

Enforcement of electoral laws

EC should brook no infringement

WITH only three more days to go, excitement is running high in all the four city corporation areas over the upcoming polls. That is only expected and befitting as well. But alongside the heart-warming news are also coming not-so-pleasant reports on transgression of electoral codes of conducts by the candidates.

Well-wishers and mentors of the mayoral candidates including some upazila chairmen and MPs are reported to have been canvassing for the hopefuls using government vehicles in not a few instances.

They are also alleged to have been using government bungalows and circuit houses for the purpose.

This is something for the election commission officials of the respective constituencies to take serious note of and act on.

Earlier, in this column, we advised EC officials to show zero tolerance towards mayoral candidates found flouting electoral rules through advertising themselves in showy posters and billboards in all the city corporations.

Now as partisan mentors of the mayoral candidates appear to have joined the fray, the challenges are also high before the EC to see that electoral codes of conduct are strictly observed by the candidates.

The success of EC in holding the city corporation elections in a free, fair, peaceful and credible manner will go to prove its efficacy in meeting the still bigger challenge before it—holding of the upcoming general election.

Hopefully, the EC will prove equal to its task.

New economic zones

Look around and expedite

IT is not without reason that countries like Vietnam, Myanmar and China have opted to set up special economic zones (SEZs) replete with physical infrastructure including power, road and rail connectivities to woo foreign investment. It is rather sad that our policy makers have been dithering on the planned formation of SEZs despite having numerous examples of such zones in the region. There are not even a dozen in existence in the country while Vietnam has 400.

From the perspective of investors, it makes sense to set up factories in SEZs. Not only do such centers provide the physical infrastructure needed for smooth operation, there is also the issue of protecting the investment made. We should not be under any illusion that because our incentives package is attractive foreign investors would be automatically drawn to us. Of fundamental importance are infrastructure and political stability.

The laid back attitude is inexplicable. Having enacted the Bangladesh Economic Zones Act in 2010, hardly any work has been done to facilitate establishment of SEZs in the past three years. With such slow progress, apprehensions are already being voiced that the first zone may not be completed by 2016. With Myanmar already in the race to provide better road and rail links and its deep sea port also coming up, chances of the much talked about billions of dollars in foreign investment, particularly in the RMG sector might elude Bangladesh if our decision-makers do not pull up their socks and give SEZ the priority deserves not on paper but in action.



IFFAT NAWAZ

Hanging by a thread

THE term "hanging by a thread" was taken too literally by a certain someone of a certain garment factory. Yesterday's The Daily Star sported a couple of photos of ladders made of rope for emergency evacuation for the said factory workers. One has to possess super power to use such an expedient during an emergency like fire or earthquake. It is a shame that this half-baked emergency compliance measure did not consider the lives of the factory workers at all.

Let's say we overlook the fact that majority of our population is not experts in climbing, but we cannot overlook the fact that most factory workers in the garment sector are women and are clothed in sari and kameez, non-friendly attires for tasks like climbing down a rope ladder during an emergency. We do not want to imagine what chaos the combination of a rope ladder with sari and scarves may cause. If anything, it would add to the casualty figure.

With the recent disaster in Rana plaza the RMG industry is trying to take extra measures for workers safety. There is added pressure from the buyers abroad as well to comply with workers' safety policies. However, we strongly feel that impractical measures like rope ladders for emergency evacuation are not the kind of steps the factory owners should take. Such a



solution is actually a mockery of all the lives lost during disasters in the garments factories and we hope our garments factory owners do not think in such illogical and callous terms.

Our garments sector earns enough, and that is increase every year. Investing a small portion of it to save the lives of the workers should not be anymore a matter of if, but when, and how. Cutting corners in implementing safety compliance is no longer an option and our RMG sector needs to strongly realize that.

