

## BNP's mid-term election ruse

*It must look at its own role as the opposition*

THE opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party is talking of mid-term elections in the country. As a political party and especially if it is convinced that the ruling party has failed to meet the expectations of the people, the onus is on it to substantiate such a claim and try to carry the people with them. The bigger and more potent reality, though, is the question of what the BNP itself has done in these nearly two years since the last election to inform people that it has played its due role as a parliamentary opposition. There might be reasons to think that the Awami League-led government has not performed well in some sectors, indeed may have actually failed to demonstrate the competence expected of it in certain areas. That is no indication, however, that the BNP is the alternative the nation can fall back on, at least at this stage judging from its performance in the opposition.

We have persistently asked the BNP through these columns to return to the Jatiyo Sangsad and play its due and constitutionally ordained role as the opposition. That it saw nothing wrong in boycotting parliament within months of the election for reasons that have had precious little to do with the national interest and that, despite nationwide demands for it to return to the House, it has chosen to stay away from it has not quite bolstered popular confidence in the party. The nation, in these circumstances, has the right to ask the BNP to explain how it has served the country since early 2009. Clearly, it has given short shrift to popular expectations of it as a responsible party by its deliberate policy of ignoring parliament. That the party has demonstrated little sense of responsibility toward its own constituents and to the country has been made very clear by its eagerness to claim all parliamentary privileges without at the same time fulfilling its task as a parliamentary party.

It is especially for the BNP to convince the nation that it can rise above petulance and work as an opposition by coming out of the syndrome of trying to push an elected government from office. Obviously, like any other political party, the BNP would like to return to power. But what has it fundamentally done as the opposition to make people think it can be voted back to office? Its boycott of the JS has prevented it from discussing such vital national issues as the budget, law and order, prices of essential commodities, religious extremism and foreign policy. It is appalling when a party has no position on core issues that it has deliberated on the floor of the House and put across to the people with due diligence.

The priorities for the BNP are simply cut out for it. It must go back to the JS. In the more than three years which remain for the present parliament, it must engage the government in a constructive debate on the issues. By staying away from parliament, by focusing on matters of a personalised nature rather than providing an alternative vision of policies and programmes, the BNP has undermined itself and may have made our return to full, throbbing democracy that much harder.

The issue today is not mid-term elections. It is one of strengthening parliament and ensuring good governance. Can the BNP contribute to the process?

## Open market to black market Take the dishonest dealers to task

IT is disturbing to find that dealers appointed by the government to sell rice under the OMS scheme, selling a part of the food grains lifted from government godowns in the black market. This has been revealed in an on-the-spot investigation by our reporter in Rajshahi town. To say that it is a daylight robbery is perhaps an understatement, given that the purpose of the operation, among other things, is to allow the lower income groups to buy rice at an affordable rate which they otherwise find beyond their purchasing capacity in the market.

It seems quite incomprehensible that OMS dealers in Rajshahi should be ripping off the government as well as the poor consumers and making profit for themselves in this manner considering the fact that what they lift from the government at 22.5 Taka per kilo and sell for between Taka 30 and 33 in the market. Each trader can lift up to four tons of rice everyday, and one can imagine the degree of undue profit the corrupt traders are making everyday. And this is even more galling because it is being done under the nose of the inspectors who have themselves allegedly become a part of the repugnant practice. And of course, they are being duly and adequately compensated by the OMS traders for their role.

OMS is an important option for the government which it uses as a mechanism to stabilise prices of essential edibles. This has been a timely step on the part of the government given the way prices of rice have spiraled in the last several months. It is also notable that more and more people are queuing up to buy rice at the OMS centers all over the country.

The government must come down heavily on the dishonest among the dealers. The inspectors, who are supposed to supervise the system, have failed to do so. They must also be taken to task for helping to distort the operation. We are sorry to see a good system at the point of becoming a channel of corruption. The black market sale will defeat the very purpose of the OMS scheme, namely arrest increase in the price of rice in the market, unless corrective measures are taken immediately. As an immediate measure mobile courts should be employed straight away to exercise oversight and weed out the errant dealers from the OMS structure.

## Novel ways to cheat in exams

Where getting a certificate, not good education, is the ultimate goal of a student and since a certificate is the passport for the world of the privileged with better opportunities in life, why should a person, in the present case, a student, should choose the harder way of learning to get a certificate?

