

Second day of blockade

Police atrocities trigger violence

THE second day of the countrywide blockade, enforced by the 14-party alliance, saw violence in many places in the city and at least one AL activist was knocked to death near Hotel Sonargaon by a police van. At least 50 people were injured in Dhaka and Narayanganj as police resorted to indiscriminate baton charging and lobbying teargas shells.

The political situation, which never looked like changing for the better in the last two weeks, has worsened further after the daylong clashes. We again witnessed excesses committed by the police on fellow human beings on a scale not permissible in a civilised setting.

There is every reason for people to feel greatly worried. The threat of law and order collapsing is a genuine one as the 4-party alliance has announced that it will also enter the fray. Only the sufferers know what it could mean in a volatile political situation. We appeal to the leaders of the political parties to refrain from pushing the country towards civil disorder that will serve nobody's purpose and only bring further miseries to the people in general. Whatever they do must be non-violent.

The caretaker government has done well to constitute a committee with four of its advisors to negotiate with the major political parties. The objectives are to end the political stalemate and move forward the electoral process. The parties, for their part, have to rely on negotiations to find a way out, rather than challenging each other in a provocative language. However, the government has to rein in the law enforcers who are pouncing on political demonstrations, even when the situation doesn't call for such action. The neutrality of the government must be fully reflected in its law enforcing mechanism -- regardless of which party or individual it is dealing with. And, of course, the government cannot ignore the logical demands of the AL-led alliance, like removal of the CEC and reconstituting the Election Commission.

However, an indefinite blockade is something that the country cannot bear with. It is a self-destructive political weapon, which the 14-party alliance cannot use for a long time without causing great dislocation to almost everything. A saner course would be to negotiate with the caretaker government immediately and try to reach an understanding on the core issues.

Economy under great strain

Exempt the core export sectors from siege

IT is very distressing to see all the land and seaports brought to a complete standstill over the last two days as a part of the 14-party alliance indefinite siege programme. It has serious damaging potential for our economy, some of which are already visible, like rise in prices of essentials.

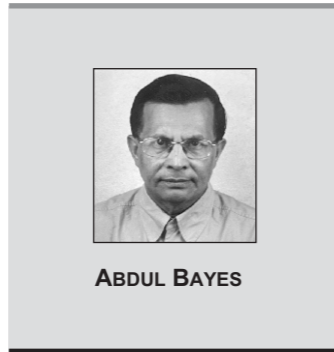
We often wonder whether those that seek solutions to political impasse ever think of the country's well being when observing various programmes in support of their demands. It has been our stand all along that political parties have the right to ventilate their grievances and indeed can place their demands in any manner they feel appropriate short of resorting to violence and without causing distress to the common man or causing harm in any manner to the interest of the state.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that thousands of crores of taka are being lost in exports, apart from the huge related ancillary costs of the land and seaports. Whose interest does it serve to strangle the economy of the country? Those parties agitating today for their demands tend to overlook the fact that if and when they come to power it is the damage to the economy caused by their programmes that they will be most hard put to recover.

The biggest harm is being done to our garment industry that is losing as much as two hundred crores taka a day in lost exports and an equal amount in production costs. But there is more to it than our concern for today's loss. What we tend to overlook is the trickle down effect. Lost exports mean lost future orders i.e. lost markets. And in this very competitive international RMG market lost markets may take long to recover if at all. Coming, as the disruption does not long after the RMG sector was almost destroyed by the fiercest upheaval, the future of it seems very bleak.

The 14-party alliance has exempted many essential services from the ambit of their programme. It is our demand that the alliance exempt the major ports considering the dire straits that its closure has put our RMG exports to, and remove blockades of all land and seaports considering the distress of the public.

Let democracy not be denied



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Suppose the chairman of the PSC (constitutional post) is alleged to have leaked out questions, or is involved in illegal money earning business, would his removal be rejected on the plea that it is a constitutional post? As far as MA Aziz is concerned, the High Court has declared his actions illegal, allegations by the finance ministry about misuse of money in preparing the voter list are on the table, and, last but not the least, he lied to the nation about his meeting with an advisor. Should he be spared for all these wrong-doings just because he happens to hold a constitutional post?

FIFTEEN days is almost one-sixth of the total stipulated tenure for a caretaker government (CTG) that has a life of 90 days, as set by the constitution. A priori, thus, one would expect that, for holding a free, fair, and neutral election, the CTG would work day and night from the very outset.