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Deshbandhu . . . and what might have been



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

In these rather banal times we inhabit across the landscape vivisected into political tribalism, figuratively as well as literally, through the happenings of 1947, it is the electrifying, idealistic nature of Das' beliefs that is recalled, to jolt us into an awareness of the transcendental calling of politics as it used to be, as it ought to be. Deshbandhu belonged to a generation of political figures that produced the likes of Surendranath Banerjee, Bipin Chandra Pal, Motilal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Aurobindo Ghosh. In Das came together the best that education under British colonialism could offer, which was fundamentally an acknowledgement that India would need to catch up with the rest of world, that such a catching up entailed a calling forth of nationalism based on sophisticated patriotism among its leadership and its citizens across the varied parameters of thought.

When you speak of Deshbandhu, you recall the man who abandoned a lucrative legal practice to place his politics at the service of his people. That was how he scaled the heights of grandeur, through being honoured as the friend of the country by a grateful people. In C.R. Das, the urge for national freedom came not through a demonstration of bitterness toward the colonial administration but through the belief that constructive engagement with the British in the administration of India would lead to self-rule, to be followed in due course by full independence. That was his reasoning behind the formation of the Swarajya Party, despite his continuing association with the Indian National Congress, in 1923. He spelt out his dreams at the conference of the All-India Swarajya Party in Calcutta in 1924:

'I have said elsewhere and repeat it today that Swaraj --- the right Swaraj --- is not to be confused with any particular system of government. . . What I want today is a clear declaration by the people of this country that we have got the right to establish our own system of government according to the temper and genius of our people . . . We must be true judges of what system of government is good for us

EIGHTY eight years after his passing, Chittaranjan Das remains a significant point of reference in South Asian history. There are all the questions which arise with every remembrance of the man known as Deshbandhu to people across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. What if he had not died in 1925, at the relatively young age of fifty five? Would India be partitioned had C.R. Das been alive in the tumultuous 1940s? Would Bengal go for a fresh new renaissance with Deshbandhu around?

and what system of government will not suit us. It is not for other people to constitute themselves as our judges.'

C.R. Das was a renaissance man. It was a reputation which came to him as a result of his wide experience across the landscape of existence. He appeared at the examinations of the Indian Civil Service, before veering off into law. He read profusely, was an enthusiast for poetry and indeed composed verses of his own. Literature was his passion. Beyond and above all that, he was a man steeped in constitutional politics, conscious of the political realities, often coated in complexities, that underlined India. That Hindus and Muslims needed to find common ground was a thought he put into clear outline through the Lucknow Pact of 1916. He was one of the earliest of Indian politicians to realize that if Indians meant to have absolute liberty for themselves, they would first need to come together as a nation that defied communal differences, that considered India as a homeland for all. It was Gandhi who spoke for all after Deshbandhu's death:

'Deshbandhu was one of the greatest of men...He dreamed...His heart knew no difference between Hindus and Mussulmans'.

And Evelyn Thomas, writing in Britain's Labour Monthly in September 1923, eulogized C.R. Das thus:

'Mr. C.R. Das, late President of the All-Indian National Congress and founder of the Swaraj Party, is the acknowledged successor of Mr. Gandhi as an all-India leader. He has snatched the falling standard and is carrying it forward in the struggle between Indian bourgeois nationalism and British imperialism --- a struggle which is destined to be a long one.'

In Deshbandhu, passion was what came into a practice of politics. And passion too was what defined his legal career, as his

defence of Aurobindo Ghosh in the Alipore bomb case in 1908 was to demonstrate all so well. In a trial that was to last 126 days with over two hundred witnesses examined, Deshbandhu's eloquence came alive in his closing arguments in court:

'My appeal to you, therefore, is that a man like this, who is being charged with the offence with which he has been charged, stands not only before the Bar of this court, but before the Bar of the High Court of history. My appeal to you is this: that long after this controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, this agitation, will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and a lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed not only in India but across distant seas and lands.'

All these years, long after Chittaranjan Das' life came to a rather sudden end, his words are recalled, his patriotism remains our pride. He would have made a difference had he lived longer. He might and could have held India together, in rainbow colours.

