

Politics -- here and over there

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

MAYBE it is time to observe, yet once more, the separate paths the two Bengals have taken over the last many years. With the Left Front scoring one more decisive win in the state elections in West Bengal, it becomes pertinent to assess the ways in which politics has shaped up in a geographical region that once formed a political whole.

And let no one miss either the point that it was precisely a hundred years ago that the All-India Muslim League was given shape in Dhaka, a political move that was to have pretty negative consequences, not only for the whole of India, but, and especially, for Bengal as well.

Overall, the impact of Muslim League politics on the psyche of Bengali Muslims was terrible, a malady which not many who form part of the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh are yet to turn their backs on. History, it cannot but be acknowledged, has been harsh to Bengalis on both sides of the border. It is in light of that harshness that one must observe the manner in which life and society have evolved, or regressed, in West Bengal and Bangladesh in these last many decades.

But by far the general impression, one that we cannot quite ignore or dismiss out of hand, made

by the process of historical movement in Bengal (and we refer to it from the perspective of history) is that West Bengal today happens to epitomize all, or nearly all, that we in Bangladesh once struggled for in the 1960s and then fought for in the early 1970s.

No, we do not mean that struggle in the sense of a movement for political sovereignty. We mean, fundamentally, the sustained movement that East Bengal put up more than four decades ago for the creation of a secular entity in Bangladesh. This new electoral triumph of the Left Front in West Bengal somehow puts paid to our own pretensions to a secular political framework.

In the twenty-nine years in which the communists and their allies have governed West Bengal, secularism has increasingly defined the attitude of the Bengalis inhabiting the state. That sort of reality, unfortunately, has been conspicuous by its absence in Bangladesh. But we did begin well, surely. The entire course of the movement for regional autonomy in the 1960s followed by the armed struggle for independence from Pakistan was based on the principle that Bengali culture, purely Bengali politics, would serve as the underpinning of life in this part of the world.

Indeed, the emergence of the free state of Bangladesh in Decem-

The tragedy for the Bengalis of Bangladesh is that while their state has slowly but surely retreated into a cocoon, certainly of a communal variety, the Bengalis of West Bengal have constantly reasserted themselves in the matter of building a properly democratic political structure. If communal riots have upset political wagons in the rest of India, the Left Front in West Bengal has made sure that on its watch Bengalis did not collapse into religious or sectarian disorder.

ber 1971 was clear proof of the maturity the Bengali in the eastern half of divided Bengal had arrived at. The Muslim Bengali, without in any way damaging his religiosity or clipping away at it, readily accepted the thought that the province he had transformed into a country would be a Bengali state, meaning a democratic structure with the very necessary principle of secularism serving as its ethos.

While East Bengalis suffered through the inhumanity of the Pakistan army and yet moved on to create their secular state, West Bengal struggled to free itself of the Naxalite shadows that had come across its skies. At the same time, the communists waged a sustained, long struggle to wrest control of the state from the Congress as it was led by Siddhartha Shankar Ray.

And then something terrible happened. The Bengalis of Bangladesh simply fell back, or faltered, somewhere along the way. What they had never imagined would

come to pass actually happened. Their soldiers killed their own founder-president and the very leaders who had shaped and led the War of Liberation.

Between 1975 and 1977, the independent state of Bangladesh took a swift slide into the past. Secular Bengali nationalism was put out to pasture by authoritarian decrees and politics mutated into the silhouette of a Pakistani past. Democracy was placed in the straitjacket of a general's uniform. MG Tawab, the air force officer brought in from his adopted home in Germany, was utilized as a hint of the future. He presided over a conference of clerics that clearly intended to redefine Bangladesh as a Muslim state. And thus was the first disturbing move toward supplanting Bengali nationalism with "Bangladeshi nationalism" taken.

And even as Bangladesh went through such manifest brutality, West Bengal was charting a wholly different course altogether. In 1977, its leftists, having cohabited

with others in government for quite a while, finally seized control of the state through winning the elections.