The past CTGs provide us with the lesson that an administrative overhauling is done overnight to dent the arranged hierarchy left by the immediate past government. The Election Commission (EC) comes next, with removal of hurdles, if any, to ensure a neutral election. But unfortunately, the current CTG seems to be locked in controversy -- mostly generated by its own words and deeds -- and, seemingly with little will for providing a level playing field for all.

There is another disgraceful development, compared to the past, that also should be noted. That is, the CTG seems to be a one-man show, with the chief heavily dependent on the politically patronized secretaries of -- and allegedly tilted towards -- the past government, with the advisers assuming the status of showpieces.

Despite the debate as to

whether the assumption of the office of chief of the CTG by the hon'ble president of the country was constitutional or not, people, in general, expected that President Izzuddin Ahmed would negate the alleged speculations about his potential partisan role through a display of neutrality in running the administration and in ensuring a level playing field for all parties in the coming general election.

If we point to the opinion polls, as reflected by the random interviews by the private TV channels (even though most of them are owned by the ministers and MPs of the outgoing government), we find that there is reason for frustration. Whereas a neutral beginning could create an image of the CTG chief as a neutral person, an absence of that has pitifully thrown the country into a confrontational quagmire.

We can cite few examples to substantiate our apprehension. First, the CTG chief is being fenced in by a hand-full of civil servants who were benefited during the tenure of the erstwhile government. Allegedly, deputy secretaries of 2001 have been promoted to secretary level during

the rule of the previous government. Many efficient officers were left out, whereas inefficient and politically aligned ones were promoted. Quietly, these groups of civil servants are going to manage a so-called "free," if not "fair," election for their masters.

To stretch the matter, further important positions, where contractual appointees are placed, have not been done away with so far, whereas it needs a mere stroke of pen for the CTG to throw out the political appointees. Meantime, to be specific, vice-chancellors and other heads of institutions loyal to the past government have been hurriedly recruiting people under the cover of the caretaker government. Appointment rules are being flouted, whereas, in the past, we observed that any government coming to power immediately halted such recruitments to take stock of things. The finance adviser has yet to work on this issue, although he has been harping on expenditure reducing policies of the caretaker government.

Second comes the EC. Barring the few bracketed as BNP supporters, the common people, intellectuals, and even foreign observers

tend to believe that a neutral election is not possible under MA Aziz et al, and with the voter list that they manufactured. Let us turn to some opinion polls, as reflected by the random views of the common citizens, shown by private TV channels: 80-90 percent think that the EC should be overhauled for holding a free, fair, and neutral election.

The argument that there is no time to overhaul the EC and rectify the voter list, due to the constitutionally set time constraint, clearly shows that time has been (and is being) killed so as to use this argument as a pretext. There are a few of the BNP-backed beneficiaries who argue that an election is a must for constitutional continuity. While we agree with the last point, we beg to differ on the first point.

"Any election" should not be entertained, "any-which-way." That we want an examination to be held does not imply that the examination should take place, no matter whether the question papers were leaked out or not, or whether the examinees took recourse to copying in the examination hall or not. "Any election" and "any-which-way" cannot be a constitutional mandate. In the same

breath, however, we also reckon that, even with the time available now, an earnest EC could perform the tasks properly in due time.

Again, the argument that a person holding a constitutional post cannot be removed by the government does not appear to us to be sensible. Suppose the chairman of the PSC (constitutional post) is alleged to have leaked out questions, or is involved in illegal money earning business, would his removal be rejected on the plea that it is a constitutional post? As far as MA Aziz is concerned, the High Court has declared his actions illegal, allegations by the finance ministry about misuse of money in preparing the voter list are on the table, and, last but not the least, he lied to the nation about his meeting with an advisor.

Should he be spared for all these wrong-doings just because he happens to hold a constitutional post? However, the present government has so far initiated no steps to overhaul the EC. It appears that, to the present government, the EC, and all administrative networks set by the earlier government, can hold a free and fair election. But we strongly feel that such arrangements would help "any election" to be held "any-which-way," but not a free, fair, and neutral election that the nation expects. It would mean a repetition of the February 1996 general election.

Third, the only output visible so far from the CTG is some "debates" and "confusions" generated from Bangabhaban. That criticizing the presidential staff amounts to interference in the president's activities is anything but sensible. The servants of the republic are subject to severe

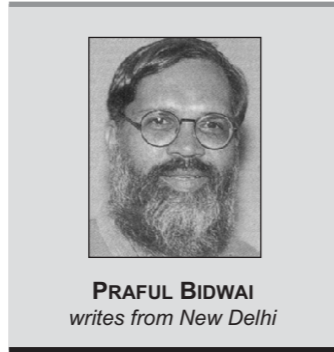
scrutiny by the public, every moment. Again, under a CTG, the advisers are the main actors, not the secretaries. Confusion also loomed large over the visit of two advisers to Shudha Sadan. The smoke could be cleared by a note from the Bangabhaban.

