

Council in preparation for election

More attention could have been on grassroots leaders

THE Awami League Council that ended yesterday with much pomp and grandeur did not bring any dramatic facelift as far as the organogram of the party was concerned. The only significant change has been the replacement of Syed Ashrafur Islam the former Secretary General of AL for two consecutive terms, with the Road, Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader who has shown himself to be very active in terms of travelling all over the country and being in touch with the people and also implementing some of the major infrastructure projects. He has gained much popularity for his dramatic televised appearances at various public arenas and taking action against errant public employees. Thus his appointment will hopefully add dynamism and vigour to the party.

What has been rather disappointing is that despite promises to bring grassroots leaders to the forefront there has been little indication that any efforts were made to hear their voices. This was the perfect forum to get leaders who are working at the field level to gain more prominence so that they are empowered to do the job that their Party Chief has instructed them to do: eradicate poverty in the villages. The Prime Minister's directive to find those who are destitute and homeless and pull them out of extreme poverty is certainly laudable. But to do that she needs to make sure her grassroots leaders are strong and honest in their duties. How this will be ensured is not clear though it is a crucial element in ensuring implementation of pro-poor endeavours.

Although there has been hype over the induction of family members especially the Prime Minister's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy into important posts in the party, no such thing happened which indicates a growing maturity within the party.

Ultimately, the Council most definitely was mainly geared towards preparing party members for the next elections, garnering their unstinting support and motivating them to work at the grassroots to ensure an electoral victory.

Economic zone on farmland

Stop this menace

WE are deeply disturbed by a business group's move to set up a resort city encroaching on a part of the Meghna and filling its bank with sand in a low-lying wetland and multi-crop fertile land. That it has come hot on the heels of a March 2014 High Court order against the ravage of arable land is unsettling. The company, which was fined for the wanton destruction of the farmland covered under government's IRRRI rice cultivation scheme, now wants to develop a private economic zone in the very place. This time, it is armed with the pre-qualification issued by a government agency! And that too after the Prime Minister has categorically warned against such practices.

Appalled though we are, the country is no stranger to such systematic destruction of ecologically-sensitive land. With the convergence of vested interests comprising of a section of developers and dishonest government officials, rivers and arable land are being encroached upon and filled up at an alarming rate. The fact that the said company is allowed to fill this huge swathe of arable land with sand is a testament to the institutionalised corruption that prevails among the regulatory agencies entrusted with safeguarding them.

There is no denying that industrialisation is essential to economic growth, but it should never come at the expense of the livelihood of the poor. In this case, the owners of this strip of the bank of Meghna are being forced to sell their land, their lone source of income. We want to remind the government that the country loses farmlands 1 percent every year, and if it shrinks at such a worrying rate, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to ensure self-sufficiency in food production. The officials concerned need to put a halt to the proposed economic zone and reclaim the river, the riverbed and the adjoining land and give it back to its rightful owners. Also, it is also necessary to identify and prosecute the elements responsible for the destruction of the invaluable farmland.

AL'S 20TH COUNCIL

Has anything really changed?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

IN the just concluded national council of the ruling Awami League, more than 6,000 councillors empowered by their party constitution to elect all office bearers of the party's central committee have been able to perform their jobs only partially.

They elected in voice votes only the party's president and general secretary. And they were made to delegate their voting rights to the president and general secretary to choose other office bearers including 16 members of the presidium, four joint general secretaries, one treasurer and 31 secretaries including eight organising secretaries.

This brought some crucial questions to surface once again: can voting rights be delegated and is such a practice healthy for a democracy? Does a lack of intra-party democratic practice hamper democratisation of a country and affect governance in the country?

It goes without saying that the kind of role a political party plays is enormously important in a democracy. In the views of renowned American political scientist Elmer Eric Schattschneider "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."

