

## Restructuring the railways

*A crying need of the time*

THAT such a big service provider as the railways would go on a sudden strike and bring the largest surface communication mode to a total standstill on Wednesday was simply unthinkable. Being a bolt from the blue, as it were, it took thousands of railway passengers completely unawares rendering them immobile and benumbed. It was more of an enforced strike than a spontaneous one without any prior notice served on the multitudes of commuters. Chaos was a necessary part of the countrywide proceedings spearheaded by Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad (RSKSP).

No service provider of the size of railway should ever go on a wildcat strike that causes horrendous public hardship and losses to the national economy. Significantly, the strike was designed to be a preemptive move whereby signing of a funding agreement with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) yesterday was sought to be resisted. The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) recently approved a Tk 3,500 crore Railway Improvement Project with the Asian Development Bank providing most of the funds.

There cannot be second opinion that the Bangladesh Railways needs modernisation, restructuring and overhaul. Given its potential, there is a grievous sense of loss in the way the railway system is being run. Much of its landed property is in illegal possession, its rolling stocks and tracks are in an abysmal state and it has reached a near dysfunctional state. The railway workers and employees should know it better than anybody else. Like many a vermin, vested quarters are bleeding it white. So much in the red has it gone that the employees and workers should themselves welcome a radical restructuring of the railways in their best interest.

On the issue of privatisation we have to say that it has not been brought to the public domain. Parts of the railway services are in private hands but to go for wholesale privatisation we shall have to deliberate on its pros and cons and take a balanced and, perhaps, a phase-wise decision. India and Pakistan with their very large railway networks have not privatised yet, although they have associated private sectors with the commercial side of railway operations.

We are all for the reform and modernisation of the railways so that it is turned into a profitable concern unflinchingly wedded to the highest ideal of public service.

## Sardine-packed roads

*Do something before it's too late*

ONE only has to see a photograph published in The Daily Star City page on October 11 to realise the magnitude of suffering the shoppers in the city's Ghausia and Chandni Chowk market areas are undergoing. Unregulated and unauthorised parking of vehicles combined with the footpaths being virtually clogged by all kinds of vendors are causing intense misery to the visiting shoppers.

It is indeed shocking to find that there is not a single parking facility in and around this important shopping area. Incidentally, most of the shoppers come with the entire families comprising women and children. Considering the sheer number of visitors to Gausia and Chandni Chowk markets, these are, in a sense, more important than the city's fancy malls. Shoppers here therefore deserve adequate physical facilities including nearby car parks.

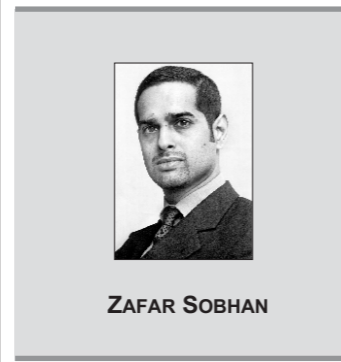
We fail to understand as to why vendors have to block the entire passage of the footpaths so that the pedestrians have no other option but to walk on the main street? We strongly believe that given the will and sincerity of purpose the vendors can be moved to more appropriate locations by the Dhaka City Corporation.

On the other hand, it is not also understandable why vehicle parking cannot be better regulated? Parking of vehicles on both sides of the road should be completely banned, especially in busy areas where the need for multistoried parking lots can hardly be overemphasised.

The administration should encourage private investors to construct extensive parking facilities to run them on commercial basis. Government has plans to build some parking spaces but unless the private sector feels obliged to go for it in a big way the parking problems would not be adequately addressed.

We wish to see some real action on the ground instead of lame excuses aimed at defending inaction.

# Death knell for politics as usual?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

KAMRAN Choudhury's blockbuster article, *Election 2007: The New Arithmetic* (DS, Oct 6), in which he predicts the AL to win as many as 180 seats in the up-coming election, but also points out the more crucial fact, that today over 50% of the voters do not line up with any political party, comes as a welcome dose of clear-eyed and well-supported analysis in this highly charged election season.

