

What remains of elected status of Upazila Parishad?

Seed of another conflict sown in the important local govt tier

WE are saddened by the fact that elected upazila parishads are being increasingly emasculated. As if giving the members of parliament a mandatory advisory role over the parishad was not enough, now comes its further weakening: the power of UNOs has been increased vis-a-vis the upazila chairmen.

Let's not be oblivious of the fact that upazila nirbahi officers are part of the parishad in an administrative sense. They have their own importance. They head the other agencies of the government assisting the working of the elected body. So their status is very much a given quantity. Hitherto they have been known as secretary to the upazila parishad, but now, according to a cabinet decision, they will be designated as principal executive officer through an enactment of law.

It is understood on good authority that the UNOs will continue providing secretarial assistance to the upazila parishad. But it appears that since they will look after financial matters and would issue cheques, the power of the purse will be held by them. This has given rise to an apprehension in the minds of upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen that in the power equation elected representatives are being put at a disadvantage in terms of implementing projects.

We understand the value of check and balance being an important prerequisite for an effective and public welfare-oriented development regime with assured transparency and accountability. But what we find baffling is lack of clear-cut delineation of authorities. In rewriting the equation between MPs and upazila chairmen, the primacy of the latter as the head of the elected body has been rudely undermined. Consequently, rivalry has been bred in two sets of elected public representatives whereas they should have been working in coordination with each other. Similarly, executive branch of the government, as represented by the UNO, is being brought into conflict with the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen.

It is claimed by the proponents of the latest proposal that just as a secretary is to a minister so will now be a UNO to the upazila chairman. But the reality is while a minister has a policy-making responsibility, the upazila chairman is denied of that role due to the obligatory advisory meddling by members of parliament.

Our final point is: if the government was bent upon disempowering the upazila system, what good does it expect from it by showering expensive perks and privileges on the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen, except to emphasise ornamentation rather than real work.

Pakistan's presidency

Constitutional amendment is cause for fresh hope

HOPES for a strengthening of democracy in Pakistan have not exactly taken a quantum leap through the adoption of the 18th amendment to the country's constitution. But they are to be regarded as a significant step considering the political legacy Pakistanis have, to their great discomfiture, regularly been heir to. With as many as four military rulers upsetting the chances for democracy since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has been caught in a vicious cycle of political despair brought on by the depredations of its non-elected leaders. Now that President Asif Ali Zardari has signed away his vast powers, powers he has had no hand in the making of, and has thus reassured Pakistanis that parliamentary democracy may be finally back on track, there is reason to feel somewhat confident about Pakistan's future.

Those who have observed Pakistan in the past many years cannot have failed to notice the repeated battering it has taken on a number of fronts. The war in Afghanistan, a direct offshoot of the tragic events of September 2001, has created conditions that now have Pakistan wage war against militants in its own territory. Add to that the political instability that remains a factor despite the return to elected government through the elections of February 2008. More importantly, the nine years in which General Pervez Musharraf presided over Pakistan's fortunes have left a visible mark, one that is hardly reassuring. His high-handedness over such matters as dealing with the Supreme Court left a bad taste in the mouth. Beyond and above all this, the inordinate enhancement in authority the presidency has seen since the overthrow of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in 1977 by army chief Ziaul Haq has periodically undermined the powers of elected governments in Pakistan. Heads of state have conveniently employed such authority to eject elected governments from office.

There is little question that the 18th amendment to the constitution is a landmark on Pakistan's potholed road to democracy. But it is no guarantee that the country will henceforth have a smooth ride to political pluralism. The army remains a potent factor. Besides, the country's politicians are yet a fractious lot. Much will, therefore, depend on how much of an accommodative spirit Pakistan's politicians can demonstrate toward one another. The presence of opposition leader Nawaz Sharif at the signing into law of the amendment gives hope to Pakistan. That hope must not diminish.



Of dynasties, pretension and snobbery

Elected dynasties are the new elite. And like any elite inhabiting an unreal world of pretension and snobbery, they preside over a slide of human endeavour into unmitigated political marshland.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FATIMA Bhutto has just unleashed her book and with it her clan once more on the people of what was once known as the Indian subcontinent. There is nothing wrong with writing a book, really. Besides, when you talk of this granddaughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, you have got to admit she has class where employing the English language is concerned.

