

## Nation concerned over growing violence

Settle back into dialogue mode

**M**OUNTING political violence is taking on ugly and sinister forms, which if not arrested soon enough, is sure to lead us to a path of self-destruction. But equally dreadfully, in the immediate terms, ruling and opposition parties risk destroying the lately emerging hopes, both nationally and internationally, for a constructive engagement between them. It could be a sea change from their no-holds-barred confrontational posturing on electoral and caretaker government reform issues.

A dialogue seemed tantalisingly close in a long-drawn but hope-ascending sequel to opposition leader Sheikh Hasina's tabling her reform proposals in parliament and Prime Minister Begum Zia asking for formation of a committee to start a dialogue on them. Suddenly, through the dark clouds flickered a hope that the government and the opposition may have come round to the view that if elections are to be held at all then the reform issues will have to be thrashed out to the workable satisfaction of both sides. But within less than a month and a half since the positive signs appeared, the whole scenario has literally turned violent, ballistic and mutually so souring between the parties that the nation and the world are stupefied at the thought whether they had at all entertained the prospect for talks in the first place. If not, then what they are up to? The public are baffled.

The audacious manhandling of senior AL leaders, street-fights between opposition activists and the police in full riot gear, merciless beating of pickets and even passers-by, hounding out of workers on to police vans in full public and international glare, all transformed political rights into human rights issue plummeting national image another abyss lower. With each dose of greater violence the chance of initiating talks is becoming remoter.

In an ascending order of confrontation, the opposition has called for economy damaging and anti-people hartals. There was one yesterday and the other one is on the cards for Sunday, summing up to four days in a row with the weekend in-between, all of it spelling huge business losses and compounding political violence. And the BNP is taking to the field with a mass demonstration planned. As though the nation is made up of two political forces, where people are only their playthings.

Our deepest concern over the political hell-fire of a tinderbox-match stick scenario which is about to enflame into a cauldron. So, our fervent appeal to both sides is to immediately take the process set in motion by exchange of letters forward in a substantive manner. It is our belief that the issue of BNP and AL alliance adopting diametrically opposite positions on Jamaat's participation in the talks can be disposed of in the light of revelations about Jamaati links to JMB with all their militancy ramifications.

## Parting words of the retirees

EC should work as a team

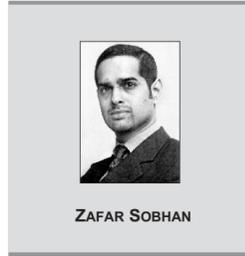
**F**OR quite some time the image of Election Commission has been riddled with controversy, internal conflict and sheer mismanagement. The conduct and behaviour of the Chief Election Commissioner has been at the heart of the problem of EC's reputation. This impression is confirmed through the free and frank airing of the views by the two outgoing commissioners to the media lately. Differences between the CEC and the two commissioners soured so much that the former did not have the courtesy and decency to let them call on him for a farewell visit. They could not even pay a courtesy call on the President.

In retrospect, we find that the entire deadlock between the CEC and the retiring commissioners which continued for months was born out of a point of difference relating to the process of preparation of the voter list, a matter which could have been resolved easily given the will and sincere effort on the part of the CEC himself. The High Court in a directive suggested that the voter list be revised based on the previous electoral roll rather than be prepared afresh. In other words this vindicated the views of the commissioners. But the CEC who took the opposite view stuck to his original plan for a new voter list which has bred complications into the whole process.

We remain concerned as to whether our Election Commission will ever be able to actually produce a credible voter list within the time at its disposal.

The moral of the whole episode is that the Election Commission is constitutionally mandated to work as a team as distinguished from what has degenerated into a one-man show under the leadership of the present CEC. There is no doubt in any one's mind that the credibility of the EC is at the lowest ebb ever and public confidence in its capacity to hold free and fair election is under a serious question mark.

# The day the government shut down the city



ZAFAR SOBHAN

## STRAIGHT TALK

This administration is tone deaf to public opinion and so out of touch with the electorate that it clearly believes that it will bear only a nominal electoral cost for its actions and that this is well worth it in order to thwart the opposition. Interestingly enough, this arrogant calculation may well be correct. But what does it tell us about a government, that it is more interested in quashing dissent of any kind and of projecting its strength on the street than in the well-being of its citizens. Nothing good, I fear.

**N**OT that it should come as much of a surprise to anyone, but in shutting down the capital city in a heavy-handed and ultimately self-defeating effort to foil the opposition's sit-in program, the government once again revealed its true colours to the nation.

The brutality of the crack-down was eclipsed only by the arrogance of the official response and the hypocrisy behind its political calculus.