It is very sad that the operation of the CG was made controversial from the very beginning. First, by attempting to install a party man as the chief of the CG, and second, the assumption of the post by the president himself, without exhausting all options in a transparent manner.

We still hope against hope. We fervently appeal to the CTG chief to come out of the alleged non-neutral domain and pave the way for a free, fair, and neutral election. The CTG will be responsible for any constitutional crisis. There is still time to plug the holes, though that may require redistribution of portfolios among the advisers or appointment of a CTG chief in line with the constitution. Any further delay might deny democracy in the country.

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Muslims, the new underclass



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

Many in India practise such denial and blame Muslim backwardness upon the community's traditional religious leadership. This argument is specious. The discrimination experienced by this excluded minority is traceable to the failure of society and the state to redress structural imbalances. India's constitution-makers didn't idly blame the Dalits' leaders for that community's status. Rather, they enacted reservations for Dalits.

Muslims today are even more disadvantaged than Dalits.

Census data shows that Muslims have lower work participation rates (48 and 9.6 percent for males and females) than Dalits (respectively 52.8 and 23 percent). They are likelier than Dalits to live without electricity or piped water and in kutcha houses.

Muslims are also less likely to use the Public Distribution System for food-grains (21.8 percent) than Dalits (32.1) or vaccinate their children (40 percent) than Dalits (47).

Muslims are marginally better off than Dalits in income and landholding. Yet, 43 percent of them live in poverty. Even this "advantage" is negated by their abysmal educational status.

Only 80 percent of urban Muslim boys are enrolled in schools, compared to 90 percent of Dalits. Just 68 percent of rural Muslim girls are at school, compared to 72 percent of Dalit girls. The gap has widened over the years. In 1965, urban Muslim girls (52 percent enrolment) were better off than Dalits (40 percent).

Muslims' deprivation is regionally concentrated because 60 percent of them live in six states: Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Maharashtra, and Kerala. Besides, there's growing ghettoization of Muslims in both urban and rural areas.

Discrimination against Muslims is starkly visible in government jobs. Data from 12 states, where the Muslims' population share is 15.4 percent, shows that they hold just 5.7 percent of government jobs.

In large states like UP, Maharashtra, Bihar and West Bengal, this proportion is less than a third of their share in the population.

In Kerala, 10.4 percent of state employees are Muslim, but their population share is 24.7 percent.

In West Bengal, despite the Left Front's three decades in power, the share of Muslims in government employment is an abysmal 4.2 percent -- a fraction of their population share (25.2 percent). This shows how deep and pervasive is the Muslims' exclusion and under-representation.

This extends to the judiciary too. Barring Andhra, Muslims have a much lower profile in

judicial services than their population share.

Muslims are shut out of elite cadres like the IAS, IPS, and IFS, where their percentages are respectively 2.2, 3.0, and 1.6. In the armed forces, their proportion is believed to be just 2 percent. Recently, the military refused to confirm this -- a case of ostrich-like denial.

Worse, Muslims are altogether excluded from "sensitive" intelligence agencies, especially the Research & Analysis Wing, and VVIP protection forces. Their presence in paramilitary forces is one to 5 percent.

However, Muslims are over-represented in prisons. In Maharashtra, they account for 10.6 percent of the population, but for 40.6 percent of prisoners. In Delhi, the respective ratios are 11.7 and 27.9, Gujarat 9.1 and 25.1, and Tamil Nadu 5.6 and 9.6.

Anti-Muslim discrimination has recently intensified because of the government's "counter-terrorism" strategy and application of discriminatory measures to Muslims. At this rate, the number of Indian Muslims in prison will soon exceed their number in universities -- like blacks in the

US.

Muslims are also severely under-represented in politics. In relation to their population share, only half as many Muslims get elected as legislators. Cumulatively, there have been only 11 Muslim women Lok Sabha MPs since independence. This amounts to systematic exclusion and institutionalised prejudice analogous to what the ethnic minorities in the West face. There is one difference, though. Many Western societies years ago stopped denying the fact of institutionalised prejudice.

Many in India practise such denial and blame Muslim backwardness upon the community's traditional religious leadership. This argument is specious. The discrimination experienced by this excluded minority is traceable to the failure of society and the state to redress structural imbalances.

