

Voters' info in non-govt. hands

This must be EC's remit

THE report that the data centre containing all the vital information about voters as well as the password for the voter registration department is controlled by a private agency and the members on the staff of a project under the voter registration wing of the EC is quite unsettling

It is worthwhile to note that the said private agency, Tiger IT, was contracted by the EC in June, 2010 to modernise the voters' information storage system under the National Identity Card Registration Act-2010. And the project named IDEA, under the voter registration department, was created between 2010 and 2013 with World Bank's financial assistance to provide voters with improved national identity card.

It gives one the jitters to think that the contractor, who was supposed to hand over the data centre to the EC by June 30, 2012, has not yet done it. Worse still, the staff members of the project under voter registration department are learnt to have been ignoring EC's authority in the matter.

But how could things come to such a pass when article 6 of the National Identity Card Registration Act-2010 provides that the Election Commission (EC) will conduct all the work relating to preparation, registration, distribution and maintenance of national identity cards?

Since it involves privacy and security of all the individual citizens as well as of the state, the EC cannot be mere spectator to it. As the custodian of the voters, it must exercise its authority and restore its control on the data centre and the voter registration department.

Rules of origin for indigenous products

A matter of right that needs protection

EXPERTS on geographical indicative (GI) products have expressed concern on the lack of movement at policy level to formulate rules regarding patent rights. Their concern is justified given that without correct policy guidelines in place, it is impossible to register patents for traditional Bangladeshi products like jamdani, hilsa fish and nakshi kantha. GI goes beyond mere patenting as it is a method of certifying a product's qualities including identifying its place of origin and authenticity. Yet, with authorities' foot dragging on Geographical Indication Products (Registration and Protection) Act since November, 2013, the country faces real prospects of losing the patent rights to many of these traditional products to countries like India for example.

Traditional items such as the highly prized and lucrative Jamdani sarees are already under contestation. In 2009, India registered this product that has proven origins in Dhaka, as Uppada Jamdani. This was possible because at the time Bangladesh lacked the requisite law. Experts challenge the legality of such registration; however, it is incumbent upon the government to take up the cause in light of intellectual property rights. A failure to act can cost us dearly. We should move quickly to enact a law suitable to protect GI goods and commodities so as not to provide any undue advantage to any country. Because there has been no movement since 2012 when the first draft of the law was placed to the ministry, the urgency is even more pronounced that we have a law in place.

Our George Washington!

SHAKHAWAT LITON

OVER 18 years ago, the BNP-led government defended the February 15, 1996 controversial election arguing that it was necessary for continuation of the constitutional provision. Now, its archrival the Awami League-led government has been using the same defence to justify the January 5 election. This time, however, the AL-led government has also been facing widespread criticism for unopposed election of 153 MPs in the January polls.

A Jatiya Party leader has challenged the provision of unopposed election. A High Court Division Bench has been taking opinions of legal experts to dispose the writ petition. Some legal experts have already given their opinions to the court against the en masse unopposed elections. On behalf of the government, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam, on Tuesday, defended the uncontested election. In so doing, he claimed that candidates have been elected uncontested in many countries. But his examples in favour of the claim are very surprising and erroneous as well. He cited unopposed elections of former US presidents George Washington and James Monroe. This means, elections of Washington and Monroe as presidents are comparable to the elections of our 153 MPs. The attorney general might have forgotten how Washington and Monroe were elected presidents unopposed. Let us revisit the history of how Washington was elected president.

Washington, one of the founding fathers of the USA, was elected president twice as the unanimous choice of the electors. The electoral colleges elected him unanimously as the first president in 1789 and again in the 1792 election. He remains the only president to have received 100% of the electoral votes. The first US Congress voted to pay Washington a salary of \$ 25,000 a year, which was a large sum in 1789. He was already wealthy and declined to take the salary as he valued his image as a selfless public servant. He, however, finally accepted the payment to avoid setting a precedent whereby the presidency would be perceived as limited only to independently wealthy individuals who could serve without any salary.

