LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY AUGUST 25, 2006

A sad day for the highest judiciary

Politicised appointments and confirmations

E are greatly disturbed by the developments centring the confirmation of 17 additional judges of the High Court by the President on Wednesday. They are a group of the 19 additional judges, the government had originally appointed triggering controversy that most of them had political proximity to the ruling alliance. The Chief Justice recommended 15 cases for confirmation but the government added two more to the final confirmation list.

A large segment of the lawyers' community led by the Supreme Court Bar Council protested the oath taking of the new judges. They have even decided to boycott the court of one particular judge. All this go to signal a negative working atmosphere between the Bench and the Bar.

There is a history of politically stigmatised appointments to the highest judiciary as well as ignoring the recommendations of the Chief Justice, either partially or wholly by the government of the day. Certain obvious examples are cited: first, on coming to power, the four-party alliance did not confirm 15 additional judges appointed by the Awami League government even though most of them had been recommended by the CJ; secondly, in 2002 the CJ recommended confirmation of three judges originally appointed during the AL government but none of them were confirmed. Again, in the following year, out of the eight judges recommended by the CJ for confirmation, only two were confirmed. A similar trend was perceptible during the AL rule but to a lesser extent.

All these go to prove that either total disregard is being shown for the need to consult with the CJ in regard to appointments and confirmations to the highest judiciary which he happens to head or a lip service is given to his recommendatory role. Government's consultation with him may not be constitutionally mandatory, but it certainly is a constitutional convention that can only be ignored to the peril of the independence of the judiciary and the undermining of its dignity and honour as the highest temple of justice.

The protesting lawyers have a valid point but it would have been far more forcefully articulated had the lawyer community

Curbing road accidents

A suggested action plan

HE participants of an international seminar on "Road Safety in Developing Countries" organised by the Accident Research Centre of BUET emphasised the need for enactment of stringent laws and their strict enforcement to reduce the number of road accidents.

The point is very relevant in our context as road accidents are claiming more and more lives and crippling a large number of people in the country. Worse still, most experts believe that the situation will further deteriorate in the coming years if no effective measures are adopted. While the developed countries have evolved ways to reduce the number of road accidents, the problem has become acute in the developing countries that account for 85 per cent of the 1.2 million deaths in road accidents every year around the world.

Violation of traffic rules makes the roads extremely unsafe. The violation is taking place at various levels. Unfit vehicles are allowed to ply busy roads; the drivers are untrained and inexperienced; overloading of buses and even much smaller vehicles is a common sight; even traffic signals are ignored, and so on. Add to this, the drivers can get away lightly by bribing the traffic personnel after breaking the rules.

The structural problems are also contributing to road mishaps Road engineering is a neglected subjected as is evident from sharp turns on the highways which create serious problems for the drivers. Roads are narrowed in many places due to the presence of shops and vendors. Roads are not repaired regularly which enhance the risk of accidents. Finally, absence of highway patrol gives the drivers a free hand. The situation turns critical when mini-buses and trucks move on the highways where traffic rules are seldom enforced. Mini-buses, in particular, have become a menace even in the city. The road transport authorities should review the situation and carefully examine the roadworthiness of mini-buses.

Obviously, commuters and pedestrians are also blissfully unaware of their responsibilities. And no worthwhile attempt is being made to create greater awareness among them regard-

The road transport authorities must work on the basis of a comprehensive plan to increase road safety, concentrating on enforcement of traffic laws and rules as the first step towards improving the situation.

Marriage of convenience or true love?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

NE of the great unanswe-red questions of Bangladeshi politics is the exact nature of the relationship between the two main components of the ruling four-party alliance, the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami: is it a mere marriage of political convenience or is it the true love of ideological soul-mates?

Many BNP voters profess to abhor the Jamaat, but firmly believe that the political landscape is so treacherous that the BNP has no option other than to hold its nose and team up with the Jamaat if it wishes to either come to or retain power. These voters believe that

joining hands with the Jamaat is a necessary evil and unavoidable if the greater evil of an Awami League government is to be kept at bay, and comfort themselves with the thought that the BNP does not sign on to the Jamaat's suggest that now is a good time to re-examine the relationship between the BNP and the Jamaat. With the decision about electoral alliances and who the BNP should take sides with still very much up in the air, now might be a good time to make your voice heard.

agenda and that the Jamaat, while able to provide the margin of victory to the BNP, is not itself strong enough to constitute any kind of threat or to advance its agenda in any way

In other words, the alliance between the two parties is a calculated risk with considerable up-side and very little down-side for the BNP. It is a little ironic that this defence of the BNP's alliance with Jamaat depends on approval of the party acting in what its ostensible defenders concede is essentially a hypocritical and nakedly political manner.