The legal framework of Bangladesh also focuses on the importance of political parties to build a democratic state. In article 11, the constitution announces that the Republic will be a democracy. And formers of our constitution were well aware of the importance of political parties in making the country's charter. In article 152 a political party has been defined as it reads: "Political party includes a group or combination of persons who operate within or outside Parliament under a distinctive name and who hold themselves out for the purpose of propagating a political opinion or engaging in any other political activity."

In the wake of a strong outcry over lack of intra-party democratic practice in political parties in our country, the electoral laws were reformed in 2008 introducing the political parties' registration system with the EC. A political party willing to contest the parliamentary election must get registered with the EC. One of the major objectives of the registration system is to encourage intra-party democratic practice. A provision of the Representative of People Order on registration says a political party charter must have provision to elect the members of the committee at all levels including



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members of the central committee. Another provision says the charter of a party willing to get registration must be in conformity with our constitution meaning the objectives of the party must not be anti-democracy.

To qualify for contesting the 2008 parliamentary election, at least 39 political parties including AL brought some amendments to their charter and get registered with the EC. The AL charter also speaks for holding elections to all posts of office bearers of its central committee. Therefore, the AL national council was legally obliged to elect all office bearers of the party's central committee.

But, legal provisions lose their force if they are not honoured and enforced. This has frequently been the case in many occasions in the country, giving the birth of the culture of impunity. Political parties also are beneficiaries of this culture. Take their attitude towards the legal provisions on the registration system. The

then ruling AL national council in its council 2009, disregarded the provision for electing all the office bearers of the party's central committee. The national council then elected only president and general secretary and empowered them to pick all other office bearers. Its archrival, another major political party, followed suit in its national council in 2009. The ruling AL again applied the formula in its 2012 council. The BNP also did the same in its council held a few months ago. And the latest AL national council followed the same formula.

All along the Election Commission has remained silent saying nothing in face of disrespect to the legal provision on the registration system. The EC must be proactive in enforcing the laws. Otherwise, the laws will remain only in paper.

In the AL national council held with unprecedented festivity, the government's achievements and development activities-

both already implemented and at the stage of implementation were in focus. The grassroots level leaders were also directed to visit door to door to inform people about the developments to drum up their support for winning the next parliamentary election. This council therefore might have energised the grassroots level leaders to campaign for the party to ensure a win in the next election. There is nothing wrong with such directives as in a democracy a political party is an organised attempt to get control of the government. But this council contributed little to encourage intra-party democratic practice as there was no discussion and debate on the party's programmes, organisational capacity, wrong doings and unlawful activities by many AL men and other important issues. In a democracy, one of the major functions of the party in power is to hold the government accountable for its activities. The AL council did nothing in this regard. Will development be sustainable in the absence of democracy?

In a democracy political parties engage, select, and train people for elected positions and offices. The political parties are also considered schools of democracy for party leaders and activists. They learn democratic practice in the parties. Therefore when trained people hold an elected office they try to encourage democratic practice in the institution. Their collective efforts help democratisation of the state's various institutions. But if they do not learn democratic practice in the party, they do not practice democracy when they hold an elected office or positions. The sorry state of our political institutions testifies how they are victims of the democratic deficiency within our major political parties, particularly the AL and BNP- the two major parties that have been running the country in turns since 1991.

There are many examples in developing and underdeveloped countries where political parties are held responsible for the failure to create democracy. Such failure foils every effort to democratise a state's major institutions, resulting in poor governance. As a result of continuous failure, the dream for state building remains a distant cry. Therefore, democratisation of political parties must be given priority for democratisation of the state's institutions. Is there any visible movement in that direction?