How were our 153 MPs elected in the January 5 polls? More than half of the country's voters did not have any say over their elections. Not a single vote was cast. But they were elected to be public representatives. What are the precedents they are setting for their successors? Think about the controversial and unlawful activities of only two AL MPs elected unopposed -- Shamim Osman in Narayanganj and Nizam Hazari in Feni. Are they our George Washington?

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

Freedom, eternal vigilance, and negligence

IMTIAZ HUSSAIN

ETERNAL vigilance may be the price of freedom, but how does it resonate across Bangladesh after forty-three birthdays?

Historically, it has been used to defend the status quo, rationalise expansion, and facilitate state integration. Sir Edmund Burke, the father of conservatism, used it despairingly when the French Revolution threatened the monarchy, as too John Philpot Curran in the United States against British threats after independence was won. Famous for dragging Florida's and Georgia's Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee, and Seminole Indians, through the "Trails of Tears" to Oklahoma, US President Andrew Jackson exposed the aggressive usage in his 1837 Farewell Address, which set the stage for James Polk's 1848 war against Mexico under a Manifest Destiny ideology. Shortly after, as the US headed towards a race-based civil war, abolitionist Wendell Phillips offered a third variation of the phrase through his desperate urgings for reconciliation and integration between citizens and slaves.

Only the first and third types could be relevant to Bangladesh, though our four-decade history is thin on exemplars. If "eternal vigilance" was our vital post-1971 interest, we would have acted immediately to try war collaborators, instead of being persuaded, largely by outsiders, to delay any trials. Procrastination, in turn, promoted secondary issues. One eventually became who to institutionalise as the country's spiritual "founding" father. Until 1975, this was a unanimous choice: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. By the 1990s, it became a contentious issue precisely because we shifted our attention from vigilance to political infighting and from democratic pretenses to authoritarian diktats, with our two dominant political parties rallying behind two different founding fathers: Sheikh Mujib for the Awami League (AL) and General Ziaur Rahman for the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Political bitterness, alternating administrations, and contrasting foreign-policy proclivities (either pro-India or pro-Pakistan), rather than any "eternal vigilance" to preserve the fruits of independence took their toll on conflict-weary citizens. What could not be done publicly and officially became a private option, rather than a universal assumption, and unofficial, as it escaped any national discourse.

Though Bangladesh was never threatened militarily, in the very "take-off" stage of its nation-building, when institutions, symbols and senses, as well as loyalties, should have been cultivated, we turned instead to institutionalise internal division and foreign homage. Even lessons were not being learned, as we kept replicating the same mistakes: turning to a caretaker government to manage any administrative transition because the country was politi-

cally so polarised, we ended up institutionalising the caretaker government instead of any representative political party, not to mention an executive or legislature.

Foreign examples reveal our missed integrative opportunity. Alexander Hamilton's protectionist policy approach after US independence, for instance, or Jawaharlal Nehru's nationalistic orientation in India, shifted attention to the home-front to construct institutions first and foremost. Both became the bedrock of cultivating democracy immediately after independence, which may be one reason why they are the largest two and most secure democracies today within their own contexts -- one representing developed countries, the other less developed counterparts. Both also de-emphasised the foreign context in the initial decades -- the US under a foreign policy of isolation, India under non-alignment. The results: thriving executive, legislature, and political institutions, respect for the idea of an opposition (adversarial politics), and the veto power of rules and law.

That sounds like our wish-list. Indeed, our gaps might matter. In an age of ferocious globalisation, countries not only have to adjust domestic growth to unpredictable external circumstances, but those which do often get to come away with fewer bruises than those which do not. In our case, globally recognised success in the social arena, such as poverty-reduction, and advances in the business sector through the textiles revolution, has so frequently been trampled by political conflict that, ultimately, we pay twice over: first, through the absence of stable institutions to intervene and absorb the shocks; then by thwarting emergent socio-economic infrastructures even as they carry promises. A future determined by political vendettas, rather than micro-finance, for example, or even trickle-down growth, could have been nipped had we nurtured the strong secular institutions we inherited from our Independence War right after it ended.

Our wounds need not become fatal. That requires we cultivate the defensive version of eternal vigilance first, and for long enough to make it a tradition; and simultaneously encourage the healing process so that integrative instincts can be built. The belief in our independence is still strong, and especially when we still have a handful of freedom fighters left. That is the critical starter we missed in the 1970s. Once restored, the state would return to being the unquestionable subject of our loyalties rather than an instrument of our self-seeking interests. It would boast broader legitimacy than in the past, and be more widely recognised than it has ever been. Failing to do so before our last freedom fighters leave us would put us on the slippery slope to "eternal anarchy" -- a war for all against all. That would insult anyone who utters the country's once-hallowed name.

The writer is Professor Emeritus, International Relations, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.

Umbrage against activists

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

DEMOCRACY and personal liberty should never be taken for granted. This is a warning that the imposition of the Emergency gave 39 years ago when the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, furtively extinguished the lights of freedom on the night of June 25-26 to save her skin.

The Allahabad High Court had disqualified her as an MP for six years for using official machinery during her election campaign. Instead of stepping down, she suspended the constitution, imposed press censorship and constricted personal freedom. More than 100,000 people were detained without trial and all the opposition members, including Jayaprakash Narayan who had led the movement against her corrupt government, were put behind bars. The worst was that she destroyed the institutions, which still have not regained their health.

The lesson to learn is to have a transparent government which can rule within the precincts of the constitution. A strong government means an effective government, not one person rule, which negates the very parliamentary democracy that we have preferred to the presidential form. People are the masters and anything done to silence their say goes against the very grain of our republic's democratic, pluralistic and egalitarian ideals.

Those who violated these principles were punished when elections were held in 1977. Even a tall person like Mrs. Gandhi was defeated at the polls. To know all this is important so that it does not happen again. Yet some signs are starting to be visible to remind us of those days when we see the working of the governments. One of its wings, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) has leaked out certain passages of a report which alleges that the activities of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) have brought down the rate of growth by two to three per cent.

I cannot blame Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government because the report was obviously prepared during the Congress rule of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. But top bureaucrats are responsible in putting across such information that tarnishes the image of those who are working at the grassroots. Some of the names mentioned in the report are people of integrity and I, as an activist, know them personally. Their defence that the government has circulated "a cock and bull story" is understandable because they have given years of their lives to work for the welfare of people in rural areas.

Disparagingly, they are called 'jholawalas'. This tag has been linked with them because they carry shoulder bags which have grams, a frugal meal for their long sojourns in remote parts. The allegation against them that their protests or agitations have stalled economic growth carries no conviction because they are conscientious objectors against big dams, nuclear power stations and the likes.

Take Medha Patkar who is associated with the opposition to the Narmada Dam. No doubt she had the World Bank loan for the project cancelled, but her objection was that you could not displace people without giving them alternative accommodation. The opposition to the dam became so strong at one time that the government appointed the Narmada Tribunal which said in its judgment that the people should be given an equivalent site of land and a rehabilitation grant six months before they are uprooted.

Gujarat, which is the main beneficiary, took the responsibility of rehabilitating the displaced persons. Initially land was given for land, but subsequently cash awards were offered. Many took it but today they are mere labourers because the cash has not lasted for long. The new announcement that the Narmada Dam would be built to its original height and that the gates would be installed amounts to the betrayal of the understanding given that until the uprooted were rehabilitated the dam's height would not be raised.

Prime Minister Modi, hailing from Gujarat, may not have anything to do with the decision that the Narmada authorities have made. But he is bound to be accused of giving his blessing for the additional work. I recall that when the agitation against the dam was at its height several Gujaratis told me that the dam was their Kashmir. "If you do not allow the dam to come up, we shall be forced to take up guns as the separatists in Kashmir are doing."

The story of nuclear power station at Koodamkulam in Tamil Nadu is no different. Rightly, the people living in that area complained that they did not want a nuclear plant in their midst and they gave the example of Fukushima in Japan where the radioactive nuclear fuel leaked into surrounding areas. Still the plant has come up and is working to its full capacity with all the hazards that the inhabitants in that area face.

The point which emerges from such projects is that the government cannot take the people for granted and that there is more to life than ends justifying the means as they

My fear is that the atmosphere of paranoia is being built because some undemocratic steps are in the offing. I hope they do not end up with another Emergency, another era where dissent would be construed as anti-national.

did in Communist China or Communist Russia. But Mahatma Gandhi's India was different. Of course, development is important but it has to be balanced against the adverse fallout affecting every individual.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, did point out that there were two ways available to build the future India: communist dictatorship or democratic transparency and accountability. He said that India had chosen the path of consensus, which is an essential ingredient of a democratic system.

I personally think that the costs of the project go up and the delay in completion takes place because of red tapeism and corruption at every tier of government, right up to the minister. The effort to put the blame on NGOs is bound to go awry because the media today is vigilant to expose the scams even at the highest level. The Manmohan Singh government was notorious for that. One scandal after another would tumble out of its cupboard. All the guilty have escaped punishment because there is no accountability in the system.

In fact, my fear is that the atmosphere of paranoia is being built because some undemocratic steps are in the offing. I hope they do not end up with another Emergency, another era where dissent would be construed as anti-national.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Tony Blair's illogical urge

Tony Blair is at it again. In The Daily Star's report on what the former prime minister of the UK has written on his website, it appears the hawkish Blair, now special Middle East envoy, is calling for drones and air strikes on portions of Iraq. Placing this man as an envoy to the Middle East is like putting a wolf in charge of the sheep pastures.

The British have a dreadful record in creating the very problems that Blair now wishes to address. In the early part of the 20th century, three events led to the creation of much of the world's problems today. The establishment of the Anglo-Persian oil company (which eventually morphed into the giant British Petroleum) in 1908, by deceiving and buying out oil concessions from the Qajar Shahs of Iran; the Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which the British foreign secretary agreed to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine; and the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between the British and French governments, in which the fate of the Arab lands formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire, was to be determined after the First World War and mandated into British and French spheres of influence.

The world thinks highly of British diplomacy. In fact it is more aptly described as British duplicity. Sadly, in their imperial mode, they thought nothing of what the future might bring as they arbitrarily sought to plunder the resources of the Arab world. And the plundering continues, with Mr. Tony Blair, the heir to all those who preceded him in that endeavour.

Syed Hamde Ali

The Nawab Palace
Bogra

Shakib's family doesn't deserve this

We have huge expectations from our cricketers. Sometimes our cricketers fulfil that and sometimes they don't. Sometimes we criticise them without showing any mercy. As a cricket loving nation, we may have the right to do so. But very often we forget that they are also human beings and have emotions as well.

Shakib is our national hero. He represents our country. During the 1st one-day between India and Bangladesh, some spectators teased Shakib's wife. A national cricketer's wife does not deserve this. We should show some respect to our cricketers.

Avraw Jashim

Dhaka University

Comments on news report, "Bought out!" published on June 16, 2014

Kabdullah

'Real freedom fighters sold themselves to power and money' -- it took 42 years to hear a brave truth from a freedom fighter. Wonder if that was the "Muktijuddher Chetona" in their hearts all along?

Spiderman

From day one liars knew that the only way to deceive people and hide their corruption and crime was to wear the mask of 'Muktijoddha'. When PM can certify corrupt Abul as patriot, what is so big news if an ex Al-Badr becomes Muktijoddha Sangsad's secretary?

Bakhtiar Hussein

It has been going on since 1972. We no longer uphold these.

Akhtar Shah

Does this surprise anyone?

"Finance minister's food for a rethink" (June 13, 2014)

Akhtar Shah

It's the political system that creates some weak 'managers' (civil servants) in various departments and possibly the FM feels frustrated and occasionally somewhat perplexed! Hence his outbursts periodically sound like drawing room banter. It's clear that actions like producing 'white papers' and setting up 'investigation committees' (possibly suggested by people around him) are procrastinating with only one goal: easing these off to a "time is the best healer" territory!

"PM for remanding Khaleda, Tarique for Zia murder" (June 14, 2014)

Nazmul Haq

"The mother and son should be remanded if the trial of the Zia murder is held." Very hilarious indeed.

Tangled Abstract Fallacy

Respect for our Prime Minister! She is absolutely RIGHT!!

"Costs up further" (June 15, 2014)

Snr Citizen

Delay in decision making plus lack of patriotism are the reasons for this further rise.