

The corrupt, the incompetent -- and the rest of us

Buet in trouble

Students are the losers

THE steady boat of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) has been rocked -- by what should have been an avoidable storm. The student demand for an extension of the preparatory time for the final exam beyond August 1 and the university authorities' vehement opposition to the idea have pushed the campus over to the edge of deeper crisis. The examinations were originally due to start on May 28 but got deferred until August 1 to provide the students a respite to watch the World Cup football championships.

The unfortunate confrontation between the students and university authorities has culminated in the latter's sudden announcement of a closure of the Buet sine die and asking the students to vacate the campus immediately. In no way can we condone the anarchy, vandalism and violence that a section of the students resorted to on hearing the news of the authorities' negative reaction to their demand for deferment of the scheduled exams. Suffice it to say though that no consultative process has worked among the students, teachers and the university administration as to the question of the length of preparatory leave (PL) before the final exams. What is at issue is whether the preparatory time for two weeks was enough considering that class performance carried 30 percent of the burden as distinguished from 70 percent burden placed on final exams. This, surely, is a matter that cannot be settled through slogging matches. Dialogue is the prime necessity.

The upshot of it all is the automatic postponement of the examinations for an unstated period, which in turn, is destined to create sessions jam. Buet, once the symbol of academic continuity and an oasis amidst session dislocations that deflected other institutions of higher learning off course, seems headed for losing out on its exceptional status. What a pity!

Govt contract grabbing spree

Unholy nexus between politicians and rent seekers

APervasive phenomenon has been brought to light with the arrest of 17 persons who were trying to illegally land a government contract by forcibly keeping the genuine persons from putting in their bid. Almost four hundred crore taka worth of contract was up for offer and true to the culture that is pervading in the country, a syndicate, reportedly linked to and under the sponsorship of the some high-up in the government and the ruling party, tried to grab the entire offer. Seven of those arrested were students allegedly belonging to the student wing of the BNP. The RAB should be congratulated on netting these people in.

The episode has highlighted three very disconcerting aspects of our national life; one is the exploitation of students by politicians for not only their political ends but also for the nefarious business of tender snatching and illegal toll collection; two, the nexus of politicians with the rent seekers and terrorists; and the syndicated control of the economy and politics is the third worrisome aspect that we are faced with. And all these have been a part of our lives, to which the administration has not been sensitised enough to act against.

What is most disconcerting in the whole business is the involvement of students belonging to the highest seat of learning. And many among these would, more likely than not, seek public office and, because of their link with politicians, as this report suggests, become people's representatives too. We shudder to think that the future of our country would be in the hands of such persons.

We have been hostage to syndicates of various kinds. Rent seeking and business syndicates have had the most appalling consequences on our economy and the society; and unless the government wakes up to the negative potentiality of such nexus of politicians, terrorists and students we will subject ourselves to a retrogressive phenomenon. Such an ominous prospect the nation can hardly tolerate.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

POLITICS is, or should always be, a matter of ethics. It is never, contrary to how much faith you might have placed in the old cliché, a place where the strangest of bed-fellows happen to come together. But if they do, you might as well inform yourself that politics is about to take a bad mauling. And that, precisely, is what you see happening in Bangladesh at this point of time.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia appears to have actively embraced the notion that there is no last word in politics (again, a cliché, but a pointed and sinister one anyway), and because she has, she finds it hugely convenient to go to General Hussein Muhammad Ershad and solicit his support in the next general election.

Consider going back in time. On a day in 1983, when Ershad was president, Kazi Zafar Ahmed, then in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, escorted Begum Zia to a meeting with the man who had overthrown the BNP administration of Justice Abdus Sattar a year earlier. The new chairperson of the BNP, still wedded to the belief that Ershad had had a hand in the assassination of her husband, refused to take a seat, told Ershad off and walked out. And for the next seven years, as head of the

GROUND REALITIES

There is little wonder that General Ershad and Begum Zia, with all their adherents, should now be exploring the ways and means of arriving at some new arithmetic. It is, lest you be mistaken, really old arithmetic based on new formulae. That the BNP and JP were really inseparable twins (both are products of military rule) should never have been in doubt. The apparent hostility that has marked ties between the general and the prime minister should, in such light, be viewed as a mere clash of egos, and no more than that.

seven-party political combine, she led a spirited movement, along with the fifteen-party alliance of Sheikh Hasina, aimed at the removal of the Ershad illegitimacy from office.

