

A concerned nation writhes

Avoid descent to chaos

THE dialogue between the BNP and the AL ended abruptly, drawing a blank and further aggravating the ongoing political crisis, so much so that people now apprehend, or even notice, a descent into chaos and confusion. The only thing that can be heard from the leaders of the two parties is a combative language that does little to resolve the real problems.

Already, ominous signs of what may come in the days ahead, unless there is a negotiated settlement to the political impasse, are quite manifest. BNP offices in at least two localities in the city have come under attack and the party's supporters ransacked the homes of the dissident leaders who have just launched a new political party. Brawn is getting the better of brain.

The opposition is going to carry out the Dhaka siege plan today. The opposition's programme, which has all the elements of overt belligerence in it, aims to bring everything to a standstill in the city. But the point they are missing is that it is the people, not the government, who will have to bear the brunt of the siege. This cannot have anything to do with our collective good. We are aware of the opposition's frustrations and grievances, but their programmes have to be well directed and worthwhile from the public point of view.

That said, there is one silver lining in the cloud that deserves mention. The BNP decision-makers have decided to hold the party rally in front of their central office instead of the Paltan Maidan, as planned originally, thus obviating the possibility of a direct showdown.

The political leaders had hinted at some sort of understanding being reached on the thorny issues that stand in the way of holding a free and fair election and keeping the democratic process alive. But it is obvious that they could make no headway on the core issue of who will head the next caretaker government and the dialogue turned out to be an exercise in futility.

We expect, for very obvious reasons, circumspection from the two major parties which are now the arbiters of our political destiny. We urge them not to throw the country into the throes of a graver political uncertainty.

Last moment rapprochement

Scope for creative approach exists

THE much-heralded and often upbeat talks between BNP secretary-general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and his AL counterpart Abdul Jalil foundered on the rock of Justice KM Hasan's likely takeover as the chief of interim caretaker government following BNP's relinquishment of power. But on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr, in the sequel to the failure of the last round of the talks, BNP secretary-general fleetingly put forward the name of Justice Aziz because the constitution providing for a long line of options approves of last retired Appellate Division judge as a candidate. But constitutionally again, Justice Aziz cannot hold a second position of the Republic which is why his name is effectively out of circulation now.

For a time, in the category of former chief justices, Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury's name was floated on behalf of the 14-party alliance as an alternative to the last retired chief justice KM Hasan. But in-between justices Amin and Hasan, one former chief justice having died, the detractors point out that Justice Amin is not strictly 'next in line', if the letter of the constitution is to be followed, even though he is the surviving one.

We do not find this line of argument persuasive, as it is axiomatic that neither the constitution nor any law applies to the deceased. However, if BNP has any reservation about Justice Amin, this is sufficient to justify excluding him from consideration. If AL can veto Justice Hasan, then BNP should also have the same right with Justice Amin.

We believe, however, that there is a potential opening in the second line of options pertaining to last retired Appellate Division judges. Since CEC Justice Aziz's name as the last retired Appellate Division judge is unacceptable, why not look for an alternative in the next last retired Appellate Division judge? He may be acceptable to both the ruling and opposition parties.

Why not have another sitting of dialogue centred on this suggestion?

No matter what, the dialogue process must be resumed — not for its own sake but for the sake of setting the right tone and temper for handling some emergent issues. Whether it is choice of the council of advisors or fair conduct of elections, the political parties need to talk. And talk they must because if there is no peaceful resolution of the dispute, extra-constitutional alternatives could gain ground setting us back. Onus for peaceful settlement lies more on government than the opposition. The government is in a giving role here while the opposition is a recipient's. In negotiations, ruling party has to go the extra-mile. Besides, the BNP is the source of the problem. If the party had not raised the retirement age of the judges at the time it did, the entire controversy could have been avoided in the first place.

