

A shocking development

It had better not happened

THE arrest warrants issued in the name of five eminent citizens connected with the research organisation called the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in a criminal defamation case lodged by the Executive Chairman of the Board of Investment (BOI) have surprised and shocked us beyond measure.

Just as a citizen has a right to feel aggrieved and seek justice against a genuinely libelous statement so also he or she has the civic right to intellectual freedom and freedom of expression. These rights are only exercisable in relation to undistorted facts or their factual representation, not on any subjective grounds.

As the TV recording of Manzur Elahi's remarks, when repeatedly replayed, showed, Mahmudur Rahman's umbrage was based on non-specific comments by the former. The CPD clarified as much, so did Manzur Elahi which also came to be confirmed by the TV footage. One would have thought that the matter had been independently verified before taking such an extreme measure against all five citizens who are on the board of trustees of the CPD, each in his own right reputed and honourable person. At least there was no point in suspecting that they wouldn't respect court's summons to explain themselves.

For his part, Mahmudur Rahman is on record having made some extremely caustic remarks. He called the CPD 'shameless, liar and traitors'. The acrid words were supposed to be against the organisation as a whole. But what of his personal invective against CPD Executive Director Debapriya Bhattacharya? He has called him 'kulangar' which translates into 'black sheep'. Such words are extremely abusive in the parlance of a civilised society.

No less flabbergasting is the suggestion that Debapriya has lost his right to citizenship by using the words 'a bad commodity', whereby, in truth, he had only referred to statistics being so and not the country which Mahmudur Rahman likes to think.

Patriotism cannot be anybody's monopoly.

Plight of indigenous people

Ensure equal rights for them

THE International Day of the world's indigenous people has been celebrated in the country the other day bringing into focus the various aspects of their lives as lived in different parts of the country.

Adivasi communities have very distinct and rich cultures surviving the onslaught of what is known as the mainstream of life. They can certainly be proud of their rich cultural heritage.

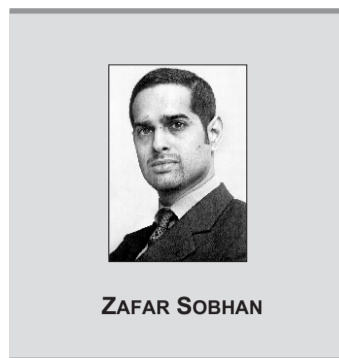
The indigenous people are facing a dilemma that characterizes their existence in most places across the world. On the one hand, they have a strong urge to keep alive the way of life handed down to them by their forefathers; on the other hand, they cannot sidetrack the priorities of modern existence. They have to compete with all other citizens of the country in their quest for a better living which might in practice force them to shed part of their ethnic identity. The truth is that their number is small and they are socially disadvantaged in certain cases.

Poverty and illiteracy are two of the major problems that the Adivasi communities are grappling with. A large number of them are landless or on the verge of losing whatever land they have while living in abject poverty. Regrettably, they have been facing encroachment on their habitats on a regular basis as development projects are taken up from time to time by the government without sympathetic consideration of the rights of the indigenous people. It seems the Adivasi psyche has never been understood by the rulers ever since the British days.

The first thing that society must do is not only recognise but also insist on the fact that the indigenous people are equal citizens of the country. Their backwardness will only mean that some groups of people will lag behind others, resulting in lopsided development in remote rural areas. The vested groups trying to exploit the vulnerability of Adivasis must be reined in to enhance their social and economic security.

Only celebration of a particular day will not help us attain the goal of creating equal opportunities for all the people, irrespective of cast, creed and ethnic identity. An action plan is imperative.

Comedy of errors



ZAFAR SOBHAN

LET me see if I can get this straight. On Sunday, August 6, speaking at a meeting with a forum of economic reporters at the press club, Board of Investment head Mahmudur Rahman referred to CPD as "a conspirator" and "a shameless liar" and accused the think-tank of maligning the country.

Mr. Rahman also made the serious, specific accusation that: "Research associates working at CPD are now being forced to engage in political activities. And if someone denies [i.e. refuses], CPD is sacking him."

In response to this broadside, CPD held a press conference Tuesday to defend itself. Executive Director Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya made short work of Mr. Rahman's intemperate accusations that CPD was involved in a conspiracy to make the country look bad, which he suggested was premised on a basic misunderstanding on the part of the BOI chief as to the role CPD plays with respect to the World Economic Forum and Unctad reports that Mr. Rahman had found fault with.