The rest of the story remains a testament to the long struggle the people of Bangladesh waged against what has traditionally been referred to as the Ershad autocracy. Begum Zia, in her first stint as prime minister, made sure that Ershad went to jail (despite his electoral triumph in his native district) on corruption charges and stayed there. It would not be until 1996 that the fallen dictator would find his place, and his feet, again when, with the Awami League in power, he entered the Jatiyo Sangsad, of course, on bail.

To cut a long story short, Begum Zia and General Ershad have never trusted each other. The degree of mistrust and suspicion that has generally defined relations between the two has all too often been the stuff of the politics of impoverishment. The prime minister's administration has sometimes made sure that Ershad could not travel abroad. And if you speak to the cynics -- and they are all over town -- you might chance to hear the meaningful whisper that it was people in the four-party alliance government who played a behind-the-scenes role in the very

public spat the former president engaged in with his young, and now divorced, second wife Bidisha. Since that parting of the ways between the crusty old dictator and the definitely ambitious young woman, Ershad's life has been made slightly easier. Or, if you care to go a little deeper into the question, you might say that for the first time in the past five years he breathes a little easier.

And those corruption cases? Well, the general does not appear to be worried. That is because, today, it is not so much a matter of his corruption as it is of Khaleda Zia's need for his support at the forthcoming elections. The general has demanded (can you believe it?) as many as sixty seats in Parliament for his dwindling Jatiyo Party, either the presidency of the republic, or the speaker's chair in the Jatiyo Sangsad, for himself, and a dropping of all cases against him.

That last bit, the cases aspect, is intriguing -- or so you think. But if you have been following the story of the alliance government since October 2001 you will realise, with something of a moral jolt, that withdrawing cases relating to either corruption, or downright murder, has been a pretty easy thing for this government to handle. When Altaf Hossain Chowdhury took charge as home

minister in 2001, quite a good number of corruption cases were pending against him. Slowly, and eventually, they were withdrawn.

That was the beginning and by now we, as a people, have reached a stage where other ministers, ministers of state, parliamentarians, and even some of their progeny, have had legal proceedings against them wrapped up and thrown out the window. That was because someone, or an organised group in the higher echelons of government, peddled the notion that the cases filed against these individuals by the Awami League government had been politically motivated. And so there was good reason, as some might argue, for the successor government to take its own political step of having the cases quashed. A fine instance of governance, or an absence of it, you have here. All this talk of rule of law, of accountability, of the separation of the judiciary from the executive sinks to nothingness when you recall all these tales of grotesque behaviour on the part of those from whom you had expected better.

That being the reality on the ground, it really should not be a surprise that the BNP, today, attempts the art of seduction on its old enemy. Even enemies have a convergence of interests. Back in

the early 1970s, a newly-formed BNP went all out in its efforts to promote a political order that ran counter to the principles of the War of Liberation. In the 1980s, the Jatiyo Party managed to uphold the same program, to the dismay of those who recalled the ethos of the armed struggle for freedom. Ziaur Rahman's nineteen points, and H M Ershad's eighteen points, when you consider the substance in them, effectively caused a slide in democracy and a battering of the secular order.

The militarisation of politics, which the BNP and the JP so assiduously stamped on the country, has left huge, almost indelible, scars on the nation's body politic. As for political somersaults, those have been refined into near art form per courtesy of these two political organisations. Both parties have preached a mishmash called "Bangladeshi nationalism," both have cleverly espoused the cause of religious politics to the detriment of democracy.

Such being a given, there is little wonder that General Ershad and Begum Zia, with all their adherents, should now be exploring the ways and means of arriving at some new arithmetic. It is, lest you be mistaken, really old arithmetic based on new formulae. That the BNP and JP were really inseparable twins (both are products of military rule) should never have been in doubt. The apparent hostility that has marked ties between the general and the prime minister should, in such light, be viewed as a mere clash of egos, and no more than that.

Now that the next round of voting threatens to send the present set of rulers packing (that is how people are beginning to see things), men and women of identically regressive thought need to come together if they mean to steer clear of the precipice. That is

what the BNP, JP and, of course the Jamaat, mean to do.

