

A step towards EC formation

Search committee's nominations should be above controversy

WITH the formation of a search committee comprising an Appellate Division judge as its head, and a High Court judge, the comptroller and auditor general and the chairman of the Public Service Commission as its members, a process of reconstitution of the EC has got underway. This is for the first time that a search committee has been formed to recommend two names each for the post of Chief Election Commissioner as well as those of three commissioners one of whom will have to be a woman.

It is important to note the committee has only 10 days to come up with their lists of nominees for the President to choose from and appoint the finally selected nominees to the statutory positions. So, the speed at which they will have to find the names should not in any way lead to a compromise on the probity and acceptability of the persons they end up recommending.

Since the search committee is nominated by the government, it is all the more reason why it should prove its efficacy by the quality of its deeds. The people expect them to act independently and transparently strictly in accordance with the constitutional principles.

In Bangladesh, the experience with search committees such as for ACC, Information Commission and NHRC has not been all that cheery. That is because, while the government was obliged to play a hands-on role, the opposition contented itself with a hands-off approach.

We would argue that reconstitution of the Election Commission is a pressing agenda while the caretaker issue is not time-bound in immediate terms. Constitution of a neutral, competent and professionally sound Election Commission is an agenda that stands on its own leg and in which all political parties have an equal stake. May we, therefore, urge the opposition to send in the names of persons they consider suitable for the posts. Nothing stops them from doing it, either at formal or informal levels.

Finally, the formation of the search committee does not in any way preclude the opposition's legitimate concern for the restoration of caretaker system within the ambit of the Supreme Court's observation for a limited waiver to its verdict on the question.

Incidence of crimes in the capital

Authorities must pull up their socks

THE recent spate of carjackings, lootings, shootings and murder in the city, that too in broad daylight, has heightened the feeling of insecurity among its dwellers. It seems that one may not be safe, even in his or her own home. Only this week, the shooting and hijacking of a tax lawyer father and his son as they were going to deposit money at the

bank, even though they were seen recuperating in a hospital and the killing of a stock trader in his own home by alleged robbers have again brought to the fore a deteriorating state of law and order in the city.

The incidents are in stark contradiction to the government's claim that the law and order situation is better than it has been in the last 10 years. Such comments may be dangerously impacting upon the attitudes and actions of the law enforcing agencies who seem to have become lax not only in preventing such crimes from taking place but also in terms of taking action after they have been committed as, in most cases, the culprits are yet to be identified and apprehended and justice done.

Along with the recent spate of disappearances and secret killings, these blatant violations of the law must be taken up seriously, investigated thoroughly and the perpetrators punished severely. This is the only way to deter criminals in future and to attempt to restore the feeling of security and peace of mind that the residents of the capital are so badly in need of.

We hope the authorities will realise the gravity of the situation and take prompt, correct and severe measures

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE acting secretary general of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has of late been giving us much food for thought. A few days ago, when he and his party should have come forth with a clear, outright condemnation of the recent attempt to remove the Awami League-led government through one more murderous coup d'etat, he remained charmingly vague about what position the BNP had on the issue. Now, that would be all right for a lot of people. But then, do not forget that there are all those cynics spread all over the place. And they will not soon forget the demand made by the BNP some weeks ago for a disbanding of the International Crimes Tribunal now busy trying to bring the war criminals of 1971 to justice. That was a wrong, almost suicidal move for the party. Here you have a party which says nothing about the three million who died in the War of Liberation, of the intellectuals led away to a gory end by the death squads of the Jamaat-e-Islami on the eve of victory, but which comes out strongly in defence of the very men who were part of that murder machine along with the Pakistan army forty years ago.

It is not a decent position to adopt, by a party which forever reminds us of the patriotic zeal with which it has been doing politics in the country. Never mind that in the five years before a state of emergency was imposed on the country in January 2007, it was a full-fledged kleptocracy the BNP presided over. Never mind that it was a story of a prime ministerial son setting up his

own version of a parallel government. The leading lights of the BNP have never said sorry, even though you have waited for three long years for some expressions of contrition to come from them.

You can be pretty sure that the party will not say sorry, considering its bizarre belief that the Awami League was placed in power at the 2008 elections by the army. That is not good politics, for it ignores the clear rejection the party suffered at the hands of the electorate. But, again, never mind. Only recall how, days before this latest attempt at a

assuming office three years ago, the bigger truth is that no Bengali will accept an overthrow of an elected government, indeed is not ready to push aside a political dispensation which, for all its flaws, remains our only symbol of secular, liberal politics. But that is not how Mirza Alamgir and his friends see it. The BNP leader has just informed us that it was the Awami League which was involved in the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. That is quite a revelation. We didn't know -- did we? -- that Farook Rahman, Shariful Haq Dalim,

Might it not have been some Awami League goons who simply walked into Dhaka central jail in November 1975 and put their four prominent leaders to a swift, brutal death?

