

Modalities of holding the next election

Resolve the question

REGRETTABLY, the mechanism of conducting the next election remains the most potentially destabilising matter if not addressed pragmatically. While we agree with the PM that in most countries national elections are held under the incumbent government with an efficient and independent election commission to back up, that, unfortunately, is not the case in Bangladesh. And that is primarily because the opposition does not trust the incumbent party to hold a credible and fair election. This was what the country was led to believe by the AL, and it is for this reason that the old system was changed and a caretaker system was pushed down the nation's throat, all on the insistence of the Awami League in 1996. Thus the about turn on the issue is puzzling.

The moot point is holding of national election in a manner that would not only be credible but would also be participated in by all the major political parties. And that needs engendering an atmosphere of trust among the main opposition parties in whatever system that is devised. And the caretaker arrangement was in fact such a system under which four national elections were held since 1996 and which, regrettably, has been arbitrarily withdrawn by the AL-led grand alliance.

In this regard the position of the government, that so many local government elections have been held under the present regime without any objection, does not hold much water since local government elections, that does not relate to assuming power at national level, cannot be equated with national elections.

Given the fact that the recent constitutional changes, which allows for holding election while the parliament is still in vogue, the fear that the election will not be free, and without political influence, is not unfounded. If one hopes for a level playing field in an election, one wonders how, with elected MP continuing in office contesting elections, a level playing field can be provided to all the contestants.

We would hope that the matter would be addressed with sincerity and due diligence by the ruling alliance, because a national election without the participation of the opposition would be unacceptable.

Another power price hike?

Frequency and amounts of increase in the rates worrying

ON available indications, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) seems set to announce a 30 percent hike in power tariff effective September 1. The hike would take place both at bulk and retail levels with sweeping knock-on effects on cost of living which has already hit the roofs for an overwhelming majority of the people.

The argument for power rate hike is a stock one: the cost of electricity generation has gone up and so the subsidies would have to be cut back on for the government to reduce its borrowing. Nobody contests the rationale for pricing to be linked to costing. However, what is missing is an elaborate explanation as to the compulsion for the hikes beyond just a terse announcement followed by a ritual of so-called public hearing. Equally important, no one in authority has ever come out with a statement on any improved management of the power sector by plugging the holes of pilferage and waste so far. How many unauthorised connections have been eliminated and how much of ghost billing causing loss to PDB and distribution companies and other forms of systems loss like transmission leakages have been checkmated? These questions need to be answered, otherwise it feels like an incompetence premium charged on the public.

This would be sixth increase in power tariffs since the government came to power and the fourth in the last six months alone. Such successive increases within a short span is unheard of in any democracy. This couldn't have happened in India or for that matter any other country. The argument for staggering is diluted in the face of such galloping increases.

Then if the supplies were commensurately steadier, at least there would be some justification to put up with the hikes. But unfortunately the increase in the rates has not been followed by any marked improvement in electric supply.

The government's pattern of emphasis clearly is in

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 3

1939
World War II: France, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia declare war on Germany after the invasion of Poland, forming the Allies.

1939
World War II: The United Kingdom and France begin a naval blockade of Germany that lasts until the end of the war. This also marks the beginning of the Battle of the Atlantic.

1971
Qatar becomes an independent state

1994
Sino-Soviet Split: Russia and the People's Republic of China agree to de-target their nuclear weapons against each other.

Does NAM still have significance?



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE 16th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has been wrapped up with a resolution containing some 700 clauses. As usual, it called for global disarmament, establishment of the Palestinian people's right to an independent nationhood, Iran's right to carry on with its peaceful nuclear energy programme, emphasis on the need to combat Islamophobia and so on.

Iran has undoubtedly been able to show the US and other Western powers as well as Israel that it is not isolated from the international community as out of some 120 member states of NAM, more than 100 countries sent their delegates or heads of government/state to the Summit.