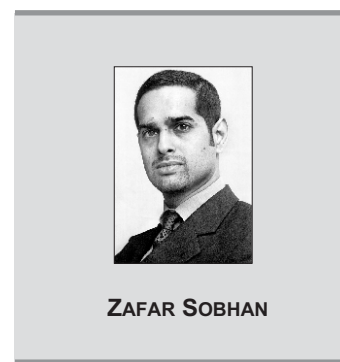
KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

It sounds like a cruel joke! When the whole country continues to be plunged into an almost infernal darkness, the prime minister tells her listeners in public meetings that if she returns to power again electric power shall be her first priority. It has taken five long years for

the prime minister to realise that power (electricity) is the prime mover of the national economy. Between the period we had Kansat, Shonir Akhra, and other mass upsurges.

Such belated realisation on the part of the chief executive of government is taken by her political adversaries and general members of the public as an indirect admis-

LDP steps into ring



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE emergence of the LDP in the political firmament of Bangladesh is one more sign that the ground seems to be slipping out from beneath the feet of the ruling BNP. There is no way that the formation of the LDP, led by one-time BNP stalwart Col Oli Ahmed and ex-president Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury, can be read as anything but bad news for the BNP.

Something of the sort was supposed to have occurred two and a half years ago in 2004 when the Bikalpa Dhara was formed. However, due to a brutal campaign of violence and intimidation, the BNP managed to keep all but a few from jumping ship then.

In addition, in early 2004, the charge-sheet against the BNP-led government did not look quite as bad as it does now, and it was possible to believe that there was time for the party to redeem itself. Today, such an argument seems markedly less convincing.

This latest offensive has been timed to perfection. Retribution against the 100-plus BNP leaders who have joined is already underway, but this will be limited by the hand-over of power to the caretaker government today, and Col Oli is on record promising "an eye for an eye" to those who would target the LDP. This is not 2004.

Furthermore, the birth of the LDP comes at a time when the BNP and AL are locked in mortal combat over the issue of who is to head the caretaker government and the election commission, in which third party opinion will be at a premium.

As such, the LDP essentially makes the AL-led opposition's argument for it. Everything that the opposition (and, indeed, the media and civil society) has been saying for the past two years with respect to corruption and misgovernance and extremism is now being seconded

STRAIGHT TALK

Can the LDP be that third party that would appeal to the disillusioned and dissatisfied who are turned off by politics as usual and looking for something new? This seems unlikely. A more realistic vision is for the LDP to resuscitate the BNP whose reputation now lies in ruins. The LDP hope is that if the more egregious offenders, such as Tarique Rahman, can be isolated and defenestrated, that the rest of the party apparatus can be salvaged. The LDP might then emerge as a re-formed (if not reformed) BNP that would essentially look something like the party, circa 1991. If not 1981.

by people from within the ruling party.

Certainly, the rebels are "disgruntled." That goes without saying. But such unhappiness does not render their critique invalid. To the contrary, the criticism has much more weight than anything the AL or even the media and civil society have been saying. The fact that the accusations are coming from a section who were until recently BNP loyalists, must come as sweet vindication for the AL.

Why?

The official line is that the LDP has been formed in protest "against corruption, injustice, terrorism, and failure." To take the LDP at its word, what the party hopes to do is to regroup under a new banner the BNP elements who have had no hand in the misdeeds of the past five years that have both tarnished the reputation of the BNP and damaged the country.

A less charitable explanation would be to suggest that Col Oli, like Dr Badruddoza before him, had found himself on the losing end of a power struggle within the party, and that the new party might be his way to regain a leading role in Bangladeshi politics.

The two explanations are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, both are true to some extent. But it must be remembered that not all of the 100-plus senior BNP leaders who have joined the LDP had been sidelined, and that even if personal ambition played some part in their calculations, this is neither surprising nor necessarily evidence of their lack of sincerity.

The crucial fact that underpins the emergence of the LDP is the belief that the BNP's reputation is

both tarnished beyond redemption and that the BNP is on its last legs.