Compare Benazir Bhutto's *Daughter of the East* with her *Songs of Blood and Sword*. The Fatima work comes out far more readable where a detailed account of Pakistan's tortuous political history is concerned. As for the way she presents facts, well, that's a different proposition altogether.

But, of course, we are not talking about books today. Our preoccupation, yet once again, is the political dynasties, which have so often in our lifetime pushed our collective aspirations into the woods, beyond the precipice. When you think of the Bhuttos, and you need to do that in calm fashion, you recall the many ways in which they have stultified the process of democracy in Pakistan. Populism is no guarantee of purposeful governance. The Bhuttos have

regularly gone before the masses with their pseudo-socialist terms of endearment for Pakistan. It has not helped Pakistanis any.

But then, the dynastic factor is not limited to Pakistan alone. Notice Sri Lanka, the very first country in these parts to have set dynastic politics into motion with the rise of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1960. That was a bad move. Sympathising with a political widow is all right, but when sympathy leads to things bizarre (and Sirimavo's rise was bizarre), you know the fate of a nation is sealed.

Watch Mahinda Rajapakse. He has won a war; he has been maltreating the Tamils; he has decided that the army chief who helped him defeat the LTTE must henceforth stay in prison; and now he has chanced upon the shoddy idea that his brothers and his children must give shape to a new political dynasty. That can lead to but one clear conclusion: pluralistic government in Sri Lanka will soon be a misnomer.

And it will be a misnomer inasmuch as democracy is essentially a wild goose chase in Bangladesh. Sit back and reflect on how governance has turned into a stagnant pool since the early 1980s, when Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia came into prominence as

torchbearers for their clans in the national political realm.

A whole world has changed before us, the Cold War is long gone, new leaders have arisen and departed in tune with the norms of politics and the immutable laws of nature. But our dynasties have stayed on. These days, they seek to have the lengthening shadows of their electorally-driven dynasties overshadow our lives in all their totality.

Sajeeb Wazed Joy has made his entry on to the national stage; and the acolytes of the Begum have insistently been singing paeans to her exiled elder child. If you are young, if you have yet not passed from the stage of innocence to that of experience, you might feel thrilled that in the hands of these political sons is embedded our future. But youth is no substitute for wisdom. And dynastic politics can never be cause for thrill.

And it will not because of the barriers it puts on the road to democracy. The tragedy of our lives is but a simple, short narrative of pain; in Bangladesh, indeed elsewhere in South Asia, we have often mistaken dynastic glamour for democratic brilliance. And we have paid the price.

Indian democracy would be a much more riveting, enthralling affair had the Nehru-Gandhis not gone beyond Indira. But there was Sanjay and then there was Rajiv. Now there is Sonia and there is her son Rahul. You see all those veteran, respectable politicians make a beeline for

Rahul Gandhi and you realise, with that nervous pounding of the heart in you, that pluralism in India will not go beyond the door and into the courtyard as long as this penchant for Jawaharlal Nehru's heirs remains.

Dynasties keep enlightenment at bay. They undermine the self-esteem of nations. Worse, they carry with them the probability of mediocrity at its worst being foisted on societies. The son of Kim Il-Sung has only succeeded in pushing North Korea further into the dark. The darkness promises to elongate itself into the future once the child of Kim Jong-Il takes charge of what has already turned into the world's only communist monarchy.

Forty one years ago a young colonel threw out the monarchy in Libya. Today, Muammar Gaddafi conspires to have his son Saif replace him as the standard bearer of a new dynasty. Much a similar act is being enacted in Egypt, with Hosni Mubarak grooming son Gamal for the succession.

Elected dynasties are the new elite. And like any elite inhabiting an unreal world of pretension and snobbery, they preside over a slide of human endeavour into unmitigated political marshland. Fatima Bhutto does not say that, of course. Nor does any other dynast. But that happens to be the unqualified truth.

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Meeting again?