In Bangladesh, as the Awami League stayed busy warding off the blows inflicted on it by a military regime and its rightwing, pro-Pakistan hangers-on, the Left lay paralysed. The segment of it that had its politics tuned in to the Beijing antenna, however, quickly linked up with the Zia regime and so accelerated the decline of the state.

The tragedy for the Bengalis of Bangladesh is that while their state has slowly but surely retreated into a cocoon, certainly of a communal variety, the Bengalis of West Bengal have constantly reasserted themselves in the matter of building a properly democratic political structure. If communal riots have upset political wagons in the rest of India, the Left Front in West Bengal has made sure that on its watch Bengalis did not collapse into religious or sectarian disorder.

In Bangladesh, General Zia sent secularism packing and then filled

the space thus made glaringly empty with invocations to Allah. General Ershad carried the whole thing a few more absurd steps further, through decreeing that the religion of the state of Bangladesh would be Islam. It was a curious condition. While West Bengal gained in health and political wisdom, Bangladesh was being systematically pushed into a condition of darkness.

Healthy enervation set in. What Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had started out doing for Bangladesh, through promoting secularism and socialism, was actually being done in earnest in West Bengal by Jyoti Basu. The people of West Bengal were noticeably giving short shrift to political leaders and workers outside the Left.

In Bangladesh, it was the enemies of independence, the collaborators of the Pakistan army, who were taking over nearly every area of politics and administration. In these decades since 1975, or 1977

(it depends on how you look at the whole idea), the Left Front in West Bengal has carried out extensive land reforms, has expanded the network of statewide education, has disciplined Calcutta in the civic sense of the meaning.

In Bangladesh, those who have benefited from the assassinations of 1975 have persistently divided the country right down the middle, have confused people with their spurious brands of politics and have simply handed over the economy to the robber barons. Of course, West Bengal's leftists have restructured their economic programs to inject pragmatism in their politics. Jyoti Basu, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, and Asim Dasgupta have solicited foreign investment without undermining their core socialistic principles.

Contrast that with Bangladesh. The quality of political leadership has been embarrassingly low, non-government organisations have claimed increasingly bigger shares of the cake and foreigners have found endless opportunities to meddle in the nation's politics.

The World Bank and the IMF have never called up the courage to tell the Left Front government what it must do as an administration; in Bangladesh, these two representatives of Western interests are everywhere in the corridors of power, have unlimited access to policy making. Ask the finance

minister of this independent country.

It is intriguing how divergent the two Bengals have been in the operation of politics. In Calcutta, politics has remained, despite the structural changes to the economy, in the hands of the political classes -- and they extend from the grassroots to the highest level of power. In Dhaka, with as much as eighty four per cent of membership in the Jatiyo Sangsad in the hands of businessmen (and the major political parties happily throwing around nominations at hefty prices), politics has slipped into the clutches of a class that knows not the high calling of the profession. Parliament, predictably, is no more the focus of governance.

In Jyoti Basu, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, and the recently expired Anil Biswas, West Bengal has had the very enviable good fortune of being led by the politically savvy and idealistic. In Bangladesh, apart from the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and, twenty-one years after his assassination, that of his daughter, politics has been in free fall. The mediocrity and incompetence all around us say it all.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

Ten questions

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

WANTING to lead the people of Bangladesh and serving them for a term of five years cannot be anything less than overwhelmingly daunting, whether or not those who wish to do so understand the significance of the statement. Nevertheless, the date of the election is approaching and the attendant campaigning, with its maniacal overtones, will build up to a crescendo in the coming months.

During this time, the political parties will be holding huge public meetings, delivering fiery speeches, making innumerable and outrageous promises, and garnering thunderous applause. The sad part of all of this is that the public will have forgotten the intoxicating language and the long list of promises made to gain their votes. And towards the end of the term of office, the public will certainly fail to hold the leadership accountable for what is delivered relative to what was promised.

