

BARE FACTS

Seize the opportunity



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

PRESIDENT Zillur Rahman has taken initiative to hold dialogues with political parties for appointing a new chief election commissioner (CEC) and election commissioners based on their recommendations. Quoting the president's press secretary, the newspapers have reported that political parties having representatives in the parliament and other major parties registered with the election commission (EC) will be invited to the dialogue.

Jatiya Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal were the first to attend the dialogue, which started from December 22. The other political parties that have so far been invited to the dialogues include Workers Party of Bangladesh, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Samyabadi Dal, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju), and Islamic Front of Bangladesh.

The need for the reconstitution of the EC has arisen because the five-year tenure of the incumbent CEC A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and Election Commissioners M. Sohul Hussain and Brig. General Sakhawat Hossain (ret'd), appointed by the immediate past caretaker government in February 2007, expires in February, 2012.

There have been mixed reactions to the holding of the proposed dialogues from the political parties and civil society. Kazi Firoz Rashid, Presidium member of Jatiya Party, Hasanul Haq Inu, president of a faction of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Rashed Khan Menon, president of the Workers Party of Bangladesh, and allies of the ruling Awami League, have welcomed the president's initiative and added that all political

disputes should be resolved through discussions with all the political parties.

While welcoming the dialogue for the EC reconstitution, Mujahidul Islam Selim, general secretary of the CPB, has pleaded for inclusion of the strengthening of the EC and the expenditure of the candidates in the general elections in the dialogue.

Advocate Subroto Chowdury, general secretary of Gono Forum, has pleaded for enactment of a law to empower the EC to prepare a panel of persons suitable for appointment as CEC and election commissioners based on the recommendations of the heads of the constitutional bodies, which should be the basis for discussion for reconstituting the EC.

Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, acting secretary general of the main opposition BNP has said that his party "will not sit for any dialogue with the government other than on the caretaker government issue" (DS, December 19). Another source (*New Age*, December 19) quoted Alamgir as saying: "The party's standing committee will decide the matter if the party is invited to the dialogue."

Some civil society members, including Professor Mozaffar Ahmed and Dr. Akbar Ali Khan, have welcomed the move for dialogue but expressed doubt about its success.

CEC A.T.M. Shamsul Huda has welcomed the president's initiative to hold dialogues with political parties for reconstituting the EC but expressed doubt about its success.

He has urged the government to "appoint impartial and competent persons to the Commission and not on political consideration."

It may be recalled that while addressing a grand rally organised by the BNP-led

the EC would be reconstituted and strengthened through discussions with all stakeholders, including BNP, to ensure free and fair elections.

BNP may argue that it has asked for fulfillment of two demands: one,

reinstatement of the caretaker government (CTG) system; and two, a neutral EC. How can BNP join the dialogue with the president when its main demand for reinstatement of the CTG system remains ignored?

It is true that the above argument is not without merit. But it is also equally true that that reinstatement of CTG system and reconstitution of the EC are two separate issues. BNP can respond to the president's call without compromising its position on CTG system. The reinstated EC will have a five-year tenure, irrespective of whether CTG system is reinstated or not. BNP knows it well how a partisan EC can influence the results of the elections.

What BNP, as the major opposition party, should do is to join the dialogue and emphasise on the need for a holistic approach to the reconstitution of the EC. BNP should insist on enactment of a law to regulate the appointment of the CEC and election commissioners. Because, in the absence of such a law, the ruling AL cannot be legally prevented from appointing persons of their choice as CEC and election commissioners.



The dialogue must focus on the whole gamut of the reconstitution of the EC. The onus for making it successful primarily depends on the ruling AL. But that does not absolve BNP and other political parties of their responsibilities for making the dialogue a success.

alliance on September 27 in the capital, BNP chairperson and opposition leader Khaleda Zia demanded constitution of a neutral EC. Following this demand, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced at a press conference in the capital on October 1 that

Reaching the un-reached

NICOLA McIVOR AND KABIR HOSSAIN

JOBEDA, 45, has already been forced to move 10 times due to floods and river erosion. The resident of Fular char, an island in the riverine district of Kurigram, has struggled to feed herself and her daughter after her husband remarried, living on just Tk.10-20 per day from her earnings from maid work.

As a female-headed household, Jobeda and her daughter are particularly vulnerable, yet such impermanence, food insecurity and low, unstable incomes are the reality of the daily existence for hundreds of thousands of people living on the chars of North-West Bangladesh, home to some of the poorest people in the country.

Island chars are formed as a result of river erosion and silt deposition. The chars are continually reformed as the westward shifting Jamuna River creates and destroys land in its path, causing near-annual flooding which leaves many households with little other option but to live on their rooftops.

The temporary nature of the chars and their detachment from the mainland means poor infrastructure, communication and limited access to markets and services. Yet the majority of the Jamuna Chars are inhabited and cultivated.

The limited employment and livelihoods opportunities mean that most char dwellers earn a meagre subsistence living from the land. Dependence on the land is most apparent during the seasonal hunger period -- *monga* -- the period between the planting and harvesting of the *aman* crop when few agricultural employment opportunities are available. During this period many char men migrate to find work. This combination of factors offer little prospect for char dwellers to move out of extreme poverty.

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) seeks to improve the livelihoods, incomes and food security of up to one million extremely poor men, women and children living on island chars. This is done by increasing social and economic assets, reducing economic and environmental risks and improving access to markets and services.

The precarious livelihoods of char dwellers are exacerbated by their lack of physical, social and economic assets. During the seasonal decline in employment between mid-September and mid-November, households usually cope by selling the few assets they have and borrowing money for food. Depletion of the already low savings and asset base leaves the poorest with nothing to fall back on.