The founding principles of Saarc are self-help and regional solidarity, and the summits facilitate an exchange of shared perceptions and values which are important factors in the growth of good neighbourly relations and success for regional cooperation.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit will take place in the Bhutan's capital, Thimpu, on April 28-29, and Bhutan has completed all preparations to host the sixteenth summit-level meeting, according to the Bhutanese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Dasho Bap Kesang.

The pre-summit meetings of the Saarc programming committee, represented by senior officials of member countries, the standing committee comprising foreign affairs secretaries, and council of ministers comprising foreign affairs ministers, will commence from April 24.

Since global change is adversely affecting the region, "Climate Change" is the theme that has been adopted for the Thimpu summit. The theme is also appropriate for the summit because Bhutan has maintained a pristine and eye-soothing forest in the country.

It has been 25 years since the first summit of Saarc was held in Dhaka in 1985. Originally it consisted of seven South Asian states -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In 2007, Afghanistan became a member, and Myanmar is believed to have indicated its interest to become a member of Saarc.

The last (15th) summit took place in Sri Lanka in August 2008 under the theme of "Partnership of Our People."

Apart from the eight member-states, representatives of nine observer countries -- including the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and the European Union -- are expected to participate in the Thimpu Summit.

The founding principles of Saarc are self-help and regional solidarity, and the summits facilitate an exchange of shared perceptions and values which are important factors in the growth of good neighbourly relations and success for regional cooperation.

Although the summit is expected to take place every year, the 2010 Thimpu summit is the sixteenth. That means that all was not going well within the institution, and nine summits were missed due to political factors among member-states.

The regional grouping of states has been a positive force in the region in generating a climate of cooperation and harmony. The regional institutions represent the member-states in multi-lateral forums to bargain for economic advantages in trade and related areas from other countries.

Saarc, however, has been limping in achieving its goal. In 2005, India's former foreign secretary reportedly identified the reasons saying: "Saarc is still a largely con-

sultative body, which has shied away from undertaking even a single collaborative project in 20 years of existence. In fact, there is deep resistance to doing anything that could be collaborative."

It seems that since the Delhi summit in 2007 there is a new momentum in Saarc. The South Asian Free Trade Agreement took effect in 2009, and a Regional South Asian University is being established in New Delhi. The Regional Food Security Fund has been invigorated. The Saarc leaders are expected to jointly inaugurate the Saarc Development Fund (SDF), with an initial capital of \$300 million.

The SDF will serve as the umbrella financial institution for all Saarc projects, and solve the problems arising from the proliferation of financing mechanisms under the Saarc.

Three regional agreements -- Convention on Cooperation to Protect the Environment, Trade in Services, and the Rapid Response Mechanism to Natural Disasters -- are expected to be signed during the summit.

Trade among member-states is the important glue of a regional institution. Regrettably, trade within the Saarc member-states is only 5 percent, while trade among Asean members is 25 percent, and it is 50 percent in the European Union.

Against this background, the leaders may examine the ways to boost the inter-regional trade among member-states by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers.

Trade is also linked with interconnectivity through multi-modal transport within member-states. The leaders may formulate guidelines for developing a comprehensive transport network and providing interconnectivity in the light of Escap's and Asian Development Bank's

proposals.

At the summit, the regional leaders will have an excellent opportunity to discuss several other core issues, including poverty reduction, water, energy and environmental security, as well as agricultural sustainability. A counter-terrorism regional cooperation plan may be devised in the light of the Bangladesh prime minister's 2009 proposal for a South Asian anti-terrorism taskforce.

Integration of power grids is an important priority for energy. Nepal could generate about 80 thousand MW and Bhutan 30 thousand MW from hydropower, and a Saarc grid may be launched by joint collaboration with a view to removing the acute shortage of energy in the region.

All the Saarc member states, despite their disagreements on some bilateral issues from time to time, have recognised that regional cooperation and harmonisation of strategies are imperative in the globalised world.

Saarc could play a role in collective bargaining for the member-states. The success of the regional institution is judged by interactions within the regional economic blocs to enhance its economic gains.

It is interesting to note that an artists' exhibition with the participation of two or three painters from each member country, and a meeting of the South Asian Free Media Association will take place on the sidelines of the summit.

Saarc is a major piece of political architecture and it has come to stay, despite its current difficulties. We all wish the Thimpu Saarc Summit great success.

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