Leaders from countries like Venezuela and Iran used the forum to express their strong feelings against the world powers, particularly the US. Venezuela's Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro even presented the proposal to construct a multi-centric world supported by the non-aligned nations and to attain that mission he stressed the need to break political ties with what he termed neo-colonial systems in which these countries are trapped for years.

Similarly, Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the closing session of the summit stressed the need for joint global governance, rebuilding the international order and making a radical change in the

way the world is run. Despite the spirit and fervour of the Summit, the resolutions are going to remain a wish-list in practice, given the history of great resolutions adopted in many such well-meaning gatherings of nations. Even the largest gathering of the world nations, the UN, cannot claim much in terms of its achievements vis-à-vis its promises and aspirations thereof.

As new members, Bangladesh and Azerbaijan got the opportunity to address the second largest multinational forum after the UN. The net

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gains for many nations that attended the summit have been the bilateral talks and meetings that were held between heads of states or governments on the sidelines. Moreover, leaders of different nations got the rare opportunity to know each other and exchange views about many crucial issues in a less formal environment. For example, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on the sidelines of the summit, met with her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh and discussed Teesta water sharing, which is a very crucial issue for Bangladesh as well as India.

How did the Western powers look at the Tehran summit of NAM?

They had a rather lukewarm attitude towards the summit and tried to make light of the gains, if any, that Iran might have desired to make by

dint of its playing host to the Summit. For example, it could not garner enough support even from the Middle Eastern Muslim states for its ally, Syrian President Assad. For even Egypt's Islamist president Mohamed Morsi termed President Assad's as a repressive regime and that it was an ethical duty to support the Syrian opposition's struggle against what it called the oppressive regime in Damascus. But is it a really important point to highlight?

As the largest platform of nations next to the UN, it is natural that there

would be diversity of opinions among the leaders on different international issues. But the main point that the critics of the NAM miss is that the multinational forum comprising newly emerging post-colonial nations created during the Cold War has not lost its significance as yet. In fact, the original idea of NAM conceived by the then Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, Indonesian President Soekarno and Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, was to provide an alternative platform for the newly independent nations so that they might distance themselves from superpower rivalry and may not join their military blocs. It had its origin in the Asia-Africa conference held in Bandung of Indonesia in 1955

at the initiative of prime ministers of the then-Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, etc, bringing together 29 nations. Later, it took a formal shape as Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at Belgrade as the brainchild of the Yugoslav (now defunct) leader Marshall Tito.

Is the context of NAM any more valid simply because one of the superpowers, the erstwhile USSR, of the Cold War era has collapsed?

The turnout at the Tehran Summit of NAM is itself a proof that the forum has not lost its significance, though the dispensation of the Cold War under which it first came into being is no more existent. The world is still under the hegemony of different military and economic powers with the lone superpower exercising its overall control on the world affairs. The Western military blocs are very much there, in some cases they are expanding. Numerous countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are torn by internal conflicts and wars, where big powers are siding with one party or the other.

In sum, both economically and politically, the Third World nations remain as dependent, or rather, at the mercy of, the rich and militarily powerful countries as ever.

So far from becoming redundant, the import and need for an alternative international forum to discuss issues of mutual interest and wider cooperation among the developing and least developing nations outside the ambit of big powers remain as significant as ever.

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International CEDAW Day: Let's fulfill the commitments

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TODAY (September 3) is international Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) Day. CEDAW is the international bill of women's rights adopted by the United Nations in 1979. Each member state ratifying the Convention is required to submit a periodic four-yearly report on the status of implementation. Non-government organisations and women's groups can submit an Alternate to the Committee. This is used by the Committee to supplement the state report.

Bangladesh signed CEDAW in 1984. Since the beginning, Bangladesh has been sending regular reports to the UN CEDAW Committee. It has been more than one and a half years since Bangladesh submitted its combined sixth and seventh state reports as well as NGOs Alternate Report. After thorough review of the reports, the UN CEDAW Committee gave a number of Concluding Observations to be addressed by the government before the next report submission.

