The Iranian state press has attached Bahari's name to a "confession" made in vague terms and conditional tenses about foreign media influence on the unrest in Iran that followed the declaration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection on June 12.

Some in the government of Iran would like to portray Bahari as a kind of subversive or even as a spy. He is neither. He is a journalist, a man who was doing his job, and doing it fairly and judiciously, when he was arrested. Maziar Bahari is an agent only of the truth as best he can see it, and his body of work proves him to be a fair-minded observer who eschews ideological cant in favour of conveying the depth and complexity of Iranian life and culture to the wider world. Few have argued more extensively and persuasively, for instance, that Iran's nuclear program is an issue of national pride, not just the leadership's obsession.

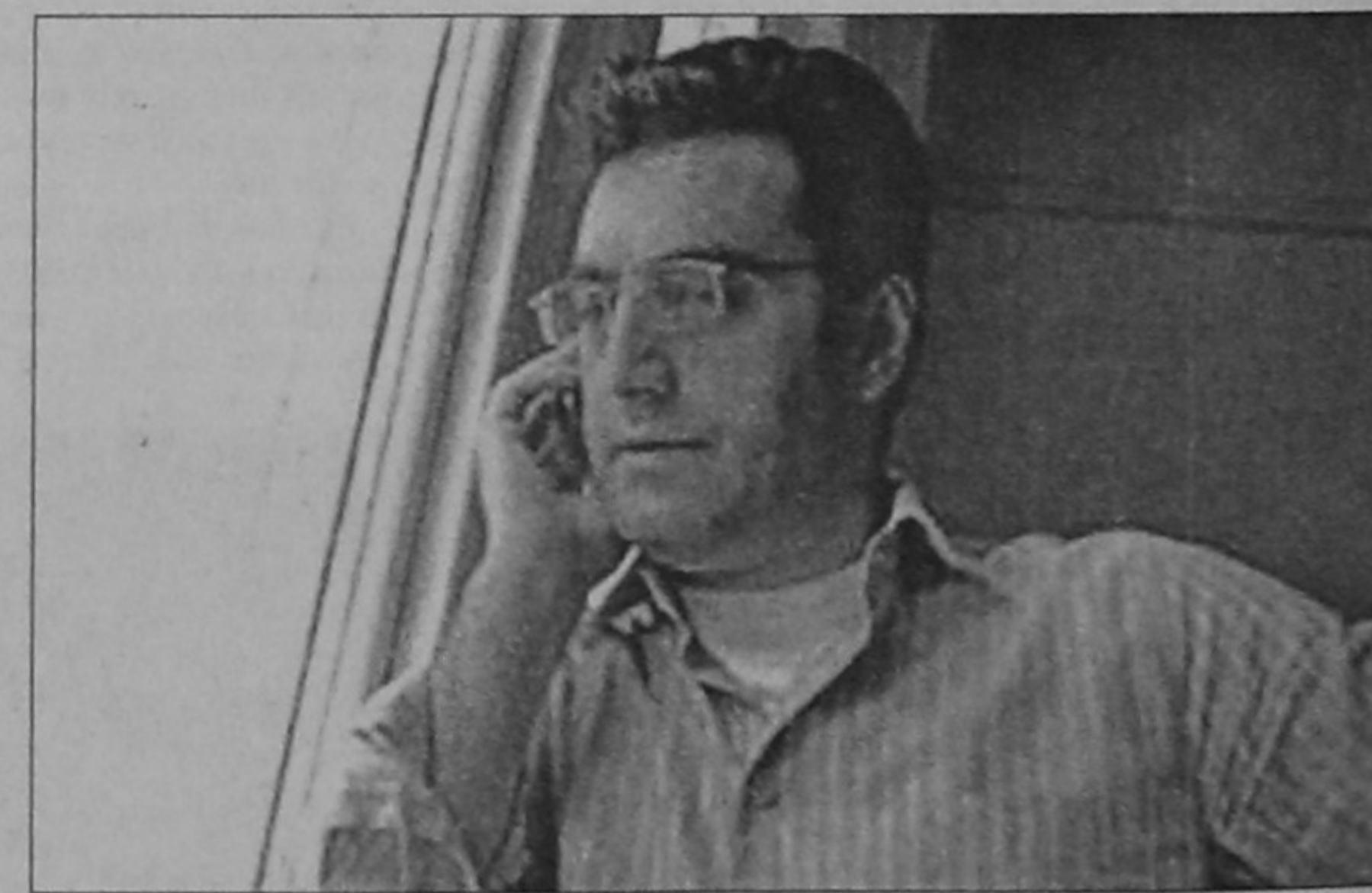
Bahari, 42, studied filmmaking in Montreal and became a Canadian citizen. Since 1998 he has worked for Newsweek in Tehran, where his stories have reflected both his experience in the street and his ability to reach some of the most senior figures in government. But he is probably best known

internationally for his documentary films.

One striking example is his 2002 HBO documentary *Along Came a Spider*, which grew out of reporting for Newsweek. It tells the story of a serial killer in the Iranian city of Mashhad, whose murder of 16 prostitutes remained unsolved for years. He has made films about drummers in Africa and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, as well as a slew of documentaries about Iran and its people.

No one, not even Bahari, was able to predict just how volatile Iran would become after the June election. One tumultuous week after the vote, he was one of the few members of the press invited to attend the Friday prayer service where the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, made clear that further protests would not be tolerated. Then, two days later, at 7 in the morning, government agents with a warrant showed up at the home where Bahari lives with his elderly mother. The agents, who did not identify themselves or the branch of government they worked for, treated Bahari and the rest of the family politely but firmly. They seized his computer and took him into custody.

For more than a day, his family and Newsweek were unable to determine his whereabouts. After another day, Bahari was allowed to call home to his mother. At 83, Molouk Bahari is still a strong, resolute woman. But her life has been marked by tragedy; in the past three years she has lost her husband, her eldest son, and her daughter.



Maziar Bahari

Maziar is her only child left in this world, and his arrest has been almost too much for her. "I don't know when these terrible things are going to stop happening," she says. "There is no reason for him to be held like this."

Given the nature of life in Iran in 2009, the government's attempts to exert control over the country and over the world's impressions of the unfolding events there are understandable, if regrettable. But history tells us that the degree to which dissent is tolerated is a measure of a government's strength, not its weakness -- and Bahari was not demonstrating, only reporting.

With respect, then, we ask the government of Iran to grant Bahari the rights he is guaranteed under Iranian law; that he be allowed to see a lawyer and, if there are no charges against him -- and we believe there should be no charges -- that he be released immediately.

We say again; Maziar Bahari is a journalist

whose fairness is evident in any reasonable survey of his work. His case is an opportunity for the government of Iran to show that it is a well-intentioned member of the family of nations, a country to be taken seriously and on its own terms. It is an opportunity, we respectfully submit, that should not be missed.

Only twice in two weeks has Bahari been able to make a phone call. The second time, as with the first, he dialed his mother. Both times he told her not to worry, that he was doing all right. But Molouk, who was one of the few women of her generation to attend university in Iran, and who has a degree in chemistry, is not fooled by her son's efforts to make her feel better. "I just want Maziar to come home," she said the day he was arrested. "I just want my son back." As do we.

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