The piece achieves special significance in the context of the on-going dialogue between the BNP and the AL on reform of the caretaker government and the election commission and the public perception surrounding the dialogue.

It has been a staple of the PM's stump speech that the AL fears defeat at the polls and that its intransigence in negotiation is a result of this anxiety. However, now that Mr Choudhury has persuasively argued that the AL, in fact, at present enjoys a commanding lead over the BNP, the official BNP party line that the AL is out to come to power through the back-door since it cannot hope to come to power through the ballot box, rings increasingly hollow, and stands as evidence either of the ruling alliance leadership's cynicism or its loss of touch with reality, or some combination of the two.

### STRAIGHT TALK

The message that lies at the heart of Mr Choudhury's analysis is that politics as usual is finished in Bangladesh. We are entering a new era in which neither the BNP nor the AL can continue to rely on their historic vote banks and in which they will need to upgrade and re-invent themselves from the bottom up if they do not wish to be consigned to the ash-heap of history. Whichever of the two parties is best able to understand this uncomplicated truth and act upon it will be the one to survive. And if neither one of them is able to do so, then they are both finished. It really is as simple and as straight-forward as that. The Bangladeshi people have had enough of politics as usual.

Indeed, Mr Choudhury's analysis is most compelling for the simple reason that it confirms, more or less, all the other polling information that has been compiled, and tallies with what casual empiricism suggests the mood of the nation seems to be.

If you were to take an informal survey of opinion, a straw poll, as it were, you will find that antipathy towards the BNP has reached a historic high. Don't take my word for it. Conduct your own straw poll of ten people at random: shopkeepers, taxi-drivers, rickshaw-pullers, office colleagues, friends, acquaintances, etc and see if this is not indeed the case.

One doesn't need to look at sophisticated polling data to determine that the public is boiling with anger at sky-rocketing prices, power and water shortages, and the high-handed and tone-deaf attitude in the government and ruling alliance.

The demonstrations in Kansat and Shonir Akhra and Phulbari and Mirpur have not come out of nowhere, nor have these movements arisen in a day or a week. The anger with the government has been building up for more or less the five years of its tenure, and it comes as no surprise that it should have

reached boiling point in the last month of this current government's time in office.

The public is sophisticated enough to understand the connection between crime syndicates sponsored by the ruling elite and high prices, it is sophisticated enough to understand that the reason that new power plants have not been built is that power brokers at the very highest levels in the ruling party have not been sufficiently accommodated, it is sophisticated enough to understand that the reason that terrorism has been able to raise its head is that until recently the terrorists had been sponsored and sheltered by elements in the ruling alliance, and above all, the public is sophisticated enough to understand that, contrary to the government's insistent claims, that these have been a tough five years for the people, and that for the government to suggest otherwise is both mendacious and insulting.

It comes as no surprise then, that, at best, one voter in five is at present prepared to cast his or her ballot for the BNP or its likely allies. This government has lurched from fiasco to fiasco since the beginning of its assumption of office, but its most damaging characteristic has been

the overweening arrogance of its power and its abundantly evident indifference to the interests and well-being of the public. The public sees this very well and is in the mood to issue a stern rebuke at the polls.

Kamran Choudhury is uniquely positioned to offer such a critique. As a one-time BNP MP who has no great affection for the AL, Mr Choudhury has no axe to grind against the party that has been his only home in post-independence politics, and he takes no joy whatsoever in being the messenger of ill tidings, either for the party or the country.

More importantly, his track record reveals him to be one of the most astute and insightful analysts of the political scene in Bangladesh. It was he who drew up the blue-print for the grand alliance that swept the BNP and its allies to power in 2001, employing a sophisticated political model that he had been refining since his entry into politics as a rookie BNP candidate back in 1979.