The BNP acting secretary general points the finger at the Awami League for the murder of General Ziaur Rahman in May 1981. That is news. It raises the interesting possibility of General M.A. Manzur and everyone else involved in that abortive coup being secretly involved with the Awami League and causing all that mayhem. And if you go by Mirza Alamgir's revelations, even General H.M. Ershad, in his position as army chief of staff, might have been part of a radical Awami League cell engaged in a heinous conspiracy to overthrow the government of President Sattar in March 1982.

The BNP leader goes a step further. The "unconstitutional" government which emerged in January 2007, says he, was again a result of Awami League conspiracy. He might as well have informed us about the role of the Awami League in President Iajuddin Ahmed's taking over the caretaker government in October 2006 through a clear violation of the constitutional provisions relating to the appointment of a chief advisor.

A new attempt at rewriting history is what you now get from a party which has never felt happy losing elections, has never been sorry about its founder's mutilation of the constitution between 1975 and 1979, has never felt embarrassed about turning its back on the spirit of 1971. You do not feel sorry about men and women who undermine the truth in such cavalier fashion. Pity is what wells up in you.

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BYLINE

The art of the jostle



M.J. AKBAR

the first. The principal motif of any display of popular support is the jostle. Whether it is Yousaf Gilani on his way to the Supreme Court in Islamabad, or Mulayam Singh Yadav scrambling towards the legislature in Lucknow, supporters feel entitled to test the body warmth of their leader by getting as close to him as possible.

Granted that in this age of the omnipotent television camera some of this display may have more to do with love of TV than love of leader. For the great multitudes that give substance to our democracies this may be the only serious opportunity of being seen on the screen. The other option is holding a placard praising mummy at cricket matches, but that costs money. Public life is free.

But we do get distinctly uncomfortable with politicians who are, shall we say, not warm to the touch. You can recognise the difference from behaviour, if not demeanour. Gilani is warm; his boss Asif Zardari is cold. In Lucknow, Mulayam is distinctly warm, but is his bête noire Mayawati cold? I would suggest not. Mayawati belongs to a third variety, one that comes in multiple shades. She is aloof. Women politicians obviously have a problem with jostling, nor would men dare to be proximate.

But Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto were warm politicians without surrendering an inch of distance from their admirers. Mayawati practises a visible personality elitism that leaves a shadow bridge between her and her followers. You cross that bridge only with permission.

It is not often that you are going to see Mayawati compared with America's President Barack Obama, or indeed his presumptive Republican challenger Mitt Romney. But all

give unearned income a new meaning altogether: undeclared cash. Being colourful by nature, we have created separate brands: the sweaty honest employee has white money, the cool corrupt have black. Mayawati, however, has discovered the perfect arc of departure. She pays taxes on unearned income. Let us congratulate her. This marks a pleasant difference from those who stash their cash without fear of accountability.

when gush becomes self-defeating. Sonia Gandhi is not a warm politician, but that has not prevented her from winning elections.

Rahul Gandhi is trying hard to heat his persona on the campaign trail, but the strain is visible. His effort is being watched with some admiration and some amusement, but judgement on polling day will be controlled by totally different climatic considerations.

Dr. Manmohan Singh is temperamentally lukewarm, but he is authentic. He is intellectual without being austere and does not try to be anything else. He knows he has an arranged marriage with the electorate and understands its advantages and limitations. But he does have one serious problem: the stench of corruption in the environment is beginning to envelop, indirectly, his reputation. As Shakespeare, who had something to say about everything, noted in a sonnet: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." He has time to dispel this odour. He should insist that prime ministers and presidents should be included, without qualifications, in the proposed Lokpal Bill.

If there was clarity on this in Pakistan, and a president was as accountable to the police on issues like foreign bank accounts, Prime Minister Gilani would not have had to be jostled towards the Supreme Court last Thursday. The neighbourhood has lessons that Delhi should be wise enough to learn.

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bloodbath along the lines of the massacre of August 1975 was made known, Begum Khaleda Zia took up a false refrain, even before conducting any inquiry or before she had been properly briefed by her party colleagues, of army officers being abducted in what she tried to give out as a conspiracy by the government against its own armed forces.

A couple of days later, we woke up to the news that a bunch of retired and serving army officers had indeed been planning a seizure of power. Predictably and very properly, an entire nation has rallied in defence of democracy. Much as we take the Awami League government to task over the mistakes it has made since

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three are "aloof," albeit for radically different reasons. His critics have called Obama's palpable sense of superiority an intellectual sneer at those who put him into office, but at least Romney will not raise the topic. If Obama is high-table don, then Romney is boardroom billionaire, displaying a faint contempt for those who merely get by on earned salaries. The ultimate achievement in capitalism is unearned income from a bunch of dividends, the source of Romney's present wealth, which is why he is reluctant to exhibit his tax returns.

On the subcontinent, of course, we

Pause, for a paean to the South Asian voter, who is mature enough to weigh the complexities of reality on a fine balance before working out the assets and liabilities within the balance sheet. His jostle is not guarantee of a vote; he can go with cool, or even cold when his judgement tells him that better value lies outside emotion. If the queen of elephants, Mayawati, offers economic growth, she gets the nod. If the king of bicycles, Mulayam, persuades the voter about the benefits of touchy-feely warmth, his turn will come. South Asians may exude sentiment with abandon, but they know precisely