The scale of the defection signifies that enough party members believe that the party is in precarious enough of a position that it makes sense to jump ship. Those who have joined the LDP clearly believe that the BNP can neither win a fair election nor be able to engineer a victory and hold on to power that way.

Their hope is that the public disenchantment with the BNP can be largely confined to Hawa Bhaban and the family of the prime minister, and that, like a cancer, if these elements are cut out, that the remainder of the body can be saved, in the form of the new party.

As such, though it would be overstating it to call this a split, the LDP is very much an ex-BNP party and it

will be interesting to see, going forward, whether it will appeal to anyone without a BNP background.

Short-term

The short-term impact is the most significant. The formation of the LDP is a body blow to the BNP. Right now, smack in the middle of the showdown between BNP and AL, 102 (and counting) senior BNP leaders have laid down their arms. They have not gone over to the other side, but the impact is almost as devastating.

In the coming showdown over acceptability of the caretaker and election commission chiefs, the LDP can provide crucial support to the opposition bloc, that would help cement public opinion in favour of their demands.

This also comes as a huge psychological blow to the BNP rank and



file in an environment where confidence and belief in victory are crucial. Injecting this kind of doubt at this moment in time and providing an escape route is likely to be extremely demoralizing.

Importantly, the formation of LDP gives the skeptical or the conflicted (as well as the aggrieved) a way out. Any BNP party worker will now be thinking twice, maybe three times, before deciding to put everything on the line for the party.

BNP has already pulled back from its original plan of a showdown with the AL at Paltan Maidan tomorrow, a further indication that the party high command suspects that the wind may now be blowing in the other direction.

Medium-term

In the medium-term the LDP could do serious damage to the BNP at the polls. Once the BNP has finalized its nominations, there will be potentially hundreds more "disgruntled" senior party members who could flock to the LDP.

In addition, the party could end up fielding as many as two dozen sitting MPs and has a good shot at doubling this representation in Parliament. Most importantly, the LDP has the capability of harming the BNP fatally in just about every constituency in the country. Given that over 100 seats were decided by less than 15% of the vote in 2001, the impact of the LDP on marginal seats could be immense.

Of course, even without the LDP, the BNP would have been in trouble in a free and fair election, but the LDP can throw any number of seats to the AL, and, by claiming the mantle of President Ziaur Rahman, has a good chance of making significant gains in its own right.

But it should be remembered that if we get to the stage where there is a free and fair election in which the LDP could play a decisive role, the game would already be more or less lost for the BNP, whose entire strategy has been aimed at avoiding such an eventuality.

Long-term

Much has been made of the 50% undecided voters who are disenchanted with both the BNP and the AL. Can the LDP be that third party that would appeal to the disillusioned and dissatisfied who are turned off by politics as usual and looking for something new?

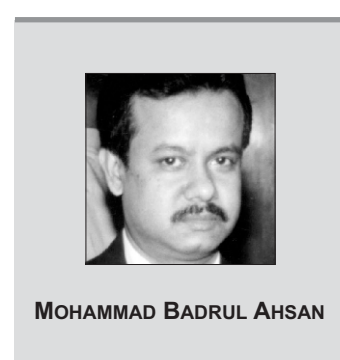
This seems unlikely. A more realistic vision is for the LDP to resuscitate the BNP whose reputation now lies in ruins. The LDP hope is that if the more egregious offenders, such as Tarique Rahman, can be isolated and defenestrated, that the rest of the party apparatus can be salvaged.

The LDP might then emerge as a re-formed (if not reformed) BNP that would essentially look something like the party, circa 1991. If not 1981. But, of course, this would have to be a BNP without what for years has been its main asset, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

Whether either Col Oli or Badruddoza have the statute within the party rank and file to unite the rump of the party behind them following such a purge, how power will be distributed between the two, and what direction the party will take in terms of ideology, all remain to be seen.