Crucially, Mr Choudhury was willing to go on record with his prediction in April 2001, six months before the elections, and subject his analysis to rigorous scrutiny and examination, at a time when his findings were at considerable odds

with the conventional wisdom. He was right then, and there is no reason to believe that his latest pain-staking analysis is anything but accurate.

More interesting, perhaps, than Mr. Choudhury's confirmation of the public anger against the BNP (which is no news-flash) is the revelation that the AL remains far from popular among the general public, today commanding the support of roughly only one voter in four, and that fully fifty per cent of the electorate as of today lines up behind no political party whatsoever.

This is the real meat of his analysis and represents a new and unprecedented independence on the part of the voting public that could have significant repercussions for the future of politics in this country.

It is not too late, Mr Choudhury suggests, for the AL to reach out to this disaffected fifty per cent, and attempt to fashion policies and proposals that will win them to the party's side. But the message for the AL is that they have been unable, thus far at least, to unite the people behind them, and that disenchantment with the ruling alliance, as widespread as it has been, has not translated into support for the opposition. This cannot be seen as anything other than a failure on the part of the main opposition. It is an important lesson that the party would do well to take heed of.

The AL has the upper hand. There can be little doubt that they would sweep to victory in a free and fair election. But the party should not confuse even a landslide (which is mathematically on the cards) election triumph with a commanding mandate or be fooled into thinking that the party retains the affections of a significant plurality of the public.

The AL, even if it comes to power, will need to engage in some serious

and sustained house-cleaning if it hopes to transform itself into a political party that appeals to the people and is capable of delivering to them the governance they both deserve and will now demand.

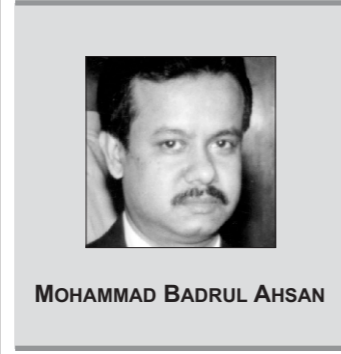
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Let us see how the dialogue over reforms in advance of the upcoming election turns out. The tenor of the talks should provide us with a pretty good clue as to whether the message has been received or not.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## Dialogue or no dialogue



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THERE is a sense of relief when children, having speech delays, speak for the first time. A similar sentiment crept on this nation since last week after the secretary general of BNP and the general secretary of Awami League sat down to start a "dialogue." Angels sing, fairies dance, and, gosh, there is music in the air. At long last, they have managed to talk, first time in eleven years!

Don't ask what took them so long. One reason could be destiny, which has designated time for everything. Nations don't get their independence until the time has come for it. Leaders don't emerge until the hour strikes. There is a time for the problem, and there is a time for the solution. Destiny is when what happens happens, when it happens.

We can find another reason if we descend into the fog of Freudian discourse. Psychological compulsions often undermine intelligence,

and people do stupid things. Here are the three pillars of human psychology. The id contains "primitive desires" (hunger, rage, and sex), the super-ego contains internalized norms, morality, and taboos, and the ego mediates between the two and may include or give rise to the sense of self.

In my view, the ego has badly messed up. Our politicians have been hungry for power. They have also known the moral dilemmas. Reforms are needed for free and fair elections. Corruption is bad and the government should deliver on election promises. But the poor ego has let them down. It has been a bad mediator. The politicians have lost their way in the smoke of pride and prejudice.

There could be even a third reason, which may be called the handyman syndrome. A handyman takes long lunch breaks, frequently goes to the toilet, smokes cigarettes, enjoys siesta, while the

### CROSS TALK

When the secretary general and the general secretary return to the negotiation table on October 16, let them sort out their mutual conditions and find new heads for the caretaker government and the election commission. But will they also consider one and only one condition from the rest of us? Is it possible to change their party bosses? Their egos have become liabilities for this nation. Dialogue or no dialogue, it is time to cut them loose and cut our losses.

taskmaster worries if the work will get done within the agreed time. But the handyman is not bothered since he knows the job and confidently sets his pace of work.