Mr. Rahman is the head of the BOI. As he is fond of telling anyone who will listen, it is his job to attract foreign investors to the country. I am sure that foreign investors watching the comedy of errors that has unfolded in Dhaka over the last few days are now falling over themselves in their enthusiasm to pour money into the country. Nothing that CPD has ever said or could ever say could possibly do as much damage to Bangladesh's image as an attractive destination for foreign investment than the recent machinations of the BOI chief.

Dr. Bhattacharya, with admirable restraint, wisely took the high road when it came to responding to Mr. Rahman's more offensive personal comments, contenting himself with the pithy and succinct: "We shall ignore all his crude and brash remarks on subjects beyond his competence as we feel embarrassed to discuss them."

But here is where the proceedings take a somewhat farcical turn.

Near the end of the press conference, CPD trustee board member and former adviser to the caretaker government, Syed Mahmud Elahi, asked to respond to the accusation of being a "conspirator," misheard, and thought that the questioner had asked him to comment on the accusation of being a "collaborator."

Mr. Elahi's response was philosophical, something along the lines: "It's a free country. Anyone can call anyone anything. Even you can tell me: 'you [i.e. Mr. Elahi himself] collaborated with the Pakistan army in 1971.'" Many people call him [pointing to Dr. Bhattacharya] a razakar. Probably [joking] he is the only Hindu

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razakar."

One would have hoped that the matter would end there. But no. The next day, two newspapers, The News Today and the daily Inquilab, ran prominent stories that claimed that Mr. Rahman had been accused of being a collaborator by Mr. Elahi.

Let us leave aside for now the coincidence of which two newspapers misreported Mr. Elahi's statement. Mr. Rahman was apparently unimpressed by the fact that none of the other newspapers which had been present at the press conference had run an account of how he had been defamed by Mr. Elahi, nor did he apparently see fit to check for himself the veracity of the newspaper accounts before filing a charge of criminal defamation against the five speakers at the press conference: CPD chairman **Zafar Sobhan**, Dr. Bhattacharya, and CPD trustee board members, Mr. Elahi, Ms. Laila Kabir, and Mr. M. Syeduzzaman.

The complaint against the five is an exceedingly odd document. Nowhere does it state with specific-

ity the statements made that are alleged to be defamatory and nowhere does it state with specificity who is alleged to have said what. The respondents are merely alleged, collectively, to have made statements against Mr. Rahman that are: "defamatory, disgraceful, indecent, misleading, conspiratory, false, fabricated, and baseless."

This from a man who is on record as stating that the executive director of CPD "does not have the right to live in the country."

On Thursday, the five respondents appeared in court and were granted anticipatory bail. Even though it is now clear that the newspaper accounts on which he based his rather feeble cause of action were inaccurate, as of the time of writing, Mr. Rahman had still taken no steps to withdraw his case.

Mr. Rahman's actions from the beginning to the end of this shabby little performance have been unworthy of a public official. It was he who struck the first blow in his press meeting of August 6, when it was he who made frankly defamatory comments against CPD in

general and its executive director in particular.

Since then, it has been he who has remained on the offensive. It is he who has filed a cause of action on unbelievably tendentious grounds, the accuracy of which he did not even have the common decency to confirm.

It is he who has continued to make defamatory and derogatory statements. It is he who, once the falsity of the newspaper reports on which he based his claim had been established, has not (till time of writing) withdrawn his cause of action, requiring the respondents to appear in court for anticipatory bail.

It seems to me a depressing sign of the times that Mr. Rahman apparently feels confident enough to file such a transparently meritless case. It is even more indicative of the all-encompassing power and reach of the government that an arrest warrant was issued with such alacrity by the presiding magistrate.

The fact that an arrest warrant was issued so quickly against five such prominent citizens of the country raises the question of what recourse an ordinary citizen would have if he or she found herself facing baseless charges. On the evidence of the last few days, not much.

One final point: one reason that foreign investors remain wary of doing business in Bangladesh, even though the country's macro-economic fundamentals remain strong and many other indicators are pointing in a positive direction, is their misgivings about the rule of law in the country and the percep-

tion that the courts remain hostage to arbitrary and capricious manipulations.

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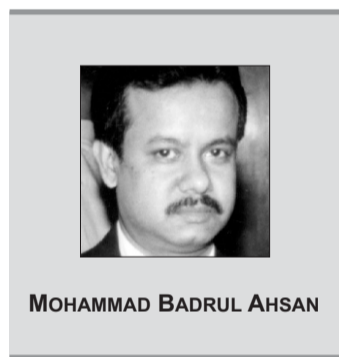
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Mr. Rahman, for the good of all concerned, not least the country he professes to serve with such devotion, should withdraw his cause of action and tender a full and unconditional apology to the five respondents, and bring this sorry spectacle to a close.