My purpose in writing this piece is to make an attempt to hold the aspirants to their commitments by raising ten questions (with sub-parts), answers to which are sought, not in speeches, but in publicly written responses in the print media. Taking out several full page segments of the most popular newspapers in the country ought not to be very costly and, therefore, not an unreasonable suggestion.

Answering them in the election manifestos is not enough since these are very generic and not widely available to the public. To earn the right to lead the country, the political parties have an obligation to clarify their vision and the direction in which they intend to take the nation. When that vision and direction are clearly stated, in writing, the nation will be better disposed to (s)elect its leaders. My 10 top questions are as follows:

1. The question of identity and orientation: On what ideological (philosophical) basis will the state be run? Will it be run along conservative/religious leanings with Bengali idealism relegated to obscurity or will the opposite prevail? If a middle ground is

This country needs enlightened leadership to grapple with these questions and steer a steady course. Those political parties that will provide reasonable answers will certainly be better qualified to take the helm of this country and guide it in the face of strong winds of change. It is now up to the voters to demand answers: not after but before the elections ... and preferably in writing!

sought, what precisely is that position? If an alternative "ism" will be the basis for charting out the nation's path, what is that "ism"?

2. The question of national unity: How will national unity be forged? There is little doubt today that Bangladesh is a divided nation. A divided and contentious nation, where conflict is the order of the day, cannot but falter. How will the nation's energies be brought to a confluence where greater understanding, respect for each other, and the need to combine our strengths be enhanced?

3. The question of empowerment, human quality and capacity: How will the electorate be better empowered during the term of office? Consequently, how will the education and related systems be restructured so that they enhance capacity and produce quality human beings able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of other nations? Today, a large majority of the people of Bangladesh earn their bread using sheer human labour while other nations use higher value-added mental labour. When and how will a greater part of this nation's sustenance be earned, not so much by sheer physical labor but by higher mental faculties developed by the education system? What strategic choices must be made to strengthen human capacity, a resource that we have in plenty, so that the nation's people are better empowered and their well-being dramatically enhanced?

4. The question of sustaining human productivity: How will the health care system be reshaped so that valuable and unaccounted productive hours are not lost because of health issues? Many who can afford it are seeking health services in other countries. Clearly, the health care system must do better. How will such a health delivery system be designed to sustain and enhance

productivity?

5. The question of insecurity and due process: With better education and health, more wealth will be generated. How will people safeguard them? What processes will be in place so that people feel protected by the justice system? How will corruption, the nation's shame, be eliminated? How will people feel more secure to speak up (and partake in democracy), how will the mastaans be eliminated to bring about a society in which fearfulness is replaced by fairness and where due process will reign?

6. The question of inclusion: How will more of the marginalised population be enabled to partake in the rebuilding of society and allowed to share the fruits of development? Roughly fifty percent of them are women, huge numbers are in poverty, and untold numbers of children are in woe and sorrow: How will their energies be harnessed and how will they be afforded a fairer share of the nation's resources? And what about members of the minority communities? How will they be integrated into the nation's affairs?

7. The question of resource allocation and growth paths: What economic goals will be pursued? What targeted industries should receive the greatest attention? How should their potential be released? Should privatisation be sped up while public enterprises are shut down? Should external orientation in terms of trade, investments, market development, etc. be the preferred strategy in opposition to internal (import substitution) orientations? Should a capitalistic economy be fostered as opposed to a socialist economy? How should we free ourselves of the dependencies and obligations that external aid generates?

8. The question of international standing: Who are our friends and

allies? Who are our enemies? On what basis will our relationships with other nations be shaped? What groups (Saarc etc) do we want to belong to? To what purpose? How would historic episodes shape our alignments with different nations? In what international projects and programs should we engage (e.g., peace-keeping) to enhance our standing in the international community?

9. The question of resource and environmental custodianship: How can we safeguard ourselves by being better custodians of our resources (gas, water, etc) and by better treating the environment? Air pollution, water pollution, waste disposal, food contamination, arsenic contamination, spread of disease, biodiversity, and other issues have a direct effect on the quality of life of the nation's citizens. What environmental policies will be in place to ensure that the environment is in balance and harmony with the people?