Such a turn in politics should be a wake-up call to the forces of secular democracy. With vested interests now aligning themselves over the need to reassure themselves about an uninterrupted supply of loaves and fishes, it becomes an absolute necessity for the Awami League, and its allies, to get their act together.

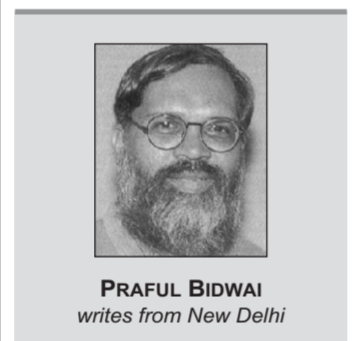
The movement for reform of the caretaker system, the struggle for the removal of the Chief Election Commissioner and the entire set-up at the Election Commission, the longer-term movement for a restoration of secular democratic order, will need to be intensified now that the rightist and fundamentalist camps mean to regroup and hold on to power. The general strikes have done their work. The road marches, or padayatra, have convincingly demonstrated a popular desire for change.

It should now be for Sheikh Hasina, and her friends, to re-define their politics, restructure their social strategies and hold out assurances to the country that they are indeed capable of providing honest, purposeful and enlightened government. But for that kind of government to take charge of our lives, the secular forces must first win the elections.

That basically means beating back such demons as election engineering, and ensuring that invisible elements do not arise in the dark to upset, once more, the caravan of decency set rolling in June 1996. The teaming up of the corrupt, and the incompetent, requires neutralising. And politics calls for a thorough cleansing.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

Fighting terror with unjust war?



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

PERHAPS never before has the Indian media wasted so many words and images on a complete Red Herring. For three days, Abdul Karim Tunda, allegedly the Lashkar-e-Taiba "mastermind" behind countless terrorist attacks on Indians, dominated the headlines. His reported arrest in Kenya was declared a "break-through" -- which would help India wage a "decisive battle" against terrorism.

India's "Counter-Terrorism Cognoscenti" and "specialists" could barely contain their excitement. Some believed that India might not have exclusive access to Tunda, since "rendered" to the United States. But access there would be.

"Tunda" soon turned out to be Ismoila Olatunde Rufal, a British national of Nigerian origin! He was deported to Britain.

This confusion is deplorable -- even more so than the FBI's harassment in the 1960s of US anti-Vietnam war activists because they possessed books on "Cubism," a school of painting,

The more savage Israel becomes in response, the more hatred it generates in its own neighbourhood. The present invasion has inflamed the entire region. If India emulates the Israeli model, it will discredit itself as a lawless and irresponsible nation. Worse, it'll promote unspeakable violence in its own neighbourhood. There is a sane, sober and peaceful alternative to this: build confidence among the neighbours, strengthen people-to-people contacts and pursue the dialogue with Pakistan while bringing the culprits of terrorism to book.

which the bureau confused with Cuba!

The Tunda episode exposed the desperation of intelligence agencies and media eager to find any evidence for their preconceived notions.

Yet, the story's collapse hasn't dampened the enthusiasm of those who feel Pakistan-sponsored terrorists were responsible for Mumbai's blasts; to punish their masters and deter terrorist violence, India should launch surgical attacks on Pakistani targets, such as terrorist training camps.

There's no tenable evidence for the first. And Indian military personnel have repeatedly said that the make-shift "training camps" cannot be effective targets.

Clearly, what inspires the proponents of strikes on Pakistan is not military efficacy, but an urge to declare India is no longer a "soft state." It'll wage a "do-or-die" battle against terrorism.

Their chosen model is Israel, which practises what may be called "maximum deterrence" against "terrorists," using overwhelming force. Ultra-nationalist

hawks admire Israel precisely for this. They support Israel's current actions in Lebanon and hold that these will deter "terrorists" from attacking Israeli civilians. India must emulate the "Israeli model" and demonstrate its "manhood."

This is a recipe for courting insecurity and making Indian citizens more vulnerable to terrorism. Consider four arguments.

First, Israel was wrong to invade Lebanon, and earlier, Gaza and unleash savage attacks on non-combatant civilians. It waged a war of aggression on Lebanon. True, on July 12, Hizbollah raided two patrolling Israeli jeeps, and killed three soldiers and abducted two. But that's not a legitimate cause for all-out war.