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

CHEATING in exams is an age-old practice. In earlier times, it was just copying from answer sheet or even book that the examinee would hide in his/her pocket or under the shirt. We hear of some cribbers of olden days who took their art of cribbing to new heights, so much so that people would hold them in awe as if they were magicians. Some of the cribbers could copy even from a distance what another examinee was writing by just looking at the tail of the pen the latter was using.

With the advent of smart technologies, the methods of cheating in the examinations have also undergone an evolution. Nowadays, the ubiquitous mobile phone is being used as an instrument of cheating in the exam halls.

The law-enforcers and the Dhaka University authorities have, in a recent drive, busted such a racket on the campus. What came out of the drive was not a simple case of cheating by an examinee. In fact, it was a group of professional frauds engaged in the trade of helping examinees by supplying answers to the questions through text messages on the mobile phones. The groups involved operated from a hideout within the campus.

After unearthing of the racket, it could be learnt that the fraudsters used a fake examinee who had the necessary papers, of course, forged ones, to enter the examination hall. The fake examinee, as soon as he was supplied with the question sheet, started to send the answers to the questions through coded short messages to the rest of the fraudsters waiting at the opera-

examinee, his seven accomplices and one examinee sitting for first year honours admission test from the department of business administration. It is expected that the fraudsters involved in the case and the dishonest examinee who bought their service will be brought to justice in an exemplary fashion.

What is appalling about the whole incident is that a student is adopting such a heinous method of getting entry into a higher institution of learning. The moral part of the case aside, what would that admission seeker at the university would do, if he could finally get away with his evil method? He would naturally flaunt himself as a university student, even though he lacked the qualifications to become a university student. And as he has no quality other than cheating, he would then try to pass all the examinations of the university through different kinds of cheating.

And imagine the scenario that the criminal-minded student in this way has been able to get through the last exam-post of the university and thus become its highest degree holder. Meanwhile, through all the years of cheating, he has already become a hardened criminal in the art of cheating and flaunts his unearned degree unabashedly to the public and uses it as well to

And small wonder the education department has been found to be one of the most corrupt even by the Transparency International (TI) in its reports on several occasions in its annual reports.

The Herculean task of reforming different sectors of society requires not only values, but also proper order of things where values can also find the conditions to survive and thrive. If proper education was the motto of our entire education system, one wouldn't need to take the criminal path of getting admission into a university or passing an examination.

But in our present-day social order, a student is badly in need of a certificate for a degree than what the certificate implies in terms of knowledge. So, where getting a certificate, not good education, is the ultimate goal of a student and since a certificate is the passport for the world of the privileged with better opportunities in life, why should a person, in the present case, a student, should choose the harder way of learning to get a certificate?

Exhortations and sermons that our high office-holders, educationists and even political leaders, often make and deliver to students usually draw a blank on the audience targeted. The reason is obvious. Social thinkers and authorities need to think over