10. The question of heritage preservation: How should we preserve our language and heritage, our songs, music, poems, stories, fables, proverbs, art forms, attire, historic landmarks, food preparations, and many such cultural emblems and identifiers that are subject to a veritable cultural invasion sweeping across the land like a tsunami?

This country needs enlightened leadership to grapple with these questions and steer a steady course. Those political parties that will provide reasonable answers will certainly be better qualified to take the helm of this country and guide it in the face of strong winds of change. It is now up to the voters to demand answers: not after but before the elections ... and preferably in writing!

Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

LARRY JAGAN

BURMA'S military rulers are planning a massive shake-up in the army and government, including the standing down of the top military ruler General Than Shwe as the junta leader and the passing of power onto the next generation of generals. At least six government ministers are also expected to lose their posts.

These changes are expected to emerge at the end of the quarterly meeting of the country's governing State Peace and Development Council or SPDC which is due to start on Saturday in the country's new administrative capital, Pyinmana, some four hundred kilometres north of the existing capital Rangoon.

The country's top twelve generals are expected to discuss their plans and strategy for the future. This quarterly meeting had been scheduled for earlier this year but was postponed because of the massive move to Pyinmana. Now that this has been effectively completed, the top generals are turning their attention to the country's political future.

The national reconciliation process, as the regime calls its plans for political reform, has been substantially delayed, partly because of the move to the new capital, and partly as a result of the arrest of the former intelligence chief and prime minister, General Khin Nyunt more than eighteen months ago.

Thousands of his supporters were also purged and many sentenced to hundreds of years in jail. Since then the regime's leader has been primarily concerned with consolidating his power within the army and the country's administration.

Than Shwe now feels comfortable enough to proceed with his plans for Burma's political future. The National Convention, which is drafting a new constitution, is scheduled to resume its deliberations later this year. The Burmese foreign minister Nyan Win told his South East Asian counterparts in their retreat in Bali last month that the constitution would take another two years to complete.

Drafting a new constitution is the first step in the government's democracy roadmap. According to the regime's plans, this will then be put to a referendum and fresh elec-

Since the former prime minister and intelligence chief, General Khin Nyunt was purged, along with thousands of his supporters in late 2004, the top Generals have begun to strengthen their control of the army and country. They are anxious to eliminate any potential obstacle to the exercise of their power. The planned changes to the military command structure and the expected cabinet shake-up are all intended to increase the junta's capacity to implement its own plans for national reconciliation.

tions held some time after that.

Now that the Than Shwe wants to restart the national reconciliation process, the regime's main concern is to prepare the ground for the next step, this means immobilising or eliminating all potential opposition, including the pro-democracy parties and the ethnic rebel groups, most of whom have ceasefire pacts with Rangoon.

Than Shwe's first task though, is to revamp the army command and shake-up the government. These changes are currently in the pipeline. These planned changes are the most dramatic since the army seized power nearly eighteen years ago.

Burma's top general is reportedly planning to give up at least one of the three key posts he holds -- chairman of the SPDC, supreme commander of the army and defence minister. "We expect Than Shwe to relinquish his position as defence minister in the forthcoming reshuffle," said a South East Asian diplomat based in Rangoon.

General Than Shwe is also expected to stand down as the commander-in-chief of the army, with the country's third most powerful military leader, General Thura Shwe Mann taking over the helm of Burma's military machine. Than Shwe's current number two, General Maung Aye is expected to be sidelined.

"He will remain as Deputy Chairman of the SPDC -- a largely ceremonial post -- but relinquish his position as deputy commander-in-chief of the military," according to a senior government source.

These changes have been on the cards for sometime. They were initially expected to be made at the last SPDC quarterly meeting more than six months ago, but were delayed when Than Shwe decided the move to Pyinmana was the top security concern. This time last year he told the visiting Thai army's supreme commander, General Chaisit Shinawatra, who has since

retired, that General Thura Shwe Mann would take over as the country's leader in due course.