Hizbollah is not a Lebanese state agency, but a private militia. It's one thing to retaliate against Hizbollah with pinpointed force; quite another to invade a whole country, kill 400 civilians, and destroy its infrastructure, including ports, highways, bridges and water supply.

Israel acted not in self-defence, but to destroy a whole society, rebuilt slowly after the long trauma of war and Syrian

interference.

Second, legally and morally, Israel is a terrible model. It has the world's longest history of violating Security Council resolutions (e.g. 242 and 338) and the worst contemporary record of occupying another nation.

As I observed during my visit to Israel/Palestine two years ago, the occupation oppresses the civilian population comprehensively, controls all its movements, and confiscates its land and water. It consciously impoverishes Palestinians and uproots them at will.

The occupation makes South Asia's humiliating experience of colonialism look like a picnic.

Israel's anti-terrorism rhetoric is deeply hypocritical. It was itself born in Zionist terrorism, practised by groups like the Haganah and Irgun, to which leaders such as Menachem Begin, Ariel Sharon, and present Prime Minister Ehud Olmert belonged. Terrorists were crucial to Israel's establishment. As Begin put it: "Blood brought our revolt to life."

Last week, Israeli leaders, including former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, celebrated the 60th anniversary of one of the

Zionism's worst attacks, on the King David Hotel. Ninety-one people perished in the attack.

It's relevant to recall this because Israel's own history of terrorism has desensitised its leadership to barbarism. It's no longer even capable of proportionate use of force.

Third, Israel has annexed Palestinian territory and is expanding its illegal settlements on the West Bank -- not least through the 700 kilometre-long Security Barrier or Apartheid Wall, which has been pronounced illegal by the International Court of Justice.

Worse, Israel has practised collective punishment of innocent civilians and laid siege to Gaza and Beirut. It has cut off power and water supply, thus depriving people of the means of survival, including food -- crimes that are punishable under international law.

Israel's invasion has created half-a-million refugees. All these actions are unconscionable and unworthy of any civilised state. Even Western governments allied to Israel, barring the US, have condemned its savagery.

India is being asked to emulate this disgraceful model, rooted in illegality, gross immorality, and terrorising of innocent civilians.

The present violence was deliberately provoked by Israel when it recently liquidated the Palestinian Authority's internal security chief, Abu Jamal Samhanada. This impelled Hamas to fire primitive home-

made Qassam rockets at Israel. Israel retaliated ferociously, even killing picnicking civilians. In the escalating violence, Hamas militants killed two Israeli soldiers and abducted one.

Now, an occupied people are within their legal rights to militarily target and kill occupying soldiers, although not to abduct them. But it is even more illegitimate to abduct civilians, as Israel has often done. It recently arrested one-third of the PA cabinet.

Finally, Israel has not gained security through these actions. Its civilians have become more, not less, vulnerable to terrorism. Although Israel has the world's thickest density of security barriers, bomb detectors and so on, Hamas militants regularly manage to kill Israelis.

The more savage Israel becomes in response, the more hatred it generates in its own neighbourhood. The present invasion has inflamed the entire region.

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There is a sane, sober and peaceful alternative to this: build confidence among the neighbours, strengthen people-to-people contacts and pursue the dialogue with Pakistan while bringing the culprits of terrorism to book.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Does national interest of India coincide with that of the US?

BOTTOM LINE



HARUN UR RASHID

China and Russia have become "thorns" to the Bush administration in its implementation of foreign policy priorities, such as actions against Iran, North Korea, Myanmar and Sudan. Bilateral ties are important for the US as for India. India however does not want others to see the relations with the US as sacrificing its policies. Rather it considers the relationship with the US as a partnership to achieve its dominant role in the region and globally.

the war on terrorism and the presence of more than a million Indians in the US. Bill Clinton's "facilitation" over Kargil indicated a new realism that confirmed Lord Palmerston's dictum that nations have permanent interests and not friends.

On the India's side

India fully realises that it cannot achieve its due role in the region and globally without American participation. Only American power can restrain Pakistan's adventurism and contain China increasing influence in the region. The former Prime Minister of India, Inder Kumar Gujral, put it that normal relations with America are regarded as a momentous breakthrough.