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Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, born on November 5, 1870, died on June 16, 1925

A conspicuous trend in Myanmar

NEHGINPAO KIPGEN

DURING his visit to the White House on May 20, Myanmar President Thein Sein talked about the release of political prisoners who remain incarcerated in the country's jails despite the air of reforms sweeping over it.

The precise number of political prisoners is unclear. One frequently cited source is the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a human rights organization based in Mae Sot, Thailand. Since its inception in 2000, the AAPP works for the release of all political prisoners and for the improvement of prison conditions inside Myanmar.

As of May 17, after the latest round of prisoners' release, the AAPP data shows that there are at least 164 political prisoners in different prisons across the country. In addition, there are more than 150 individuals facing trial under different political charges.

Their existence long denied by Myanmar's rulers, political prisoners are now central to the country's diplomatic dealings with Western powers in the era of reforms. During his trip to Washington, the first by a Myanmar head of state in 47 years, President Thein Sein openly acknowledged the incarceration of political prisoners.

The President's acknowledgement came weeks after the government's announcement on February 7, 2013 to establish a committee to review the detention of political prisoners. The committee includes government officials, members of civil society, and former prisoner groups.

These prisoners are mostly student leaders, members and sympathizers of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and political activists of ethnic minority groups who were arrested during the 1988 uprising, and through the years of repression that followed.

The much celebrated release of NLD chairperson Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010 did not immediately result in the release of these prisoners. Instead, the government seems to be carefully calibrating their release in batches in return for concessions from the Western democracies, especially from the United States (US).

The strategy seems to work well for the West too, as it can show human rights lobbyists at home that it has won something concrete from the Myanmar government in return for its

concessions. There is a conspicuous trend in how the issue of political prisoners have been meticulously handled.

Since President Thein Sein came to power in 2011, the government has announced amnesty as many as 10 times and prisoners were released on nine occasions. These prisoners are mostly held under Article 401 (1), which gives the President the power to "remit the whole or any part of the punishment to which he has been sentenced" at any time.

Every batch of prisoners' release has coincided with political movement. For example, the amnesty on May 16, 2011 was announced at the time when Myanmar was lobbying for the 2014 chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Subsequently, the October 11, 2011 amnesty was announced prior to the arrival of ASEAN representative to study whether Myanmar government deserves ASEAN chair.

Then in January and February 2012, on the anniversary of the country's Independence Day and Union Day, the Myanmar government released more than 600 political prisoners, including prominent student leaders of the 1988 democracy uprising and ethnic minority leaders. The release happened a few weeks after Hillary Rodham Clinton made a three-day visit to Myanmar in November 2011, the first US Secretary of State since John Foster Dulles in 1955.

In response, the US government decided to resume full diplomatic relations with Myanmar. An ambassador was posted for the first time in two decades. Subsequently, the US also suspended investment sanctions on July 11 and import bans on September 26, 2012. Those initiatives allowed international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to re-establish its links with Myanmar.

Amnesties were also granted before Myanmar president attended the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012, and before the 22nd ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam in April 2013. Before the visit of President Obama in November 2012, the first sitting US President to have visited the country, President Thein Sein pledged to create a commission to review political prisoner cases.

Just ahead of President Thein

Their existence long denied by Myanmar's rulers, political prisoners are now central to the country's diplomatic dealings with Western powers in the era of reforms.

Sein's visit to Washington, the Myanmar government released 23 political prisoners on May 17. President Obama commended the visiting Myanmar President and said, "We very much appreciate your efforts and leadership in leading Myanmar in a new direction." As a sign of appreciation, President Obama used 'Myanmar' instead of 'Burma' though the US government has not officially recognized the new name.

Until diplomatic relations with the Western democracies are fully normalized, the Myanmar government is likely to continue using political prisoners as a pawn for political bargaining. Though the trend is unfortunate, it apparently serves the strategic interests of both Western democracies and the Myanmar government during its transition period.

The underlying reality is that Western democracies cannot wait to do business with Myanmar. On April 22, 2013, the European Union (EU) lifted the sanctions it suspended a year ago. At its meeting in Luxembourg, the EU foreign ministers welcomed the changes that had taken place in the past year and decided to lift all sanctions except the arms embargo.

In response, President Thein Sein announced amnesty for about 100 prisoners, including 56 considered to be political detainees. Even prior to lifting sanctions, the European Commission on March 5, 2013 had announced a package of €150 million to support the country's democratic reform ahead of national elections in 2015, and also pledged more EU development money and a bilateral investment agreement.

Rather than being satisfied at Myanmar's piecemeal release of prisoners for each concession it makes, the West should be insisting that the government release all political prisoners in its custody.

The writer is General Secretary of the U.S.-based Kukui International Forum.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Padma bridge to eat up ADP

The implementation of Padma bridge with our own fund is an absolutely ridiculous idea in a poor country like Bangladesh. The government is doing this just to get votes. This huge project will eat up the



major share of our ADP depriving many other priority projects. One needs not to be an Einstein to understand this simple math. Padma bridge is not essential at this stage without a foreign donor or lender, and we are not financially capable of bearing this gigantic cost.

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Rethinking "Letters" page

For a long time in the past we had been used to reading 'Letters to the Editor' in one full page of your esteemed daily. The contributors enjoyed the full allocation of one complete page, and as many as 8 to 10 letters of different subjects and interests used to appear on that page.

The letters to the editor are a strong vehicle to bring out many facts of grievances of public before the authorities concerned to act on those. The readers can also know the views, incidents, experiences of real life facts through the letters. Could the editor of this widely circulated daily please rethink of going back to its former format?

M Haque
Dhaka

Ashraful must pay

Cricket has become a rich man's sport and most international cricketers are multi-millionaires. Even 'poor' Bangladeshi cricketers earn more than their qualifications usually justify. What justification is there, then, to seek forgiveness after being caught in the act? After all, has this not become our national pastime?

Certainly, there can be no forgiveness without restitution; and never, for bringing such a noble game into disrepute. For being a greedy fool, Ashraful must pay!

Sikander Ahmed
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

"Dhaka and Delhi: A tale of two cities"

Not often one comes across such fluent write-up as Muhammad Aminul Islam's 'Dhaka and Delhi: A tale of two cities' (TDS, June 07). Mr. Islam has said it all -- short and simple, except leaving a big question: Why there is no Arundhati Roy in Bangladesh? Perhaps many of us know the answer and many of us do not want to know. I do not mean to imply by any chance that Bangladesh cannot boast of its own intellectuals! But should one consider a layman like me as an intellectual, I shall consider this a humiliation and disgrace to me.

I hope I have been able to answer Muhammad Aminul Islam's question; and, yes, Delhi honuz dur aust!

Ashfaq Chowdhry
Banani, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Money hardly whitens," published on June 10, 2013

Iqbal Khan
Mr. Sajjadur Rahman has very aptly produced this report. Points given in favour seem logical, but positive logic behind such move could have been incorporated more clearly.

Niloufar Sarker
Everybody knows including Mr. Muhith that property prices are undervalued to evade the stamp duty; nothing has been done to detect or correct this. Has any effort been made to calculate how much revenue is being lost by this, besides creating black money? It's a vicious cycle.

"Crude, stinky," (June 10, 2013)

Dev Saha
Civility is priceless! When ugly words come from these "honourable" parliamentarians, they look awfully ugly too.

Anon
They are supposed to have civilised debates. The parliament is not for uneducated people with limited vocabulary who regularly throw "temper tantrums." They should at least try representing their party in a positive way.

Triple Ace
Once I was told that inner ugliness eventually becomes visible on the face. Well, now I know it is true.

Mortuza Huq
Actually, these two ladies know the language AL understands.