Chinese officials have believed for sometime that Gen Than Shwe will stand down this year so that he can become the civilian president under the new constitution.

General Thura Shwe Mann, is scheduled to take over as head of the army and then replace Than Shwe as head of the junta, according to a senior Chinese diplomat who deals with Rangoon. "Even if Than Shwe officially retires he will not give up his power. Instead he'll remain the grey eminence behind the throne, along the lines of the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the years before his death," said the independent Burmese analyst Win Min, who is based in Chiang Mai.

Than Shwe's move is part of his scheme to ensure that he remains in control of the country after a civilian government is voted in under the new constitution. "He wants to be president for life," a senior military source close to him said.

A major cabinet reshuffle is also in the pipeline. Some of the older ministers are likely to resign and give way to some of the younger regional commanders. Amongst those slated to give up their posts are the country's energy minister Lun Thi, electricity minister Tin Htut, immigration minister Sein Htwar, and industry minister Saw Lwin. Several others may also be dumped including the planning minister Soe Hta.

This is primarily to provide positions for the next generation of generals to become familiar with civilian administration and to more effectively prepare for the country's new political future.

Than Shwe's grassroots community organisation, the Union Solidarity Development Association or USDA set up more than a decade ago, will soon officially become a political party so that it can contest the new elections to be held under

the new constitution.

Since the former prime minister and intelligence chief, General Khin Nyunt was purged, along with thousands of his supporters in late 2004, the top Generals have begun to strengthen their control of the army and country. They are anxious to eliminate any potential obstacle to the exercise of their power.

The planned changes to the military command structure and the expected cabinet shake-up are all intended to increase the junta's capacity to implement its own plans for national reconciliation.

Although now a new generation of generals may take responsibility for the day-to-day running of the country and execute the seven-stage roadmap to democracy, Than Shwe will remain the power behind any throne. "He is replicating his usual approach of pitting potential junior rivals against each other to create a balance of power," according to the analyst Win Min.

General Thura Shwe Mann, will head the new triumvirate of military leaders, and is expected to be supported by the prime minister General Soe Win and Secretary One, General Thae Sein.

"This is the new generation of military leaders who are being readied to take over power," according to senior Indian diplomats who deal with Rangoon. But, they warn, this group of generals lacks the manners and intelligence of their superiors.

"These men are uncouth, uneducated, and only know how to bark orders," said a former Indian diplomat who had been based in Rangoon previously and knows the new generals well.

Larry Jagan was the BBC World Service's News and Current Affairs Editor for Asia and the Pacific for more than 10 years. He is an East Asia specialist and has covered Burma for more than 20 years.

Shanir Akhra: Arrogance and impatience made things messy

ABMS ZAHUR

WE must not forget that we are not only branded as the most corrupt country in the world, we are also a least developed country by any count. Thus our capability in almost every field is extremely limited, be it bureaucracy, political acumen or the skill. But we have very recently started dreaming to catch up with at least the middle-income countries in no time. Some of our ministers are assuring us of a prosperous future within a couple of decades. Alas, now we see we do not have even enough of foreign exchange reserve to import crude oil to meet our modest demand. We cannot produce even near enough electricity to meet our essential need. The essentials like edible oil and sugar are becoming luxury items for the common man. Perhaps considering most of the people as fools the government is trying to convince them that price hike is due to sudden increase in purchasing power of the people.

However, at last (when it is too late) the government has changed the commerce minister and the commerce advisor. Let us see how soon and to what extent the new minister can push the prices of the essential items down. It would be interesting to see his strategy to tackle the 'lords of the syndicates'; how a party ruling mainly on the strength of the business class can control the traders.

It is not very clearly understood, as to why the BNP-led alliance government, depends so much on the raw advice of the present bureaucracy (much of it incompetent and ignominiously politicised). In sensitive matters a democratic government must show enough patience and capability to convince the people of the objectives of its actions and inactions. This, of course, needs careful handling because common people do neither understand nor bother much about state security, state property or public interest, because of poor level of education of the villagers.