India has been able to come out of the straightjacket of the Cold War and has been taking a long-term view of its national interests. It was the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in tandem with Manmohan Singh in 1991 who had launched economic reforms that provided impeccable cover for closer political and military ties.

Economic reforms have a two-fold impact: First, it can provide India to pursue an ambitious foreign policy and secondly, it makes engagement attractive to US businessmen who powerfully shape foreign policy.

Times have changed so much that Manmohan's ministers are eager for the courtesies shown to

them in Washington. The senior members of the Bush administration spend so much time with their counter-parts from India that was not seen earlier. India seems to have abandoned its avowed policy of non-alignment to placate American wishes, such as vote against Iran on nuclear programme at the IAEA Governing Body meeting in Vienna.

India's military nuclear programme was based on the belief only when the button is in its own hands and not someone else's finger on the button. The Vajpayee government accelerated and resumed vigorously the nuclear military programme and conducted nuclear tests in

1998.

One of the Vajpayee's Ministers, Ram Jethmalani, who wrote to Vajpayee before President Clinton's visit in 2000 to suggest a mutual defence treaty. Substantial advantages, he argued, would flow to India if it was a part of what he called the Washington-London-Jerusalem-Tokyo axis.

Unprecedented in American politics, India was able to conclude a nuclear deal with America for nuclear fuel and technology that would provide an edge over China and Pakistan in the area.

India's leaders have been able to impress the Bush administration that Indian democracy and tolerance could have a moderating influence on the Muslim World.

On the American side

Oil is their civilization as James Baker III, former Secretary of State said. Its domestic sources produce only 2% per cent of the oil and 3% per cent of the gas that America devours. It must import oil for its economic and military power.

Saudi Arabia accounts for its 25% per cent of American requirement. It is no wonder that it is

haunted by the nightmare of the volatile Middle East oil supplies. Iraq and the looming confrontation between the US and Iran on nuclear programme add to its concern. The US must look out for other areas for oil. Africa has become one of the regions for oil besides the Central Asia.

America has always protected its oil interests. In 1953, the CIA helped Britain to overthrow the Mosaddeq regime that nationalized British Petroleum in 1951. In 1969, Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State tried to activate the sinister 40 Committee, the US inter-agency for secret operations, against Libya's Gaddafi who nationalized oil industry.

An American analyst said: "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia and who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." India, Pakistan and Afghanistan constitute the Rimland and the "Great Game" in the region, in the eyes of Kipling, is now for a bigger prize, the reserves of oil in the Caspian Sea.

The hydro-carbon reserves in the Caspian Sea are larger than the combined reserves of Alaska's Northern Slope and the North Sea.

The US Heritage Foundation estimates reserves of 25 billion barrels in the Caspian basin alone. According to Unocal's Vice President, it is estimated that the Central Asia has over 236 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves and over 200 billion barrels of crude oil. The Caspian Sea oil can be piped through the Rimland to the Arabian Sea.

The US has been successful in getting oil from the Caspian Sea bypassing Russia and Iran through Azerbaijan, Georgia to Turkish port of Ceyhan in the Mediterranean Sea.

There is another strategic reason for the superpower to be friendly with India As Japan and Europe grow weaker and China stronger, the Bush administration has seen India as a counterweight to China. The US needs to contain China, its strategic competitor, in the Asia Pacific region and there is no country other than India that can do it.

America also sees a great market in India. In a speech prior to his visit to India this year, The US President said: "India's middle class is now estimated at 300 million people. Think about that. It

is greater than the entire population of the United States. India's middle class is buying air-conditioners, kitchen appliances, and washing machines, and a lot of them from American companies such as GE and Whirlpool."

The US is looking for new directions in foreign policy as it has failed in Middle East including Iraq. The Israel-Lebanon conflict shows that the US and Israel have been trapped in a struggle for regional balance of power with Iran and Russia.

China and Russia have become "thorns" to the Bush administration in its implementation of foreign policy priorities, such as actions against Iran, North Korea, Myanmar and Sudan.

Bilateral ties are important for the US as for India. India however does not want others to see the relations with the US as sacrificing its policies. Rather it considers the relationship with the US as a partnership to achieve its dominant role in the region and globally.

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.