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The Bangladeshi mind



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE basic frame of mind comes from the Emersonian sense of individualism where the self is a sort of metaphysical cygnus. Like an individual anywhere in the world, each of us likes to think that everything is relevant in relation to his life. Thus self is the concentric center of an eccentric world where the gyre of affinity widens from thickness to thickness of blood. There is an apogee as there is a perigee because the world is as far from the self as the self is close to the world.

Within that interchangeability, there is a multi-layered unease within each of us, social, political, psychological, and religious, a kind of Freudian anxiety that churns our emotions into pathological storms. We are greedy and needy, hopeful and despaired, shameless and embarrassed, badly torn between conscience and convenience, between here and yonder, this life and the next world. We want to have the best of both worlds, heaven on earth and then heaven again afterwards.

That makes us like everybody

CROSS TALK

The Bangladeshi mind is trapped in the mass psychosis which works like a pyramid scheme where the politicians seek to become cult deities and the economic elites seek to become admired nobilities as the mass people wobble in the void of their mental block. What that block does to the people is a pretty scary thought. In their unthinking moments people refuse to topple their idols and they resist their own liberation.

else, except for something which sets us apart from rest of the world. From time to time, writers and scholars have depicted that peculiarity in both sardonic and serious terms. Rabindranath Tagore lamented that Mother Bengal had kept her children as Bangals, who were yet to grow up as humans. Another limerick described us as a race of strange animals which hopped on the trees, but didn't quite sport a tail.

The serious words came from an outsider though. Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote in 1840 that what the horns were to the buffalo, what the paw was to the tiger, what the sting was to the bee, what beauty, according to the old Greek song, was to women, deceit was to the Bengali. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery, were the weapons, offensive and defensive, of the people of the Lower Ganges.

The tragedy of a Bengali mind is that it could not prove Macaulay wrong in hundreds of years. Instead it got itself locked in that stereotype, culminating in the

signs of confluence in religion. Chaitanya preached Bhakti, which claimed that one could attain a near unity with Vishnu through complete surrender. Incidentally, the Sufi school of Islam embarked on a similar trend, which expounded that the surrender to Allah the eternal was the core of Islam. The Fakir tradition started viewing Kanai (Krishno) and Allah as one and the concept of the Prophet in the lap of his mother Amina ran concurrently with the Jasoda-Krishno relationship. People started worshipping pirs, dervishes, baul-goshains, and sanyasis with same reverence. Ramkrishno accepted the kalma and followed namazes five times a day. The Christians of Bengal adopted Kristho-kirtan in their churches instead of western hymns.

But that confluence soon met with new contradictions. The Bengali renaissance created a middle class which would be Bengali by birth, but European by education. The discriminatory British policies had set the tone for another contradiction. Permanent Settlement of 1793 by Lord

Cornwallis created a mainly Hindu landed class. Then in 1843 the switch from Persian to English further handicapped Muslim chances of social mobility. In their search for a new synthesis, the Bengali Muslims sought emancipation both from the grip of British colonial rulers as well as their local Hindu overlords.

At this point the universal Bengali mind split on the razor's edge of political conflict. The religious identity which was implicit now came to the foreground, putting Bengali Hindus against the Bengali Muslims. The weekly Mussalman launched by the Calcutta-based Bengali Muslim elite indicated further division in their mindset. It declared that the Indian Muslims, politically and economically, were Indians first, Muhammadans afterwards.

The creation of Pakistan favored moral over political victory, and the Bengali Muslims secured a separate homeland for themselves on the basis of religion. But that victory would prove temporary as soon as the Bengali identity resurfaced in their pride for language. This time religion receded to the background as ethnic aspirations rose to prominence.

Perhaps this is where the Emersonian frame of mind never fit the picture. The Bangladeshi mind, which splintered from the universal Bengali mind, failed to reconcile between the genetic memory of the whole and the kinetic energy of the part. If we are asking today whether we are Bangladeshis or

Bengalis, Muslims or Bengalis first, it is because our quest for identity has been a long and arduous journey from identity crisis to identity crisis. After all that hard rowing, it appears that the boat had never left the shore.

The outcome is a mental block. The Bangladeshi mind is trapped in the mass psychosis which works like a pyramid scheme where the politicians seek to become cult deities and the economic elites seek to become admired nobilities as the mass people wobble in the void of their mental block. What that block does to the people is a pretty scary thought. In their unthinking moments people refuse to topple their idols and they resist their own liberation.

In 1957, CG Jung wrote in The Undiscovered that resistance to the organized mass could be effected only by the man who was as well organized in his individuality as the mass itself. In the Bangladeshi mind that remains the ultimate contradiction. The individual doesn't make the mass, but the mass makes the individual.

Is there anybody who can break this cycle?

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Celebrating achievement where failure outweighs success

There were as many as 32 broad items comprising over one hundred specific areas on the agenda of 4-party alliance incorporated in their election manifesto of 2001. BNP promised to augment power generation capacity and improvement of supplies. In practice, however, the majority population of the country is now compelled to pass most of their nights in dark, and their days are having terribly frequent snaps in power supply.

very temporary incident attributed to sudden mechanical failure and overloads at some points. It was just not allowed to escalate. Politicians here are used to making such pre-election promises which cannot be of any positive consequence.

At least, BNP stalwart Col (ret) Oli Ahmed didn't believe that the party leadership would be able to fulfill its promise, inter alia, on power generation. He too observed that this had been on the election manifesto in 2001 but nothing tangible has been done in this sector over the past five years. He ascribes this major failure to the colossal state of corruption among the ministers and others. Without specific mention of any name he asserts that many of them had nothing to thrive upon before inducted in the cabinet. Now he

sees them with swollen necks sustaining their livelihood on mostly unearned income. Col (ret) Oli set a date line by which the Prime Minister would have to remove the corrupt ministers from her cabinet, else, he would be no longer with BNP.

The situation in the power sector has rapidly turned out to be terrible. Mass upsurge at Shonir Ankhra is again in the offing. Other areas/wards of the city including the old part are also raging in frenzy; rampage of motor vehicles, road side shops and establishments have already been there. Battle in the streets with the law enforcing agencies has been mounting.

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their election manifesto of 2001. BNP promised to augment power generation capacity and improvement of supplies. In practice, however, the majority population of the country is now compelled to pass most of their nights in dark, and their days are having terribly frequent snaps in power supply. Even in the holy month of Ramadan the situation remained almost unchanged. In spite of the drum-beating to celebrate completion of its 5-year term, the successes achieved so far are far outweighed by the magnitude of the failures.

Unbridled escalation of prices of essential commodities, glaring failure to solve problems related to power generation, failure to contain corruption now reaching all time high, more importantly, failure to separate the Judiciary from the

Executive due to indecision, inability to form the much desired Human Rights Commission etc. can be cited as examples to discredit the present government. Unfortunately for every citizen of the country these and many more important areas couldn't receive the authorities' time and honest attention over the past five years. On the contrary, the men and women responsible for taking care of the stipulated areas devoted their time and energy on state rhetoric against the Opposition in public meetings pursuing concurrently their respective designs to be richer overnight as Col (ret) Oli Ahmed pointed out.

Now, about the dialogue on the reform proposals of AL-led 14-party alliance. This resembles a mockery.

Time and again Mr Abdul

Mannan Bhuiyan and Mr Abdul Jalil sat in the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. Their press briefings were mere repetition of their previous parley. Both confirmed, without being specific, that there had been some progress on quite a good number of items.

But, ultimately they failed to reach any agreement. How can they if they can't budge a bit from their respective stances. And it was a foregone conclusion. But the point is, whom they befooled and why?

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