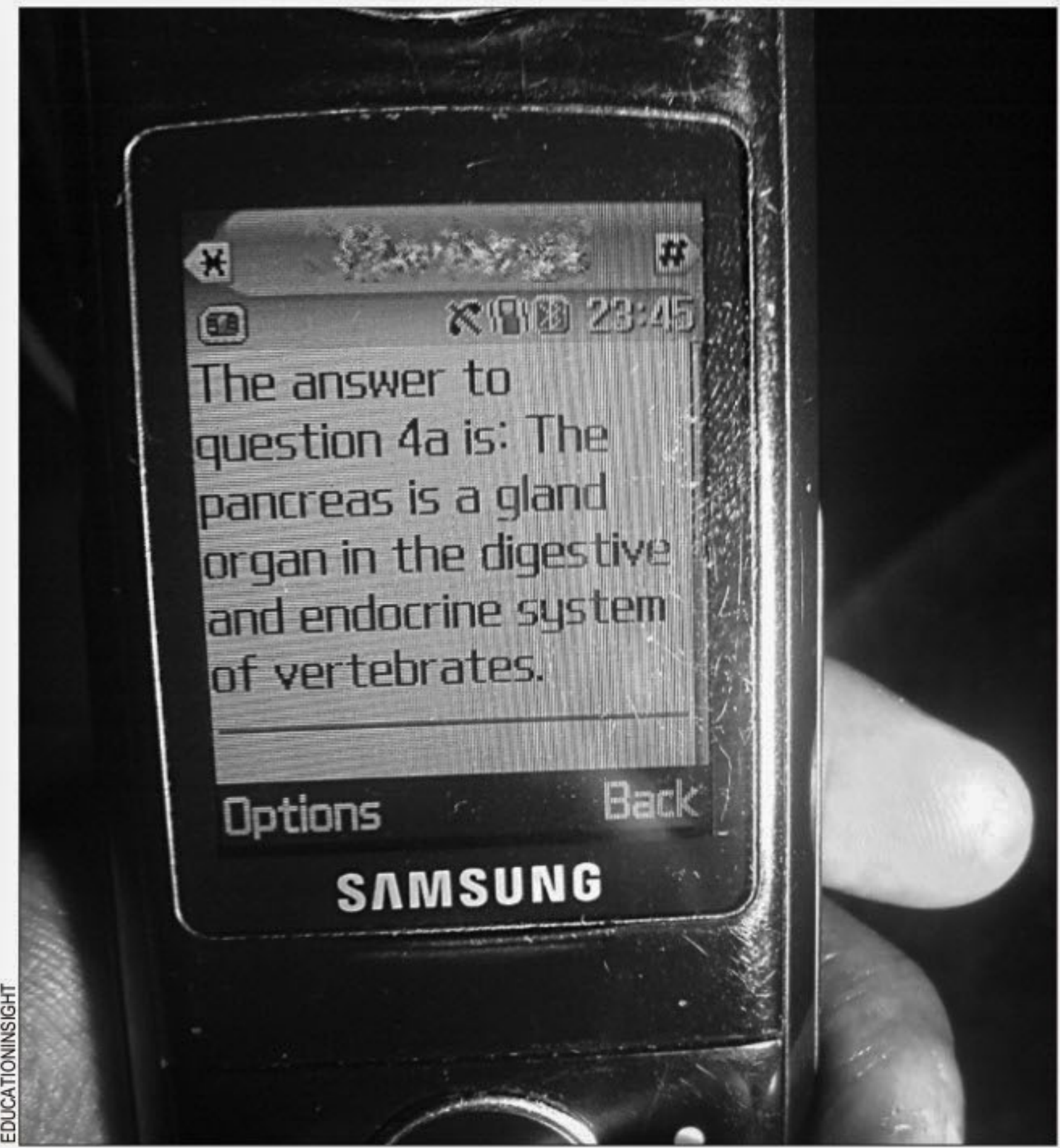
Ask the question . . .

But however clever or magician-like a cribber may appear, the practice he or she adopts is a crime, pure and simple. And like any criminal they deserve to be punished. Society always hates such students as resort to cheating in the exam.

Use of mobile telephony in cheating at the examination halls has by now become an old practice. But criminalisation of the practice has taken many innovative forms.

tion centre at the hideout. The operators working there received the short answer messages from the fake examinee and then resent those to their client examinees at different centres of the examination.

It has been reported that the police and the proctor of Dhaka University took up a mission to find out the fraudsters involved in this new kind of cheating in the exams and have been able to arrest the fake



. . . and the answer!

choose a profession, land a job or even look for still higher degrees from a foreign university.

What can society expect of such fraudsters? Can these people help doing more harm to the nation through more cheating, stealing and robbing of public property?

The pervasive corruption that has now become the order of the day has a lot to do with such cheating in the education system.

these issues seriously and create the correct model of educating our children that might make cheating in the exams redundant. The job market should also be tailored in the proper way so that a mere certificate would not ensure its holder a job unless he or she is properly educated and skilled in the trade that the job in question implies.

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## No right to food yet!

Numerous surveys show that BPL categorisation contains two kinds of error: exclusion of those who are poor but lack the clout to get recognised as such, and the error of false inclusion, under which the names of the non-poor enter BPL lists through political manipulation. The exclusion can be as high as 50-60%, and diversion of food over 30%.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

INDIA has missed a historic opportunity to abolish hunger through a universal public distribution system (PDS), which entitles all citizens to affordable food. The National Advisory Council (NAC), a progressive body established by the United Progressive Alliance, was to draft such a law, but has recommended a Bill which greatly reduces the public's entitlements.

This is a setback. India's annual per capita cereal consumption has fallen to 174 kg, lower than in the least-developed countries (182 kg), or 44% below world average. India ranks 67th among 84 countries in the Global Hunger Index, and scores worse than Pakistan or Nepal.