[Full disclosure: CPD chairman Rehman Sobhan is my father. Journalistic ethics require that I inform my readers of this connection, and then the readers can make up their own minds how much credence to give to my opinion on this matter.]

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Last word in politics



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I think I know why there is no last word in politics. It happens when leaders, who aspire to last long in power, disgrace their own words. Many great leaders have left the world, but their words stay with us. We still remember what Gandhi said. We quote Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. See the connection? Lasting words come from committed leaders. Lasting leaders are not always committed.

We have had and we still have a good number of lasting leaders, leaders who have more lives than cats, whose longevity in politics can put vultures and whales to shame. But were or are those leaders committed? Take for example the leaders like Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, Korban Ali, Ataur Rahman Khan or Shah Azizur Rahman? Now that they are gone, do you miss them? Those men were powerful in

So come September, don't be surprised if BNP and Ershad are going to dance cheek with cheek. Don't be surprised if you also see a somersault, a kind of political legerdemain when the caretaker government sits in power. After all, in our part of the world, politics is a long night of drunken spree. Once people come under the influence of power, they don't mind if the music changes or they dance with a monkey.

their days, and they literally made governments, so to speak, evolve around them. Then look how their careers ended in vain. They were mischievous men, fraught with human vices but that was not why they came to their ruinous ends. As a forgiving nation, we were always ready to look the other way. But what took them down were their very own words, which hovered in the air like haunting spirits and came back one day to strike them down.

Despite their many differences, those men had two things in common. One was their lust for power for which they always shifted. The other thing common was a clever man. All of them fell in his hand, and he took them down one by one like the broken menageries from a showcase. Who is that clever man? Why don't you see if you can figure that out on your own?

Let us talk about the living names. Sheikh Hasina once

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promised to retire by a certain age. She has now changed her mind. The country needs her, what can you say? The sitting Prime Minister has already ruled two and a bit terms, her health rumored to be failing, yet there is no sign that she is ever going to let up. Then a former dictator is coming back all decked up in safari suits and scarves. After nine years of reign and five years of prison, this octogenarian Robert Bruce wants to regain his throne.

Then you have got other long lasting leaders of small caliber. One-man parties, which don't win elections, maneuver in politics like a school of fish freely swimming in the deep waters. Many of these leaders were left-leaning once, but now they use their ideology in the same way a spinster uses old pictures to remind that she was young.

Are you beginning to see what I mean? To sum it up, when leaders want to last long in power, words

wobble under the weight of their ambitions. Last word is a measure of character quotient, the integrity of a person who is ready to stand by his words at any cost. But that doesn't hold when the son strikes deal with the alleged killer of his slain father, or the daughter of a fallen leader does not mind working with those who may have played dubious roles in wiping out her entire family.

As a matter of fact, what we see is psychosis with political consequences. Power is the greatest aphrodisiac and elections are mating seasons. Never mind, who said those words, let them stretch your imagination. When one large party consorts with a few small ones, a political coalition is born. That is how politics is an eight-letter word that does all the four-letter things to the country and its people.

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These days, you hear lot of political babbles. CEC, voter list, reforms in the caretaker government, corruption, price hikes, teachers' strike, split in JP, one coalition, another coalition, Citizens' Group, CPD, clean candidates, power shortage, new bridge, old bridge, and the list can go on and on. But if you come to think of it, these are old problems with new labels. These are the varied symptoms of the same disease. Our politics is dirty and our politicians are despicable.

When I was growing up, there was a saying in my village that a man who doesn't keep his words, his mother has two husbands. The words of mouth are linked to a man's honour until our politicians discovered the opposite, that power was more covetable than respect, and learned to lie with a straight face. It is amazing how they boast that there is no last word in politics as if reciting holy verse from the scripture right before undertaking a noble cause.

It is the same inclination that

reverberates through the society now. We tell lies to hear lies, which cascades from politics to all walks of life and then throws those lies back into politics. Perhaps the best way to describe our country is to compare it with a steamship stuck in the sand, which revs up its motor only to kick up more sand.

If Ershad ever returns to power, we shall get that sand in our face. It will prove that our politics has come to a stagnant stage, where nothing comes out of nothing except recycling old wines in new bottles. Only good news is that most of our long lasting leaders may not last very long. Because there may not be last word in politics, but nature puts its own limit. There is always the last breath when the time comes.