Likewise, maybe the politicians know something we don't. It's their trade and they know it best that no matter how complex is the problem, they can always do it like a snap of their fingers. Maybe that's why the politicians were hardly worried over the deadlock when rest of the country was going to faint in anxiety and fear. We have to wait until the dialogue is finished to see if it proves the point.

But the question comes to mind in circles. If they can sit now, why couldn't they sit before? Perhaps it is a kind of brinkmanship, wasting time to get the kicks from the last-minute suspense. Perhaps this is called cliffhanger politics, when the outcome is as uncertain as a blind hand in the game of cards.

Let us say, the blind hand wins.

Let us say, all goes well; either one side gives up everything, or both sides give up something and the dialogue is fruitful. Then what? Will a quickly cobbled deal between the two sides tie all the loose ends? There will be elections and one party will come to power. But will the other party concede the election? Will both parties go to the parliament? Are these going to be sorted out in the dialogue? If not, then why so much ado about nothing? Why start something with a big bang, if it must end with a whimper?

True, this nation is eagerly waiting for the outcome of the dialogue. But will that outcome encompass all solutions? And will those solutions help or handicap democracy? Take the case of the caretaker government. We thought it was a solution, which would ensure free and fair election. But now it is our biggest problem. Democracy, like a spider, has got

tangled in its web.

Hence, we need to make changes so that we can have free and fair caretaker government. Next time, we might see more changes so that we can have free and fair changes. Beyond that we might even argue over the definition of free and fair changes. It's like the sad story of that suspicious king. He put more people to keep an eye on the milkman and then even more people to keep an eye on those who kept an eye on the milkman. The outcome was that the supply of milk incrementally depleted.

In fact, the entire controversy around the dialogue is based on a fallacy. It is rooted in our delusion, or should I say, in our arrogance, that we are safe if we change the watchman while the culprits are hiding in the house. In the two elections held so far, neither the head of the caretaker government nor the chief election commissioner is said to have influenced the outcome. At least there hasn't been any evidence other than the losing side fussing over some imaginary concoctions.

Indeed, there is a difference between cunning and intelligence. Intelligence is to do your job so that nobody gets to put the blame on you. Cunning is not to do the job and point finger at others so that you don't have to take the blame. If the flow of democracy has been disrupted, it is not because any

caretaker government or election commission has goofed up. It is because the politicians have been downright dishonest, always blaming their mistakes on others.

Thus the politicians have weakened our democracy like a virus weakens the human body. It is the politicians who have been unreliable in their reckless pursuit of partisan interests. The government sits in power and plunders the country. The opposition boycotts the parliament and does nothing more than threatening to topple the government over the next five years, its hands itching all that time to put the fingers in the pie.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

# New PM's priorities

## CLOSEUP JAPAN

Much of the speech dealt with security issues, and the prime minister was frank enough in expressing his views on the revision of the Japanese constitution and also on the country's position to exercise the right of collective self-defense. The Japanese constitution has not been revised since it was promulgated during the US occupation in 1946. The government of Japan, for quite long, has been holding the view that the constitution denies the country the right to collective self-defense. Abe touched upon this interpretation and declared that his government would conduct research to determine exactly what the constitution prohibits in the broader understanding of collective self-defense.

MONZURUL HUQ

JAPAN'S newly elected prime minister, Shinzo Abe, delivered his first speech in the Diet last Friday outlining the basic guidelines that his administration will focus on. Termed as the policy speech, it was heavily inclined towards Abe's already declared principles based on his conservative ideas that have been characterized by nationalism and a more hawkish stand on security related matters.

The prime minister stressed on a thorough overhauling of the

Japanese constitution, and also on options that would allow Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense. And, as expected, he repeated his commitment to create "a beautiful Japan" that the new Japanese leader foresees will make the country capable of devoting its full potential and energy for future growth, while preserving the values of culture, tradition, nature, and history.