The NAC proposes providing an entitlement to subsidised food for over 75% of India's population, comprising 90% of the rural public and half the urban population. This 75% is to be divided into "priority" and "general" categories.

The "priority" households would have a monthly entitlement of 35 kg at Rs.3 a kg for rice, Rs.2 for wheat and Re.1 for millets. The "general" households would get 20 kg at half "the current Minimum Support Price" -- or Rs.5.50-6 per kg.

But the "priority" category excludes over half the rural population and 70% of the urban population. The two categories are

only slightly modified versions of the notoriously inaccurate below-poverty-line (BPL) and above-poverty-line (APL) classes, identified by various official committees and used in "targeted" PDS schemes. Such targeting has proved counter-productive.

The "priority"-"general" category differentiation is to be left to the government. Experience suggests this is likely to be arbitrary and unsatisfactory.

Numerous surveys show that BPL categorisation contains two kinds of error: exclusion of those who are poor but lack the clout to get recognised as such, and the error of false inclusion, under which the names of the non-poor enter BPL lists through political manipulation. The exclusion can be as high as 50-60%, and diversion of food over 30%.

The best way to minimise the errors is to universalise the PDS. Past experience in Kerala, and current PDS performance in Tamil Nadu, establish the decisive superiority of universalisation. This is not wasteful. The rich don't use the PDS, the poor do.

One study of the universal PDS in Kerala found those with a monthly income of Rs.1,000 or less bought 71% of their PDS entitlements, but those with incomes exceeding Rs.3,000 purchased only 6% of their entitlement.

If the government can currently procure about 55 million tonnes of foodgrains (of an

output of 230-240 million tonnes), it can almost as easily procure the maximum of 85 million tonnes needed for a universal PDS.

NAC member, food-security activist and eminent economist Jean Dreze describes the recommended Bill as "a minimalist proposal that misses many important elements of food security" and allows the government "to appear to be doing something radical for food security, but it is actually more of the same." He says: "Entire fields of intervention crucial for food security have been left out."

The government speciously argues it would be unwise to procure more grain than the last three years' average of 55 million tonnes. The long-term procurement trend shows a steady, 5%-plus a year increase. Universalisation only needs a continuation of this trend.

Ultimately, the government will spend barely half the amount on food security as it does on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. That's hardly an expansive commitment to UPA-2's flagship social programme.

This failure is all the more hurtful because the additional funds needed for universal PDS -- Rs.20,000 crores a year -- are a fraction of the government's revenues, which have tripled in six years.

The government can no longer plead a paucity of funds to deny enough food to all its citizens. It blows up the bulk of this income on tax-breaks and subsidies for the rich.

The food security Bill raises larger questions about the NAC and its relationship to government. The present body is much less of a civil society-based progressive policy-oriented pressure-group than its first avatar.

The earlier body didn't have diehard neoliberals like Planning Commission member Narendra Jadhav or fence-sitters like Dr. M.S. Swaminathan.

Prime Minister Singh has unduly influ-

enced the new NAC's composition. UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi, who played a strong Left-leaning role in the first NAC, has decided not to cross swords with him.

The earlier NAC had a synergistic relationship with the Left parties, which exerted a progressive influence on UPA-1 and kept up pressure in favour of NREGA, the Right to Information Act and other participatory measures.

That relationship no longer exists. If the NAC isn't as Left-of-Centre as before, nor is the Left proactive on social issues.

Ms. Gandhi would do well to reflect on the NAC. If it is meant to be the UPA's conscience, it needs more of a soul and more panache and vibrancy. It should ambitiously and boldly attempt to do precisely what the stick-in-the-mud government would not ordinarily do.

This alone can fill the credibility gap between the promise of inclusive growth on which UPA-2 came to power, and its performance, with an inequality-enhancing, jobless and exclusionary growth pattern, in which the vast majority has no stake.

Surely, if she has sound political instincts, Ms. Gandhi would understand that this is crucial to the UPA's popularity and its ability to retain its relevance for the people.

Of all the UPA's special initiatives since 2004, the NAC has been the most productive, vastly more so than, for instance, the National Knowledge Commission. Ms. Gandhi should be proud of the NAC and encourage it to act with freedom, moral clarity and unity of purpose so it does something unusual.

The NAC must rebuild its links with civil society movements and re-energise itself. In the last instance, it's answerable not to the government, but to society and to those who represent emancipatory social change.

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