During the last four and a half years of rule of the present government one can observe the following peculiarities:

- Majority of the leaders behave like people's masters;
- The PM is too much involved in too many areas due to lack of proper determination of priorities, lack of confidence and competence of ministers;
- Strange tendency of not accepting mistakes and omissions;
- Loyalty or subservience to the party chief is regarded as greater qualification than knowledge, competence or experience for placement of members in critical positions;
- Too much of hesitation in taking decisions in some critical areas (e.g. energy sector, separation of judiciary, appointment of ombudsman, denationalisation of state television etc) due to lack of confidence;
- Too much of respect for opinion of the junior partners in the

alliance show lack of control over such partners;

- Underestimation of importance of the job of some vital ministries like of commerce, foreign affairs, home affairs and education;
- Too many ministers with huge secretariat doing too little work and (reportedly) lack of good understanding between secretary and minister in certain ministries;
- Apparent lack of coordination among ministries (e.g. ministries of energy, water resources, industries etc).
- Tendency for going slow in implementing even clear directives from the prime minister (e.g. arrest of Bangla Bhai).
- Every tendency for down grading judiciary (may be even to weaken it) after observed.
- Too strong tendency to put all blames on AL;
- Too much use of JCD activists towards retaining power; and

Some ministers' strong allergy for journalists or media.

Very recently we have seen miserable performance of the BNP law makers in Kansat to tackle the outburst suffering ordinary people. As at Kansat again we saw the failure of BNP law maker in Demra (Shanir Akhra) to face the dissatisfaction (perhaps anger) of the common people. Thus one may apprehend from these incidents that before the present government hands over power to the caretaker government there may be further worse incidents of the kind because of sheer arrogance, ignorance or incompetence of certain law makers.

Needless to say that without a reasonable solution of the power crisis we cannot expect an acceptable solution of water crisis. Only verbal assurance for adequate water supply quickly cannot assuage the anger of the suffering people. WASA and PDB may jointly come up with a plan to tackle this serious problem.

The law makers concerned of BNP led alliance government may try to convince (without suppressing truth) the people that crisis of water or electricity is not peculiar to Shanir Akhra and the adjacent areas. The problem exists more or less throughout the country may be in different degrees. Permanent solution of such a gigantic problem needs a considerable time and the people must be convinced to have patience for creating disturbance will only cause delay in solving the intricate problem.

It is surprising to learn that a people's representative is afraid of the press (which helps people to know things). It is disturbing for any conscious citizen to know that a people's representative has engaged JCD activists to stop people from talking to the press. Certainly a strange democracy exists in Bangladesh where people's representatives behave like masters of the people!

In the otherwise sad incident of

Shanir Akhra the role of our city mayor Sadek Hussain Khoka is commendable. He has proved that as an ex-freedom fighter (who fought for the people's liberation) he knows quite well as to how to handle the anger of the suffering people. However he has no permanent solution for the problems in question i.e. water and electricity crises. The appointment of a 4-member probe committee by the government does not appear to be a step in the right direction because people are certainly aware of the crisis of power and water. What is needed is taking some immediate measures (even some stop gap arrangement) to bring the crisis to an acceptable level because with the start of monsoon within five/six weeks the demand for water may come down.

If the government thinks that by thrashing the leaders of Sangram Parishad it may be able to silence the people it is wrong. In fact any repressive measure will aggravate the situation. It

may be relevant to point out that both police and army have shown restraint because they could study the situation better than the politicians.

Only with people's cooperation and sincere effort a government (particularly a democratic one) can face any challenge. The BNP law maker concerned may be advised to remain calm because he has no option except showing forbearance and fortitude. It appears that "flood of development" has not only caused scarcity of water and electricity, it has also, perhaps, made some BNP law makers unpopular. If the government really desires to serve people then it has no option other than pushing down soaring prices of essential commodities and increase supply of essentials.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.