As a means of creating his version of "a beautiful Japan," Abe called for an early revision of the fundamental law of education so that the future generations could be

given the opportunity to get a proper education that would help them to learn the art of loving their family, community, country and life itself. Japan's fundamental law of education has not been changed since it was enacted in 1947, and many find the ongoing rhetoric surrounding the revision as a convenient tool for conservatives to strengthen their position further in the society. The policy speech of Japan's new prime minister would, no doubt, help their cause to find a consolidated ground for the future in the form of school education.

Overtly, Abe's vision of education sounds pretty good and is bound to attract followers as it patronizes the helping of children to get the kind of education that would allow them to grow up with a proper sense of patriotism. But the danger is that it could also result in feeding the younger generations with the views of the country and history that has been endorsed by the people in power.

We know for sure where this kind of narrow idea might lead a nation to, as there is no shortage of examples in history ranging in time frame from the distant past to very recent days. But when popularity becomes the crucial deciding factor in politics, any idea capable of arousing the interest of the masses seems to have a wider appeal to those who tend to ride the wind of populism.

Abe is no exception in this regard as he failed, or just avoided, to see the danger of feeding state endorsed patriotic zeal to children.

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On the more specific issue of the revision of the constitution, Abe reaffirmed his view that Japan is in need of a new constitution that would be in line with the demands of the time. He expressed the hope that the Diet would pass legislation, without much delay, laying the ground for the work on constitutional revision to start immediately. Though the prime minister was enthusiastic in stressing upon the need for the revision of the constitution, he conspicuously refrained from mentioning what he sees as faulty or defective in the present constitution. Those keeping an eye on recent developments in Japanese politics know for sure what the prime minister sees as not being in line with the demands of the

time.

It is specifically Article 9 of the constitution that politicians, belonging to the camp that Abe now leads, consider an obstacle in making Japan a "normal country" that can take any step concerning the security of the nation without being reminded by critics that taking such steps would be a violation of the constitution. Hence, though Abe did not mention Article 9 by name, it is sure what his main target for the constitutional revision is. He also stressed the importance of security arrangements between Japan and the United States and said that the arrangement is essential for maintaining peace.

On the diplomatic front, the speech reflected the utmost desire of the new Japanese prime minister to improve ties with China and South Korea. These have been strained in recent years due to the repeated visits of the outgoing prime minister to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Abe, though refraining from saying if he would go to the shrine in coming days, termed China and South Korea as important neighbours and said that strengthening ties with them is extremely important to Asia and all

of the international community. He said it was crucial that all parties make efforts to allow for frank discussions with an orientation toward the future.

On economic and financial issues the prime minister vowed to keep the flame of reform burning without any interruption. He praised the results of the reform program of his predecessor and pointed to a number of issues, including the difficult fiscal conditions, that his administration is to deal with. He also expressed his desire to carry out plans to revitalize local-level economies and provide "second chances" to the disadvantaged aiming at minimizing the gap between rich and poor.

There was no deviation in the speech from the earlier declared pledges that the new prime minister of Japan made during the election campaign for the leadership of country's ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Those who expected to hear detailed outlines, or specific steps that the prime minister had in mind for fulfilling all the commitments that he was making, were no doubt disappointed. Expressing his immediate reaction to the speech, the acting president of the opposition

Democratic Party of Japan, Naoto Kan, termed it as ambiguous and unclear.

But at the same time there are already signs of at least a few positive moves in the international arena, as both Japan and South Korea indicated, that the leaders of the two countries are willing to restart summit level discussions as early as the first part of October. It would be the first meeting between the leaders of the two countries since Abe's predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, met President Roh Moo Hyon last November.

Abe and Roh had already spoken by telephone and they agreed that it was essential to hold a summit meeting as soon as possible. Should the idea materialize, this would no doubt give a clear signal that Abe's beginning is not as bad one as some were expecting it to be.

Monzurul Huq is a Daily Star columnist writing from Tokyo.