However, as disquieting as that thought might be, the astonishing thing is that, for possibly the majority of the country, this understanding of the relationship is actually the most acceptable spin that can be put on it, though I would suggest that it is rarely a good sign when hypocrisy and cynicism is the best defence one can muster for one's actions

STRAIGHT TALK

For those who do think that it is a bad thing that the country seems to be

marching steadily in the direction of intolerance and obscurantism, and

believe that our political discourse (to say nothing of religious sensibilities)

has been cheapened and demeaned by the politicization of Islam, I would

Furthermore, the suggestion that the alliance between the BNP and the Jamaat is nothing more than a marriage of convenience is called into question by the continued and seemingly disproportionate deference shown by the BNP to its alliance

Then there are those who suggest that there is actually a considerable similarity of opinion and world-view between the Jamaat and the BNP, and that theirs is a true marriage of the minds. This point of view suggests that there is enough commonality of purpose and philosophy between the two parties that their alliance is not mere naked political maneuvering, but actually dictated by common sense

and common goals.

But, either way, whether it is out of conviction or cynicism, there is no denying the fact that the BNP has permitted the Jamaat extraordinary leeway in the past five years, and that the influence of the Jamaat over the alliance government and affairs of state has been far out of proportion to that which its numerical strength would suggest it is entitled to.

Perhaps this is a tacit admission on the part of the BNP of the crucial role played by Jamaat in the last election and recognition of the fact that it will need the Jamaat again in the upcoming elections, or perhaps the BNP is merely using the Jamaat as cover for enacting policies that it itself supports but does not have the courage of its convictions to fully stand behind

The two principal decisions taken by the BNP in recent weeks demonstrate this tenuous balance of power. The first decision was the one to reach out to expresident HM Ershad, a move that the Jamaat is on record as being opposed to. But the decision to bring Ershad into the alliance can be juxtaposed with this week's decision to grant degree status to the Qawmi madrasas equivalent to a Masters degree from an accred-

Was the decision with respect to the Qawmi madrasas intended to soften the blow of inducting Ershad into the alliance and should it be seen merely as a concession to the Jamaat to keep them happy and to ensure that they do not defect with their vote bank, or was the decision one that the current administration feels is defensible public policy?

I do not know the answer, and perhaps it is a little of both. In the final analysis, though, I am not even sure that it makes much of a difference when politicians enact poor (or good for that matter) public policy, whether their principal motive is electoral gain or conviction. The end result is pretty much the same in either case.

What is unarguable is that the past five years of BNP-Jamaat rule have seen the country move very perceptibly right-ward

may not last beyond us. Bad

news is that none of us will last

forever. Like ones before you,

you will also walk into the sunset

of power. That is inevitable some

day, this time or next time. But

how would you like to be remem-

bered once the glory-hounding is

remembered as a leader, to earn

your place in the pantheon of

Here is your chance to be

towards the narrow interpretation of Islam that is openly espoused by the Jamaat and perhaps covertly by influential parties in

Many might argue that this is no bad thing and that this is the right direction for the country to be heading. I would disagree strongly which such a statement, but all are entitled to their opinion, and it is certainly a point of view.

However, for those who do think that it is a bad thing that the country seems to be marching steadily in the direction of intolerance and obscurantism, and believe that our political discourse (to say nothing of religious sensibilities) has been cheapened and demeaned by the politicization of Islam, I would suggest that now is a good time to re-examine the relationship between the BNP and the **Jamaat**

If the direction the BNP has moved in the past five years is one that you are comfortable with, all well and good. If not, however, with the decision about electoral alliances and who the BNP should take sides with still very much up in the air, now might be a good time to make your voice heard.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Many happy returns, Madame PM



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Yes, Madame, how could you not enshrine the memory of a fallen hero of this country, if you could endear a foul dictator? Once again, a Happy Birthday to you and wish you many happy returns of the day. If you return to power next time. Madame Prime Minister, feel free to celebrate 364 days of the year. Just spare one day so that this nation can mourn its loss. Even better, if you join us.

belated Happy Birthday to you, Madame Prime Minister. You are the most fortunate amongst us at this point in time, a gracefully aging housewife sitting at the helm of state power. You have been elected to the highest office for more than two terms (counting one that Would you like to hold any jubilalasted only weeks!), riding on the tion in the same house? waves of aspiration, adulation and authority. Life has given you more than you asked. You deserve to celebrate every day of

The question is why do you have to celebrate it on 15th of August? I am not questioning the date of your birth. We believe birth, death, livelihood and marriage come from God. These are givens, predetermined facts of life -- predestination. You were born on the same day a great leader of this country got killed. It didn't happen in the same year and nobody could blame you for that coincidence. It is not your fault that two opposite events got booked in our national diary on the same day!