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Climate deal on HFCs



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

HYDROFLUOROCARBONS or HFCs are thought to be responsible for contributing to 0.5 Celsius warming of the climate. On October 14, 170 countries came

together in Kigali, Rwanda to sign an amendment to the Montreal protocol treaty that will commit nations to eliminate 90 percent HFCs with phasing out work slated to begin in 2019. HFCs are used in air-conditioning, refrigeration and aerosols and its usage has been rapidly increasing (at about 10 percent annually) as income levels spurred in Asian countries like China and India with expanding middle classes; the mass scale adoption of air conditioning in homes, commercial buildings and cars was inevitable. The downside to HFCs is that it is considered to be much more destructive to the climate than carbon dioxide.

The deal will have little impact on advanced nations which had begun to phase out HFCs much earlier. For instance the European Union adopted measures that took HFCs out of their cars as back as 2011. The problem of course



HFC gases are widely used in air conditioning units

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"solution" turned out to be not very helpful as global warming was concerned, since scientists identified it as a greenhouse gas.

The reason perhaps why it took so long for developing nations to come to the negotiating table was that companies making air conditioning equipment in their countries still relied on old technology and a ratified treaty would require substantial investment to upgrade both factories and equipment. The age old argument remains that climate change is primarily caused by advanced economies and the penalty being posed on developing nations is unfair. Unfortunately, climate change is a global problem and we all need to do our bit to stem global warming. But the good news is that countries such as China will get a little more time and our time for phasing out HFCs begins in 2028, while for Europe, Japan and the United States (US) it starts in 2019.

The agreement includes provisions for hot countries to reduce their use of HFCs at a slower rate. Developed countries will start to reduce the use of HFCs by 2019, while developing nations have been given a longer time frame in which to

freeze their use of the damaging gases. The roadmap points to richer economies like that of the US, Europe and Japan start limiting their use of HFCs within a few years and make a cut of at least 10 percent from 2019. Developing countries like China, Latin American countries and island states will put a cap on use of HFCs from 2024. Other countries including India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the Gulf States will not freeze their use until 2028. China remains the largest producer of HFCs and getting it onboard the deal was of paramount importance.

According to Durwood Zaelke of the Institute for Government and Sustainable Development (IGSD) "Absolutely it's a historic day. We came to get a half a degree of warming out of the system and we are going to walk away with about 90 percent from the Kigali amendment". The sentiment is echoed by Christian Aid's Senior Policy Advisor, Benson Ireri who stated "HFCs posed an immediate threat to a safe climate due to their increasing use and high global warming potential, thousands of times more potent than carbon dioxide".

While the deal is being hailed as a great success, implementation remains a

major issue. If implemented fully, experts calculate that it will remove the equivalent of 70 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere by 2050. The challenge will be to find monies for research and development of viable albeit environment-friendly alternatives to HFCs. Current research points to substances that do not deplete the ozone layer and have minimal impact on the climate, e.g. ammonia. According to experts, super-efficient, cost effective cooling technologies are in the development phase that can help protect the environment by reducing HFC emissions that are also energy efficient. Given that worldwide use of refrigerators, air conditioners, aerosol spray use is increasing at a rate of 10 percent annually, it was imperative that the Kigali deal be signed by participants with realistic timeframes. Any change of this magnitude will require billions of dollars in new technologies to re-equip manufacturers. This issue will be discussed in the next Meeting of Parties in Montreal in 2017.

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lies with developing countries such as ours where the use of HFCs remains widespread. The original agreement signed in Montreal in 1987 replaced another harmful chemical CFC with HFC. However, as we are finding out the

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"The Next Hope"

Bangladesh is growing faster than our expectations towards its decisive target to be a middle income country by 2021. We will hopefully be a higher middle income country by 2030 through proper transformation of our vast human resources into capital resources. It's time to make right decisions for our children and our grandchildren. China, India and Japan are all competing to make agreements with our government to build our first ever deep-sea port. At the same we need to maintain a balanced relationship with all interested parties including Russia and the World Bank.

I agree with critics that we need to take necessary steps to reduce the extreme poverty figure close to zero by 2030, or if possible by 2025. If we can, it will be a matter of time before many other countries start showing interest in Bangladesh.

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