NGOs in Bangladesh working on CEDAW created a collective platform named Citizens' Initiatives on CEDAW, Bangladesh (CEDAW Platform) in 2007 to prepare and submit the Alternate Report. This was prepared after extensive, participatory consultations amongst a wide range of women's rights and human rights groups. The CEDAW Platform (42 national NGOs are members) has come up with a status report to help monitor the achievements and gaps since more than one and a half years have passed. So it's worth knowing what has been achieved or what challenges remain that need to be dealt with before submitting the next report.

While putting forward the

Concluding Observations, the Committee selected two issues for follow-up procedure and requested the state party to provide, within two years, written information on the steps undertaken to implement the recommendations contained in Paragraphs 12 and 20 of the Concluding Observations 2011. The two issues are: (1) withdrawal of reservations and (2) measures taken to combat violence against women. Let's see the current status with regard to these two issues.

Withdrawal of reservations

No steps have been taken for withdrawal of reservations, so there is no progress on this issue to date. While

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signing CEDAW, Bangladesh government kept four reservations. While reservations from two articles have so far been withdrawn, Bangladesh's position remains unchanged regarding Articles 2 and 16.1.C. These two articles would necessitate the state party to enact new laws or amend all discriminatory laws that affect women's human rights. In other words, these reservations allow for continuation of discriminatory policies and laws. The reason given for reservation is that withdrawal may go against the spirit of Quran and Sunnah.

In its last periodic report, the Bangladesh government made written commitments for considering withdrawal of reservations and full ratification of UNCEDAW. In the 2004 periodic report, the government mentioned: "The Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs had

opined in favour of withdrawal of reservations." But, in reality, that has not been done. This leaves a big question mark regarding the fulfillment of Bangladesh's commitment to establish women's human rights and gender equality.

If we look deeply into the issue of continued reservations, then we will hardly find any justification in favour of that. The excuse of Quran-Sunnah is feeble as we see seventeen Muslim majority countries, including, Jordan, Kuwait, Tunisia, Lebanon, Maldives, Oman, etc., have placed no reservations on Article 2. Besides, over 10% of Bangladesh's population is non-Muslim, for whom Islamic laws do not apply. Their lives are governed by

laws other than the Islamic law. Therefore, maintaining reservations on account of Quran and Sunnah is not universally applicable.

Moreover, Bangladesh's reservation to Article 2 is in contradiction with constitutional guarantees provided under Articles 10, 19, 27, 28, 29, which say that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life.

Combating violence against women

In this area, Bangladesh has a few positive stories to tell, albeit challenges remain in the way of effectively combating issues of violence against women. For example, the Parliament enacted the Domestic Violence Act in 2010. But rules and

regulations that are very important for judicial procedure and effective implementation of the law are yet to be formulated. Besides, there are some weaknesses in the law, such as marital rape is not included in the definition of domestic violence. On the other hand, the government has not been able to finalise its action plan to deal with violence against women, which is extremely important in putting the law into practice.

On the issue of sexual harassment, which is a rampant form of violence in the public sphere, the High Court issued directives to educational institutions and workplaces in 2009 to set up complaints committees and complaint boxes to prevent sexual harassment. However, no specific law on sexual harassment has yet been formulated. Most of the educational institutions have not set up complaint committees or complaint boxes, and steps have not been taken to create awareness against sexual harassment.

In a nutshell, it can be said that Bangladesh is making a slow progress in implementing CEDAW. Forty years after independence one would expect a far better performance with regard to ensuring human rights of all citizens, including women, because the basis of the movement for independence was to create a democratic, secular and discrimination-free country. So we need to keep that constantly in mind, and we need to fulfill our commitment to implement CEDAW in full.

Besides, implementing CEDAW is not just about fulfilling a commitment at the international arena; it is even more than that. It is about making women's life more secure and meaningful, because they are 50% of the entire humankind.

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(Steps Towards Development is the Secretariat of CEDAW Platform.)