Still. Madame it leaves a bad taste in the mouth when the nation is split between two occasions, slaving anniversary of one leader and birth anniversary of another. If you take this country as one family, politics apart, that

is how leaders should treat their people. Think of yourself as the head of a family where, more or less, half the members are mourning a loss. Would you like to invite them to a wedding or birthday party on the same day?

Perhaps many other people celebrate their birthday on that day. But you are different from them. Madame, in stature and feature. You are the leader of the people, head of the government the chosen one, so to speak. You are a role model, a beacon light, who is supposed to give us



hope, lead us down the moral path to make us proud of this country again and again.

Set one example and it will go a long way to shape our politics. We must all

show respect to the dead, and one great leader must show respect to another.

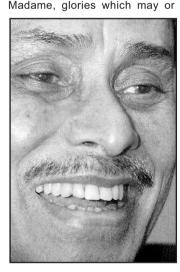
But when you cut the cake on the same day as another leader goes to sprinkle flower petals on the graves of her loved ones, when you receive bouquets from vour admirers in an illuminated hall room, while another leader garlands the picture of her slain father or breaks down into emotional stutters while recounting the memories of a dark night, all within the space of a single day, it looks odd like a badly edited movie where sequences are all misplaced, where tragic and



comic contents are badly jumbled into confusion and don't make sense

Our nation, more accurately our politics, has many fault lines. Many days, many events divide us already, and that division runs across the whole country "from members of the board to baby on board." like they say it in a TV ad. We need to talk about it. Here, we need to do an examination of our conscience. Why must we subject ourselves to such surreal stupidity that insults our values

We all live for glories,



great patriots, to be treasured in history as someone who healed

the wounds of this nation and brought it together. You can fix those fault lines, which jolts this nation into violent convulsions. You can erase the barriers, which divide this house. You can knock down the walls which separate one half of this family from its other half

A good start can be 15th of August next year. No, you shouldn't skip the celebration, but please do it a day before or a day after. Please allow the day have its due solemnity, so that those who need to mourn are not disturbed. Let us mourn this day as a nation. It is a grim day in our history. Madame Prime Minister. It is like a smudge, a dark spot, a moral eclipse that hangs over us like mushroom cloud.

When Napoleon went to conquer Egypt, he met with serious resistance and his wife was fooling around with a young lieutenant back in France. A distraught Napoleon wrote to his brother that it was a sad situation "to have so many conflicting sentiments about a single person in one's heart." Those words adequately capture the state of our minds, Madame. Right now we are a nervous nation that has so many conflicting sentiments in its heart.

Let us step out of politics for a moment, Madame Prime

Minister, A great leader was killed on 15th of August like another great leader was killed on 30th of May, within the space of six years. We are still fighting over who was a greater leader between them, while our politics crumbles each day in the aftershock of our endless squabbles. You can turn it around, Madame, with your popularity, charisma, sagacity and foresight. You can stanch the hemorrhage, which will save this nation. If you rise

above politics, you can lift us together. Leaders are important for a nation because they can rouse the people and mobilize them into actions. But we need leaders who can lead by example, those who can show it to us that united we stand, divided we fall. Madame, I know you are surrounded by many yearning yes-men, demagogic dogsbodies, bureaucratic brownnoses, ideological idiots, opportunistic oilers and greedy gremlins. But I appeal to your conscience. That is the only voice you should

listen in the midst of this clamour. Set one example and it will go a long way to shape our politics. We must all show respect to the dead, and one great leader must show respect to another. Yes. Madame, how could you not enshrine the memory of a fallen hero of this country, if you could endear a foul dictator?

Once again, a Happy Birthday to you and wish you many happy returns of the day. If you return to power next time, Madame Prime Minister, feel free to celebrate 364 days of the year. Just spare one day so that this nation can mourn its loss. Even better, if you ioin us

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

The PRSP: What was wrong with it?

Who is to be blamed for the PRSA debacle? It is easy to attack the consultants for their incompetence, but at the end of the day it is the WB that must take the major responsibility. What does it mean? It means that while the Bank speaks loud about the accountability and the transparency for good governance, the preacher appears to be the main offender.

wealth Secretariat and

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

T is almost three weeks now since the PRSP debacle surfaced. The Honourable ICT Minister's outburst against the paper is well known. Local and international experts have been shocked by Dr Moyeen Khan's unprofessional outburst in a gathering of highly professional people, including the representatives of the local multinational agencies. Leaving this aside, and since the dust has settled by now, let us look at what exactly went wrong with such a high profile report behind which so many hours and resources had been spent to address the issue of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh.