For the past four and a half years, we have heard speech after speech made by ruling party officials on the iniquity and injustice of calling hartals, and how they heap nothing but more trouble on the heads of the toiling masses and show that the opposition is more interested in scoring political points than in the public good.

This critique of course glosses over the inconvenient fact that during its years in opposition the BNP actually called and enforced more hartals than have been enforced against it in government.

It also blithely disregards the fact that the opposition is not permitted any space within parliament to express dissent.

Nevertheless, for all these cave-

ats, the government argument against hartals has the virtue of being more or less correct, and the government when it complains of hartals as a political tactic does have a point.

I am opposed to hartals as well, and have argued against them in these pages many times.

But now we have seen that the government has no objection to shutting down the city when it is in its own narrow political interest to do so.

Gone were the paeans to the rights of the toiling masses who were unable to get to work or ply their trade due to the fact that all main arterial thoroughfares were barricaded, gone were the earnest laments for the economic cost that came with essentially shutting down the capital city.

Incidentally, in the two and half years since I returned to Dhaka, I have never once been kept out of the streets and prevented from reaching my office by a hartal.

But what the opposition could not accomplish, the government was able to do, and it was not until the early afternoon on Wednesday that I was able to navigate my way past the elaborate network of road-blocks that had been set up, even though the route from my house to

my office takes me nowhere near the PMO.

The blatant hypocrisy that was on display on Wednesday pretty much obliterates any principled anti-hartal argument that can be made on the part of the government.

This is a mistake. In doing so, the government has handed the opposition the best weapon it could possibly have going into the election season.

The opposition has made the decision that in the coming six months it will take the route of agitational politics in order to put pressure on the government and to project its own strength and resolve.

The one potential drawback to this tactic is that it runs the risk of appearing obstructionist and that the public is in general opposed to hartals.

Now, however it is open season for hartals, and the government does not have a leg to stand on in terms of complaining about the negative repercussions for the economy and the public.

In fact, how has the opposition responded to Wednesday's lock-down?

Why, by calling a hartal for Sunday, of course! Why am I not surprised?

And the public, with the memory of Wednesday's government lock-down fresh in its mind, will compare the rather lesser inconvenience that it suffers during the upcoming hartal, and conclude that perhaps hartals are not such a bad thing after all.

The next question that needs to be asked, surely, is why the government was so heavy-handed in its response.

It is, of course, fruitless to appeal to this government in the basis of morality or of respect for fundamental rights, but one would imagine that a government whose unpopularity seems to be increasing by the day would not wish to alienate the fifteen million citizens of the capital if it could avoid it.

The government is facing tough times with even tougher ones ahead. For the general public, the continued rise in the price of essentials and the power crisis have been the most striking features of the ruling alliance's current tenure.

The high command is worried that it is losing support and that factionalism and cronyism and corruption will continue to eat into the alliance's electoral prospects.

So one would have thought that it would make sense for the govern-



PHOTO: AFP

ment to not continue to alienate public opinion at every turn. To not shoot people demonstrating for electricity and set fire to their houses, for instance.

Nor to impose Section 144 on a 20 square km area around the PMO and clog up the entire city.

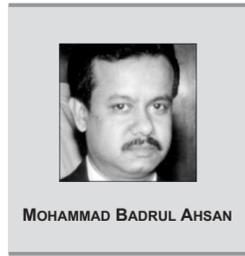
But, no. This administration is tone deaf to public opinion and so out of touch with the electorate that it clearly believes that it will bear only a nominal electoral cost for its actions and that this is well worth it in order to thwart the opposition.

Interestingly enough, this arrogant calculation may well be correct. But what does it tell us about a government, that it is more interested in quashing dissent of any kind and of projecting its strength on the street than in the well-being of its citizens.

Nothing good, I fear.

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# Formula of honesty



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

## CROSS TALK

In the scuffle over who should go first, we might miss the train as well. Unless we learn that a contrived formula does not work for honesty, because it does not withstand meddling. It needs decency, conscience and purity of mind, if not fear of next life or shame in this. Honesty does not thrive in pretentious stand just like nothing grows on arid land. So we need to decide if honesty and competence can come together before anything else. There are honest men who are incompetent as there are competent men who are dishonest. Let us find both amongst us and then go after those wicked candidates.

person who wears it is not naked. There is so much corruption around us, the expensive cars, expansive houses, extensive shopping centres, pervasive mobile phones, impulsive foreign trips, and compulsive clothes. It is writ large all over us, yet when we see it we cannot state the obvious.

Let us say we have bollixed up big time. We have invited the evil to sit in our heart and let it run our lives. How do we get rid of it now that we are tired? Can we drive it out simply by asking it to leave? Can we expect to curb its power simply by screening election candidates? I am not so sure we can heal a deep social wound by pasting it with a Band-Aid.

Instead what we need is much more than that, a kind of purple fury that will be relentless in striking at the evil until it is gone. We need mobilization, a ruthless awakening of our souls which have long lived in the slumber of complicity and acquiescence. We have lived amongst friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbours, knowingly or unknowingly complicit in their questionable fortune. We have condoned their

actions by being dinner guests at their homes, taking gifts and favours from them, desperately seeking their company to embellish our own social status and connections.

Many of these people have used their money and popularity to get elected. Perhaps they will do it again and again. How does it help if they are not allowed to seek election? These people will still influence our elections by bankrolling candidates like they used to do in the old days. A culture can not be destroyed by destroying some of its adherents.

In all these years corruption has spread its tentacles. If we carefully look, perhaps all of us have got some kind of link with it. Most of us would find themselves touching corruption through a membrane in their daily life. In careerism and conformity, relationship and restitution, greed and need, favor and fervor, confusion and conviction, we have been tainted by its radiation.

Is not it important to know the symptoms before we eradicate the disease? If corruption is perversion of integrity, it may be equated with dishonesty. So, it is corruption if you

tell a lie. It is corruption if you take bribe or use your office to give undue favours to family and friends. It is also corruption if you adopt unfair means in the examinations or use your uncle to get a job. You are corrupt if you evade taxes, break laws, steal from others, or ingratiate with corrupt people to get their favours. It is corruption if you pretend, lie, cheat or harass anyone. Corruption is anything that deviates from the straight line, any elusive turn, however smart, from the long stretch of moral shoreline.

Now political candidacy may be used as a shield, but will it bring the lasting solution? No doubt lot of people who bring money into politics can not explain its source. Still once they get elected, some of them try to maintain at least a facade, looking good to their constituency so that they can get re-elected. What will happen if we stall that process, and keep them out of elections? Corruption proliferates because there is no accountability. How are we going to make them accountable if we tell them to go to hell?

So when we talk about honest

and competent candidates, we talk about the end not the means. People who get to that point are already the finished products, the top of the corruption class, who have beat others in the game. But that also brings another question to mind. If we know who they are, why should we just leave it to that? If we have enough evidence to screen them as candidates, why not use that evidence to challenge them in the court?

This is where rebellions fall through the crack. Remember the rebellion of Spartacus? His army of seventy thousand insurgents crushed the best Roman legions and marched through Italy. But they halted and wavered once they arrived within the sight of the sacred walls of Rome. They were paralyzed with fear standing in front of the city of Gods. They retreated without having fought, thus beginning their defeat and martyrdom.

The moral of the story is straightforward and simple. We should not tickle what we can not tackle, and scratch the wound we are not ready to open. In that sense, corruption is like a disease, which does not get well if partially cured. Year after year the government has been allowing black money to become white. Many of our "respectable" people sit on the board of companies owned by rogues. The hot dogs who steal do not get their comeuppance. Intelligent people tell me how some of the most money-grabbing politicians have turned into successful venture capitalists. TV channels, newspapers, garment factories, restaurants, some of the best things in life are gifts from them.

As the saying goes, if all your solutions are hammers, then all your problems are nails. We identify the solution before we identify the problem and that is where corruption perpetuates. It perpetuates in the wind of convenience blowing in the happy land of hypocrisy. In the end, distorted solutions always create distorted problems.

The result is endless scuffle. The leader of the opposition has announced that she would declare her wealth and that of her party MPs, but the government also should do the same. The government will probably say the converse and ask the opposition to go first anyway. Then some of the politicians are going to ask, as they are asking already, that those who are on the Citizens' Group should reveal their wealth before asking others to do the same.

In the scuffle over who should go first, we might miss the train as well. Unless we learn that a contrived formula does not work for honesty, because it does not withstand meddling. It needs decency, conscience and purity of mind, if not fear of next life or shame in this. Honesty does not thrive in pretentious stand just like nothing grows on arid land. So we need to decide if honesty and competence can come together before anything else. There are honest men who are incompetent as there are competent men who are dishonest. Let us find both amongst us and then go after those wicked candidates.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

# Fielding honest candidates is illusory

Fielding candidates in the polls is a political job to be performed by the political leaders. The members of the civil society cannot overtake the politicians in choosing what type of candidates will be put up by them in the election. The civil society can at best urge upon, exhort, pressurise the political parties to focus on honest, efficient persons to depute them to the election battle

AR SHAMSUL ISLAM

**T**HE electors of Bangladesh vote the candidates into the Parliament hoping they (candidates) would do something to mitigate their (electors) sufferings that the candidates so lavishly pledge before the election.

But unfortunately, in recent years, most of the MPs are found to have totally forgotten their commitment to the people. Instead they have engaged themselves, sometimes openly, in plundering government exchequer, public properties, private assets etc. When the protectors themselves turn into grabbers, the woes of the people, particularly

those of the poor class, are bound to go manifold stiffer.

Thus a realisation has got widespread that the country cannot go with this kind of corrupt, unaccountable, undemocratic, arbitrary legislators. A new breed of honest, efficient people's representatives is the crying need of the hour.

In a recent seminar in Dhaka jointly hosted by the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star and enthusiastically participated by a galaxy of country's eminent economists, intellectuals, political leaders of both isles, NGO stalwarts, jurists, social thinkers etc, strong sentiments for fielding honest, efficient candidates

for the approaching national polls were voiced. Some follow-up agenda was also eked out. This is something like a prelude to forming an institution to bail out politics from the clutches of dishonest, corrupt, inefficient political elements. Several pertinent questions on this issue may be discussed:

Question one: Will the political parties, ruling and opposition, field honest, efficient candidates? It is almost certain that it will be the prime concern of both the ruling and opposition parties to nominate such candidates who appear most potential to carry them through the election. And who does not know what constitutes, in the context of present

day politics of Bangladesh, potency? It is first money and then men and support. The question of money being huge in quantity, it is, in most cases, what may be called black money. Regarding the other point - men and support - it more or less means activists, private bands that are also largely got in expense of money mostly snatched through unscrupulous means. What about lining the public on a candidate's side? Painfully, there has, of late, developed a realisation that in the past the public opinion was to be moulded but of late it (public opinion) is to be purchased as well. Cynical though it may sound, the remark may not be any far from the brutal truth. Of course, for the sake of coalition election partners, those selection criteria may be somewhat sacrificed in a very small number of cases.

When pressed to field honest candidates, the ruling and opposition parties may alike argue, "Let us first win the polls. People will surely

be served."

Question two: Can this forum carry its nominees through polls? It is highly improbable that this pious desire will be fulfilled. First, how to obtain huge funds to contest the elections? Second, in national polls, candidates vie either under political party banner or as independent. How the forum's candidates will find a way to get into the list of the contestants? Third, how will they obtain the huge work-force spreading network across the country to fight against the major political parties? Fourth, will the leaders and activists be able to encounter the oppression and suppression prescriptions of the ruling parties? Fifth, doesn't the next poll provide too small a time to be born and bloom? So on and so forth.

Question three: Can the existing rules offset the corrupt? Despite many flaws and inadequacies of the laws governing the elections, it is not that these are wholly impotent to ward off the dishonest from entering

into the parliament. First, there are rules regulating candidates' expenditures fixing the ceiling probably to five lac taka per head. But these are openly violated by expending manifold higher, in some cases, as revealed by dependable survey reports, two hundred fold higher even. All the election commissions have performed a sacred duty of sleeping over this sort of gross violation of rules. How fantastic indeed! Let alone other laws of election, if this law alone is put into practice the corrupt candidates will find it hard to stand up. Second, the rules defining eligibility of candidates need to be enforced. Sometime back the High Court division asked the election commission to obtain certain information from the candidates regarding their assets, state of being free from bank debts, criminal prosecution in court, etc to be given by them under their own signatures and make them (information) available to the voters. Third, the devices are to be made to

settle the election cases, particularly the post-election ones, within a reasonable time-limit and the aberrants of election rules are severely dealt with.

The malady lies with feeble functioning, if not non-functioning, of the organs of democracy as now evident in Bangladesh. To rescue democracy from the brink, its vital limbs are to be given SOS treatment. The election commission is to be made strong and independent having its own controlled secretariat, own budget with full financial powers to transact its business, it is to be made free from the influence of the PMO. The judiciary is to be separated from the executive forthwith without further fuss. The anti-corruption commission is to be constituted as a powerful and independent body. Ombudsmen are to be appointed to oversee political, economic irregularities, corruptions. Long held up local bodies elections should be held. The legislators are to be engaged in law-making pro-

cess and purged of the duties of distributing money and material in their constituencies which job will be performed by the elected representatives of the local bodies. In this way the lawmakers may be kept away from the greed for money.

Fielding candidates in the polls is a political job to be performed by the political leaders. The members of the civil society cannot overtake the politicians in choosing what type of candidates will be put up by them in the election. The civil society can at best urge upon, exhort, pressurise the political parties to focus on honest, efficient persons to depute them to the election battle of 2006/2007. However, it is naivety to hope that the political parties will budge from their strategy of fielding candidates to be considered most potential in their (political parties') judgement.

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