During annual flooding, water borne diseases are widespread and there is a lack of safe drinking water available. To reduce the environmental risks faced by the char dwellers, the CLP raises homesteads on plinths 60 cm above the highest known flood level to mitigate flooding and provides access to safe drinking water and sanitary latrines.

The cornerstone of CLP's holistic approach is the transfer of an income generating asset of the household's choice, to the value of Tk.16,000. 99% of households choose cattle as they are considered

secure investments and their mobility makes them suitable to the itinerant char lifestyle. The CLP provides training to enable participants to generate a sustainable income from their asset and initially provides a monthly stipend to offset the need to sell assets during crises. A CLP survey shows that households' asset values and average incomes have increased and households continue to build assets after support from the CLP ends.

The transfer of physical assets alone is not sufficient to achieve sustainable development. Therefore, CLP complements the asset transfer with social development group meetings which improve community cohesion, enhance participants' awareness of civil rights and laws, and increase their knowledge of issues concerning health, hygiene and disaster preparedness. This increased social capital is vital to equip the communities to act collectively to lobby the government and demand food security, education and healthcare. All these remain unmet needs at the moment in the remote and underdeveloped chars.

Access to health services is particularly limited in the chars and many char dwellers rely on traditional healers known as *kabiraj*. The CLP trains and funds community health workers to run satellite health clinics and increase awareness of health, hygiene, nutrition and family planning issues at the household level, as well as offering referrals to the mainland. As the CLP prepares to phase out of some areas, Brac will move into the char areas and continue provision of healthcare services under a similar model to the CLP's.

Improving market access and linkages are essential to increase the livelihood options for char dwellers. The CLP focuses particularly on market systems for livestock products to develop profitable opportunities within the uncertainty of the char context. This entails a range of projects from fodder production, to milk marketing, model poultry rearing, training livestock services providers and poultry vaccinators and establishing village savings and loans groups.

Char dwellers' dependence on seasonal labour means that when the demand for agricultural labour is low during *monga*, many households become food insecure. The CLP creates employment through a cash-for-work project that uses local labour in the construction of homestead plinths. The CLP also provides safety-net grants for the most vulnerable, such as widows and the disabled who are unable to work during this period.

Poor communication, lack of access to markets and basic services, dependence on daily labour and seasonal migration, exacerbated by continual erosion and annual flooding trap the char dwellers in a cycle of extreme poverty. The CLP has demonstrated that it is possible to work in this challenging environment to improve the livelihoods of its inhabitants. There is indeed scope for the government and other development organisations to respond to these challenges to improve the livelihoods of char dwellers, who are some of the poorest citizens of Bangladesh, and to contribute to the Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty and hunger.

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No good governance without austerity

M. SHOEB CHOWDHURY

THE terms mentioned above are not mutually inclusive. There is common ground in our general understanding of austerity and good governance. Good governance requires optimal use of resources for the benefit of the maximum number of people, if not all. Austerity is against wastage of resources and prudent management of whatever is available. There are also common grounds regarding good governance and human rights. Human right is all about ensuring social justice, equality and dignity of people. To effectively deliver these three requires good governance. Human rights aim at enabling individuals to collectively develop their best selves -- something that can only be achieved via good governance.

It is pertinent to ask whether austerity is inconsistent with human rights. It may be argued that austerity measures have negative impact on the enforcement of human rights because they curb expenditure on welfare programmes that promote human rights. Austerity measures lead to job losses and the reduction of entitlements of those acutely in need. It appears that implementation of austerity programmes can act against the needs of individuals and therefore go against social efforts to protect human rights.

It is necessary to remember that good governance and the enforcement of human rights are both ends in themselves. Austerity, however, is something that does not need to be pursued for its own sake. It is a means that has to be used from time to time in the interest of good governance.

In a country like Bangladesh, austerity, at this moment, is an economic imperative. The recessionary trends that are so conspicuous in the world economy have an important bearing on the economy of Bangladesh, where the majority of the people live in rural areas. Most depend on subsistence level of agriculture for their livelihoods.

The RMG industry has successfully created employment for the rural poor and still continues to do so. However, the global economic downturn may have an adverse impact. The global recession can also prevent the export of manpower to more industrially advanced countries. It is necessary for austerity

and good governance to work in tandem, taking into account both the national and the international contexts.

In the present Bangladesh, austerity should not be seen as something inconsistent with human rights enforcement. It is essential to eradicate corruption, reduce administrative costs and curtail other unnecessary government expenditures. Resources have to be allocated most efficiently for the welfare of the people. Austerity can assist us in the pursuit of good governance as well as human rights enforcement.

In Bangladesh, as in many others parts of the world, human rights are threatened most by counter-terrorism activities. Even with democratic institutions apparently functioning, counter-terrorism is turning many countries into police states. Disappearance of people, death of people in state custody without trial, and the detention of people without specific charges have all become prevalent controversies in today's world.

The war on terror has bred apathy regarding civil liberties, the key component of human rights, amongst many governments in the modern world. This is something that is yet to be understood by the all in Bangladesh.

No individual or institution is authorised with a license to kill people. We cannot afford to allow our country to be degraded into a police state with a democratic facade.

In Bangladesh those in power, those in the opposition and those claiming to represent civil society have to work in concert to evolve a consensus that will ensure good governance for the people. Hence, contain and eradicate terrorism in the country without violating human rights. Dire need is also to ensure that the impact of asceticism on good governance causes minimal damage to human rights.

Finally, to implement the Covenant for the United Nations in regard to the present scenario of Bangladesh, much work needs to be done to ratify the International Human Rights code and ensure adequate standard of living, which also includes food, clothing, housing and social security rights.

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