The organisers (Common-

Economic Research Group) of the meeting on that unfortunate day, perhaps, had anticipated that professional exchanges would take place among the participants about the PRSP. Unfortunately, that did not happen due to the minister's rejection of the report and the way he Like many development researchers I have been waiting

with great interest to see the outcome of the PRSP in Bangladesh. With my background on this subject, over the last thirty years, I can claim that I understand the poverty issue reasonably well. I will come back to this point later, but let us see, first, why both the local and international development experts took PRSP seriously, not only in Bangladesh but also in the least developed world. During the last half a century,

the multilateral agencies, including the World Bank, have been working tirelessly to overcome poverty in the developing world. Among all these initiatives, at least two are regraded as being highly successful: food-grain availability from both demand and supply side point of view.

On the demand side, the population control measures initiated in the 1950s, and adopted subsequently, had effectively checked population growth and in turn lowered the relative demand for food grains over the last forty years.

On the supply side, the socalled "green revolution," again

initiated in the 1950s (the role of Manila based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and subsequently the BRRI for Bangladesh in particular), had successfully increased food grain production manyfold during the last four decades. It is needless to say these policy measures had been supportive in keeping the food grain prices within the reach of the poor. Both these programs have been based on technological innovations, covering the areas of medical and agricultural sci-The institutional side of pov-

erty alleviation, globally, has been mainly taken care of by the World Bank during the last fifty vears. Within this time frame, the Bank had initiated at least half a dozen strategies to alleviate poverty. For example, IRD Program, Basic Needs Approach, Growth with Equity, Structural Adjustment Program, and so on. After so much investment in resources and time, unfortunately, none of these

strategies can claim genuine success the way the demand and supply side policies did. It will not be an exaggeration if one maintains that the institutional side of the poverty alleviation game has been a dismal failure. For this, after investing so much time and resources, the failure on the part of the WB profoundly comes to mind. A few years back, when the

WB initiated the PRSP mechanism, many had taken this strategy seriously, both at the Bank and in the least developed nations. The PRSP's journey in Bangladesh, indeed, began with a bumpy ride. Some even argue that the PRSP is dead in this country. One does not have to elaborate further why this is the case. Dr Moyeen Khan, a high profile educator-cum-minister, has branded the over 300-page PRSP as "worthless" since it failed to include the ICT's role in alleviating poverty in the 21st century. Who was right? Dr Khan or the WB?

At this stage, let me mention

that I had the privilege of participating the 8th meeting of the UN ICT Task Force, held in Dublin, Ireland, from April 13-14, 2005. The Task Force, established by the UN Secretary-General in 2001, is a multi-stakeholder partnership, bringing together representatives of governments. the private sector, civil society and international organisations in a global effort to harness the immense potential of ICT for promoting development.

The Dublin meeting was aimed at "harnessing the potential of ICTs for education." The whole idea was, as mentioned by the Executive Coordinator of the Task Force, "the falling costs of ICTs have made the use of ICT for education more economical and, as costs fall even further, the case for their use is set to become compelling in even the poorest of countries." Although the meeting had addressed primarily the issues of ICT for education, one of the keynote speakers, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, talked about the ICT and its role in poverty alleviation and it was regarded as a major input to the meeting.

Having said that, one may ask how it was possible for the Bank to ignore such an important issue in the PRSP? Can we really blame the minister for his outburst? Moreover, it is professionally disturbing to see how such a major omission escaped the World Bank's scrutiny before

the release of the report. Who is to be blamed for the PRSP debacle? It is easy to attack the consultants for their incompetence, but at the end of the day it is the WB that must take the major responsibility. What does it mean? It means that while the Bank speaks loud about the accountability and the transparency for good governance, the preacher appears to be the main offender. Also, one can legitimately raise the question, who was in charge when such a high profile report was outsourced for its preparation? It is generally the practice in the profession that such a document

should have an independent review under an embargo before its release. The review should have included at least three types of stakeholders: government, industry and civil society. Obviously, it seems that the paper had not gone through such a rigorous scrutiny.

Unfortunately, with the PRSP's bumpy start, the governments (present and future) would be unlikely to seriously take the recommendations of the report for halving poverty by 2015. The lessons from the document are clear. The multilateral development agencies must realise the fact that while outsourcing is a cost cutting measure, it is, however, professionally dangerous to adopt such a measure which can backfire. It is not easy to introduce competition in the market place for intellectual capacity building. The answer must lie, first and foremost, with building the inhouse capacity of the WB.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily