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PHOTOS: AFP

Democracy on the brink

For a few days I thought that we had lost it. Having gone through such a hard struggle to earn man's greatest freedom, it was simply appalling to see us push it back to the brink!

Anyone, including myself, seeing the pictures on our TV screens of the Awami League, the BNP and of course Jamaat waging war against one another, would have been convinced that some one should intervene and at least save the nation from destruction. I feel the major political parties are simply too immature to run the country. First, we have the BNP, with its mischievous scheme to manipulate the neutrality of the caretaker government and the elections. Then we have the Awami League trying to flex its muscles. Then we have that so-called Islamic party Jamaat claiming that all the dead belonged to them. How inhuman!

I don't know whether we'll again go back to that tormenting situation but if we do it'll be the biggest disaster this country has ever faced. It is time for a more mature, honest and liberal set of leaders to pilot Bangladesh through these troubling times and into the future. Let us not kill democracy, let's cherish it. Let us not behave with immaturity; let's behave with maturity. We the people deserve democracy as our fundamental right.

Umran Chowdhury
Gulshan 2, Dhaka

I would request the chiefs of the major political parties of Bangladesh, not to use the word "people" in their speeches. If we look into their speech, and put the respective parties' names instead of the word "people" one can realise, what actually they mean. To the two ladies, please do not think that "people" only belong to your party. The majority is neutral and it is you two, who try to control these general people with your activities.

That day is not far away when both of you and your party men will pay for your deeds and perhaps then you will get a proper treat for playing with the peace-loving people of Bangladesh.

Saidul Alam
On e-mail

Sheikh Hasina met with the president and also the chief of the caretaker government Professor Yajuddin Ahmed and gave him a list of 11 tasks. She urged him to stop functioning of all private TV channels set up during the last five years. Why does she have such a grudge against the recently set up television channels? May be because these channels are showing how brutally AL activ-

ists behaved during the clashes of the last few days. The true face of the AL has been unmasked.

The whole nation was shocked when they saw after beating some Jamaat activists to death AL cadres were hitting them again and again to make sure they were actually dead. The savageness of AL activities remind us of the misdeeds of the AL during its tenure.

We have seen it from the previous election that the caretaker government is neutral to AL if it listens to all that AL says. So there is little possibility that AL will finally accept the president as the caretaker chief.

Robin, On e-mail

The argument that impartiality and neutrality are just gimmicks or utopian concepts does not justify the unruly scenes being created in Bangladesh following the appointment of a caretaker government to ensure free and fair elections to parliament. It is most unfortunate that the present government failed to ensure the acceptability by the opposition of the choice of the person to head the government before announcing the name. Now with the rejection of the post by Justice Hasan himself the resultant turmoil looked ridiculous. The only country in South Asia, perhaps, relatively free from chaotic politics for some time, Bangladesh, has also fallen disgracefully.

Dr. Abdul Ruff Colachal
Jawaharlal Nehru University
India

I am writing regarding the incidents that happened in the streets of Dhaka on 28/29 October. It is obvious that people have different opinions, ideologies but in the name of democracy what we have done in our streets is disgraceful. Were not the victims Bangladeshis, were not they born in Bangladesh?

The media could have played a very effective role to prevent this, but it didn't.

H Rahman, On e-mail

So far I was living with an understanding that some dead people can guide our political course to a great extent. They can even divide the entire nation in two distinct halves. After having felt frustrated for over three decades, now I have learnt to live with it and so have the people of Bangladesh, I guess.

Now I have to live with another frustrating phenomenon, that is, dead people can affect our day-to-day constitution also! Yes, that is what our Attorney General wants us to believe and live with!

If late Justice Mainur Reza Chowdhury (May Allah rest his soul in peace) had known that in death, he doesn't take his body into grave only but takes an Article of the sacred Constitution of Bangladesh along with him; I'm sure as a patriotic and prudent Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, as he indeed was, he would have given a 'suomoto' ruling detaching this Article of the constitution from his dead body, prior to his retirement.

Yes readers, you got me right, I am talking about Article 58C, (3): "The President shall appoint as Chief Adviser the person who among the retired chief justices of Bangladesh retired last and who is qualified to be appointed as an adviser under this article." Provided that if such retired Chief Justice is not available, or is not willing to hold the office of the Chief Adviser, the President shall appoint as Chief Adviser the person who among the retired Judges of the Appellate Division retired last, and who is qualified to be appointed as an Adviser under this article."

Let us look at clause (4): "If no retired Chief Justice is available or willing to hold the office of the Chief Adviser, the President shall appoint as Chief Adviser the person who among the retired Judges of the Appellate Division retired next before the last retired Chief Justice."

I'm no expert on the constitution but I do understand plain and simple English language. The opening sentence of clause (4) dispels all misunderstandings about retired CJs when it says, "If no retired Chief Justice is available or is not willing to hold office of the Chief Adviser..." This leaves nobody with any option, let alone AG, to discard any available, willing and qualified retired CJ, of whom we did have one, but unfortunately ignored!

Waliul Haque Khondker
On e-mail

I believe the AL's eleven-point demand placed before the head of the caretaker government to fulfill by 3rd November 2006 was unrealistic. It was humanly not possible for anyone to fulfill all those conditions in such a short span of time. It was rather an absurd proposition.

The MAIN constitutional task before the caretaker govern-

ment is to hold a free and fair election conducted in an impartial manner. It is, therefore, their duty and responsibility to provide necessary infrastructure in those respects which are, a) Reforming the Election Commission, b) Correction of voter list, and c) Setting up an impartial and non partisan administration to hold the election. Let the caretaker government concentrate on those extremely important issues for holding a free and fair election. Therefore, AL should put forward and press for implementation of those three demands within a given date.

Other issues raised by the AL although quite relevant should be left to the next government to handle. The AL can go to the voters with those agenda, particularly on corruption issue, as a tool for wooing the voters to vote in their favour.

Burdening the caretaker government with so many issues which can wait, will be quite unwise at this stage. Inability to fulfill those conditions may lead to confrontation between the AL and the caretaker government, which at this stage is totally undesirable and should be avoided by all quarters at all costs. We only hope good sense will prevail among the leaders to avoid any more turmoil in the country. Further chaos is bound to harm the democratic process in the country which is already threatened.

MA Hoque
On e-mail

Did the nation want the president to take charge of the agitation advisor to the caretaker government? The answer is 'no'. Actually the post of president in Bangladesh has been a titular one and virtually he has no powers. But as the president he could do something when the country was undergoing a tumultuous and turbulent political situation. Without doing that he took oath as the chief of the caretaker government.

Bazlur Rahman
On e-mail

We are surprised, is it the democracy we are looking for? On the first day of the agitation, one person was hit from behind on his neck and the rest was done by others. They were not happy with that, rather they continued the brutal attack on the dead bodies.

The politicians should think over the gruesome incidents that have further blurred the image of the parties.

Dr. Waliul Islam
Uttara, Dhaka

Having observed the events of

the last 15-plus years, it is abundantly clear to me that democracy and the country itself are being held hostage by the two leaders of the main political parties. They put their personal vendetta and animosity above the greater interest of the country. Just look at their behaviour during last month's crucial dialogue. Both of them were outside the country during a very critical phase of the dialogue - displaying utter indifference to the welfare of the nation. They talk about democracy. But if they lose an election, they do not accept the results and resort to destructive politics causing immense suffering to ordinary citizens.

Unless these two ladies are removed from the political helm, there is not much hope for democracy in Bangladesh. Let us implore them: if you truly love our country, please retire from politics and let the country and democracy flourish.

Dr. Abu Syed
USA

It was a nightmare, it seemed that hell broke loose all over the country as Awami League activists took to the streets with sticks and oars when power

was set to be handed over to the caretaker government and the BNP-AL dialogue failed. They set fire to vehicles and damaged buildings and beat people to death, the clash between BNP and Awami league resulted in the loss of 30 lives and injured thousands of people. Citizens' sufferings knew no bounds due to the blockade enforced by Awami League, thousands of people became stranded, those who ventured to reach their destinations had to pass through an unimaginable ordeal.

When president Iajuddin Ahmed was taking oath as the chief advisor to the caretaker govt. we braced ourselves for fresh violence and prayed to the almighty Allah to save us and He responded to our prayers. The opposition political parties led by Awami League accepted the caretaker chief and we thank Sheikh Hasina for this decision.

As the chief of caretaker government the president has great responsibility, the whole country is looking up to him and we hope and trust that he will not disappoint us, act wisely, perform his duties in such a way that no one will be able to find any fault with his actions. We wish him all the best.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Even after 35 years we have yet to decide upon an electoral process equally acceptable to all

parties concerned. We have political leaders fighting like vultures looking for scraps of state power in their quest for corrupt and inefficient governance. It is a shame we could not agree on a single person for the post of the chief advisor. Seems like the blood of our freedom fighters all went in vain just because these pathetic politicians are unable to display any iota of statesmanship.

Javed Iqbal
NYC, USA

In his article "The deepening crisis" on 31 Oct 2006, Mr. Abdul Bayes said that the Awami League and its allies have gained a moral victory by mobilizing the people against the government led by 14-party alliance. Surely AL and its allies were able to give enough reasons to make KM Hasan refuse to become the caretaker chief.

In their quest for power, opposition parties have imprisoned people by blocking streets, destroying public property and of course killing people. In this case, I really don't see the connection between taking a country hostage and mobilising people. If the 14-party alliance really wanted to gain a moral upper ground they could have requested the people to stay away from supporting the government. Enforcing blockade is not a request. It is a violation of human rights. You cannot fight injustice by doing injustice yourself. Unfortunately, our political leaders intentionally avoid this point. I agree with Mr. Bayes regarding the role of the government, but I really feel Mr. Bayes has taken a wrong view regarding our opposition parties.

During the last five years, our political parties have made two records, the widespread corruption by the ruling parties and the naked destruction of public property and disregard of constitution by the opposition parties through hartals and blockades. If any party wishes to win the next election fairly, they have to take a u-turn from the politics of violence.

SMAH
On e-mail

Power supply during Eid

Your city correspondent's write up (Oct 30) on the subject is not fully accurate. We the residents of Gulshan 1, behind the Gulshan Market, had power cutoff on 30th Ramadan, in the morning on Eid Day, in the afternoon and late evening after Eid Day. "The whole city virtually experienced neither power failures, nor gas or water shortages over the past six days"; as stated is an over-optimistic assessment, even if qualified by the word, "Virtually"

To sum up, power wise we have dug our own grave; thanks to our greedy and unprincipled politicians. Now we have to lie in the grave we dug for ourselves!

S. A. Mansoor

Gulshan, Dhaka

Dealing with North Korea

I am writing with reference to: "North Korea: Seeking symbolic security," by Muhammad Zamir (Oct. 21)

Before its collapse, the Soviet Union was a military superpower in every sense of the term. In fact, the Soviet nuclear stockpiles were far larger than those of the United States. And yet it collapsed without any military showdown with America. Revolt in the Soviet bloc countries combined with domestic unrest over economy triggered the collapse.

Similarly, North Korea is likely to collapse from a number of factors. North Korea is facing a food shortage of massive proportions and it is entirely dependent on China for its survival. China has been providing most food and other basic necessities to its communist neighbour. However, China has embraced capitalism and other capitalist countries like Japan, the US, South Korea and EU are China's main trading partners. As such, China has little interest to allow North Korea to destabilise its strong economic relations with these countries. China is likely to tighten its economic assistance to North Korea and such action will have far reaching consequences.

Any reduction in the Chinese aid will have devastating consequences in North Korea and we might see a mass exodus of refugees fleeing to China. Whether China likes it or not, it cannot send these refugees back to North Korea for humanitarian reasons. Once starving North Koreans start fleeing, the regime might collapse in no time. The collapse may come much earlier if the North Korean military refuses to fire at its own people. Remember the Soviet Union collapsed when the Red Army refused to fire at the protestors in the Red Square. In fact, North Korea might collapse far more quickly given the precarious economic situation inside the country, the public anger might explode suddenly.

The world must prepare for such an eventuality and make preparations to provide food and shelter to the North Korean masses when they decide to move. Nuclear weapons may be the last straw of the North Korean regime to intimidate its own people, but it might prove ineffective when the starving people realise that they have nothing to lose but their misery by

defying the regime.

The Americans policymakers are notoriously shortsighted and they cannot see the writing on the wall even when it is clear. They failed to see the coming collapse of the Soviet Union even though the Soviet regime was facing an economic and political catastrophe before its collapse. Similarly, they cannot see the coming collapse of North Korea even though the signs are obvious. But China cannot ignore the reality because it will be affected by the collapse of a neighbouring country.

Ambassador Zamir writes: "DPRK needs to be re-assured that they are not going to be invaded and that there is no plan for regime change. It is also important that the Six-Party talks are re-convened as soon as possible. Let there also be strict sanctions at the same time to ensure that the carrot and stick formula works."

But there may be no DPRK when the dust settles. Remember, West Germany was negotiating with East Germany (German Democratic Republic) when East Germans were fleeing to Hungary after it opened its borders before the Berlin Wall fell and GDR disappeared from the map of Europe. The biggest threat to DPRK comes from its own people and not from any impending American invasion. After the debacle in Iraq, the only invasion the Americans are interested in is to invade the House of Representatives and chase the incumbents out.

Mahmood Elahi
Ottawa, Canada

November 7, 1975

What happened on November 7, 1975? We need the historical record on that day straightened out. What actually happened? Who did what to whom and why? From my own research I can tell you, in a nutshell, that there was an uprising of the ordinary soldiers incited by and planned by the Gano Bahini led by Lt Col (Rtd) Taher, a valiant freedom fighter who lost one of his legs in the liberation war.

This uprising was being planned for quite some time and was not an instant reaction to the failed coup of Brigadier Khaled Musharraf, Chief of General Staff (another war hero) of November 3, 1975. Maj Gen Zia, a valiant freedom fighter and the then Chief of Army Staff, did not want to be part of the 3rd November coup and was asked to stay put in his official quarters, a veritable house arrest. It is the members of Gano Bahini which included younger brothers of Col Taher who went to Gen Zia's house to release him.

Ironically, a year later Col Taher was found guilty by a military court for attempting to overthrow the legitimate government of Bangladesh which involved a subsequent coup plot and was sent to the gallows. To celebrate 7/11 as a revolution day minus the memories of Lt. Col (Rtd) Taher is at best a travesty, and at worst, a chapter in the sad history of Bangladesh where facts and truths are buried under myth and falsehood. But what can I say -- we also celebrate our national days (Independence Day, Victory Day) without featuring Bangabandhu!

Habibul Haque Khondker, Ph.D.
On e-mail

Where is ethics today?

We already have been informed by the national dailies that former dictator Ershad is going to join BNP-led four party alliance with a vow to contesting in the upcoming general elections.

Again we can see that there is no ethics in Bangladeshi politics. Supporters and activists of the BNP always claim that their leader was "uncompromising" in the 9-year long movement against Ershad to establish democracy in Bangladesh. We want to know how they are feeling now with the so-called "uncompromising" image! This is very ridiculous.

We are also hearing that Ershad will be president if the four-party alliance goes to power again! This will be very unfortunate for the nation as a whole.

Asif Iqbal, Kazipara, Mirpur, Dhaka



Some questions



We are watching leading lawyers and media denouncing the president for a minor (if any) constitutional violation. But what about the constitutional right of 24 innocent people who got killed during the irresponsible agitation? Do the media, particularly print media, and so-called intellectuals see that those innocent people had the constitutional right to live in this world? Are these lives less important than the minor violation of president's decision to appoint himself as chief of caretaker government? I ask this question to Dr. Kamal Hossain, whom we know as a man of principle.

Why doesn't he speak out

for the constitutional right of those people who wanted to live in this world? Editors of much respected dailies are surprisingly silent about the deaths of these people. May I ask another question to Dr. Kamal Hossain? You and Amirul Islam interpreted that Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury is the right person for the chief of caretaker government but former Justice Naimuddin Ahmed and the former attorney general refuted that assertion. In that circumstances, president sought dictation from attorney general's office, which contradicts your opinion. Besides, BNP and other parties don't like Mahmudul Amin

Chowdhury. So what was the president's option? Are you telling that despite the opposition from BNP and others, president should have invited Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury to form the caretaker government? I regard you as a 'man of letters' and I respect your opinion that Mahmudul Amin should have been the chief of caretaker government.

The president violated the constitution. But this minor violation was nothing compared to the basic right of those 24 people to live. How do you respond?

Shohel R Jewel, New York, USA