Now where there is good news, there is bad news as well. It is a custom amongst certain African tribes that whoever catches the last breath will carry the dead person's soul and spirit with him for ever. I am keeping my fingers crossed that when our lasting leaders go one by one, the African custom will not prove right.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

BNP's unfulfilled commitment

In a situation dominated by the trade syndicates, wealthy class and corrupt high officials party members will be asking for too much if they expect nomination of honest, sincere and dedicated workers. After all the government have not allowed whitening of so much of black money without any motive. In the accumulation of this huge amount of black money it is corruption which has played a critical role. So why they bother for curbing corruption?

ABMS ZAHUR

WITH less than three months left for the BNP led four-party alliance to hand over power to the caretaker government, very often we see ministers of the present government are blaming the press for depicting them as corrupt, inefficient, and non-responsive to their good recommendations.

Instead of appreciating the enormous courage and conviction shown by the journalists, they are reprimanded, repressed, tortured or harassed by the government for finding out their faults and failures. A number of journalists lost their

lives simply because some powerful politicians or leading activists could not be happy with them. Nothing has been done to protect the journalists in their quest for finding out the truth.

Curbing of corruption was certainly a major election commitment made by BNP during the election of 2001. After coming to power we find that the party has completely forgotten about the commitment. Instead of making any honest effort to curb, it has allowed practicing corruption by as many as possible of its members. Like any other political party, some of its members do love indulging in corruption, while some others like to remain honest. The hon-

est ones now repent because they no longer can compete with the richer corrupt members in obtaining nomination from the party.

To their great shock and frustration, they find that no longer honesty, dedication and even participation in the war of independence are enough to qualify them for nomination.

We cannot say that the government did nothing to curb corruption. By abolishing the bureau of anti-corruption it has officially set up a commission with retired persons with different backgrounds. Not to speak of starting any real work the commission has not yet been able to obtain approval of its

organogram. Though some personnel of the defunct BAC have been absorbed in the commission no work could be started because of lack of field staff. Thus by abolishing the BAC the government in fact allowed the people whose cases were pending with the BAC to get some respite for "tadbir" to free themselves from charges against them. As the true start of the ACC's work is still uncertain the accused have enough time for relaxation (may be new opportunities for increasing their wealth).

Among the most corrupt ministries, the most prominent are Ministries of Communications, Home Affairs, Local Government and Rural Development, Public Works, Finance, Energy and Power and Education. The annual audit reports (submitted by the CAG), newspaper investigations or the TIB compilations are almost ignored by the government which encourage people to hear no evil, see no evil, and speak

no evil. Though supposed to be an accountable government it has made even the recommendations of the parliamentary committee dumped in the basket. This has made the corrupt officials and law makers more bold and desperate.

Some ministers not only deny corruption in their ministries then do not hesitate to shout at TIB and threaten them with filing cases against them. The ministry of communication, despite its challenge, failed to submit any information against the charge of corruption. The late minister for shipping, refused to contest the complaint of corruption against his ministry before the concerned parliamentary committee. He even suggested the members of the committee to refer the case to the ACC if they considered it appropriate.

It has become abundantly clear that without full operation of the ACC and the appointment of ombudsman, the curse of corruption cannot be controlled because it has become a part of

our culture. The donor agencies are worried about corruption. They have requested the government repeatedly to take appropriate steps. They have offered technical aid to the government to accomplish the task. In fact the amount of aid may be reduced in future if the government fail to show positive steps in curbing corruption.

It is hardly possible for a government dominated by corrupt members linked to the past corrupt dictatorial regime of Ershad. The first regime of Khaleda (1991-96) was much less corrupt than her present regime. Either she has become too ambitious or she has lost control over the party.

The alliance government complains that the media is hostile to the government and it always tries to find out faults of the government. It never tries to publish the achievements of the government. This government likes to ignore the fact that our conscious citizens are fully aware of the fact that without the

ceaseless striving of the press to find the truth about the government and the political activities people would have been in complete darkness and the suffering of the common men would have been enormous.

In fact, without fearless journalism it is difficult to imagine even running of parliamentary democracy. People would have at least deprived of seeing the statements of the opposition who prefer indulging in street politics and tracing out failures of the party/parties in position.

During the last four and a half years, corruption is responsible for widening the gap between the rich and the poor, increasing extortion, poorer quality of governmental construction (development projects), dominance of money in politics, unprecedented price hike. Though the alliance government is supposed to be collectively responsible for failure to curb corruption, only the main party i.e. BNP will have to bear the brunt.

BNP is going to face a tough

job in handling the task of nomination of candidates in the next election. With the highly politicised inefficient corrupt bureaucracy, tremendous pressure from the senior members of JCD to allow them to greater participation in national politics, proper utilisation of senior, dedicated, experienced and moderate members of BNP, allocation of seats to alliance partners (particularly JJ).

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ABMS Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.