India's constitution-makers didn't idly blame the Dalits' leaders for that community's status. Rather, they enacted reservations for Dalits.

Muslim religious leaders, especially those cultivated by political parties, are no more backward than Hindu, Christian and Sikh leaders. It's absurd to presume that they control Muslims or perpetuate their deprivation.

Indian society must urgently take affirmative action (AA) in favour of Muslims -- as it did for other disadvantaged groups including Dalits and OBCs.

Many Muslims are uncomfortable with job and political reservations from the bitter colonial experience of communal reservations, or a likely Hindu backlash today. But some things are eminently do-able: establishing greater access for Muslim girls to education, improving public services, and recruiting more Muslims in government jobs.

OBC Muslims must be included in the overall OBC jobs quota of 27 percent. And 15 percent of Plan expenditure must be set aside for the religious minorities, who constitute 18.4 percent of the population.

Apparently, Prime Minister Singh is keen on this and on setting up more schools in Muslim-majority areas.

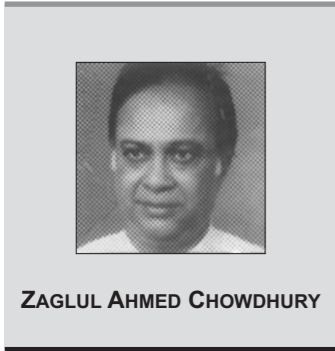
There are, logically, two parts to a strong AA program: ending exclusion, and promoting empowerment. The 15 percent "special component" plan could help address empowerment issues.

But addressing exclusion will need bold AA, including aggressive recruitment of Muslims to "sensitive" police and intelligence agencies.

India simply cannot afford Muslim alienation. Dr Singh must evolve a consensus on AA through an all-party meeting endorsed by the National Integration Council. Eventually, India's success as a democracy will hinge on pluralism.

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In the spotlight



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

After all, Bangladesh can ill-afford such an impasse for long and a way out has to be found soon. Much time has already been lost while people seem to be beginning to believe as if the sordid situation is a fait accompli. This condition notwithstanding, we cannot resign to fate, as the nation has to go ahead. But healthy signs are still not discernible. Will the main players show some sense? Can we look for something bright and not be mired in deep frustration and despondency? We can only hope for the best.

this achievement after the attainment of the much-cherished independence in 1971.

The people tasted something which many of us still feel is like a dream. Nobel Prize for a person and institution in Bangladesh! We are simply on top of the world. Even those who probably hardly knew about Bangladesh came to know of it with a sense of respect.

Currently Bangladesh is also in the headlines particularly in the sports arena in the foreign media because of the visit of French football legend Zinedine Zidane, who chose to visit this

country for a noble cause, with which once again Professor Yunus and his organizations are associated. All these made us really proud. The avalanche of joy was only expected and our pride knew no bounds.

Bangladesh is now also very much under discussion in the outside world for another reason, and unfortunately, it is not something for which we can boast of or draw satisfaction. A deepening political crisis continues to haunt the nation. The political stalemate that persists has not come as a surprise, as all the indications were discernible that the country was some-

what inexorably moving towards a political stand-off.

Nevertheless, people wanted to see the political leadership resolve the problems, thereby facilitating a fair and meaningful election. This has not come off in the manner they expected. Confrontational politics has become the order of the day, where obstinacy and intransigence seem to play the bigger part. People are now keeping their fingers crossed about the shape of things to come in the future, hoping against hope.

South Asia mostly attracts global attention for negative developments like belligerence

between the two arch-rivals India and Pakistan. Any peace initiative aimed at improving their ties also creates interest and curiosity, but not as much as the hostility and conflict do.

This situation notwithstanding, the two South Asian rivals remain at the center-stage of regional political landscape for obvious reasons. Two other smaller countries -- Nepal and Sri Lanka -- are also very much in the international focus for sometime past for their domestic problems.

While good news is there from the Himalayan country in the shape of progress in the complex talks between the democratic government and the radical leftist Maoists on their differences about the future shape of the country following their success in ending absolute power of the king, the message from the Indian island state of Sri Lanka is not that refreshing.

The vexed dialogue in Geneva, resumed after a long gap, failed to produce expected result, although the government

and the Tamil rebels agreed to honour the ceasefire that exists only on paper. There has been no cessation of hostilities and reports say both sides may swing into bigger conflagration. Mediators are still struggling to broker a peace between the two sides despite the fact that the task is proving a Herculean one. Leadership of two contending sides are seen as more concerned with their respective strategy and fear of "loss of face" in the civil war than the need for peace and harmony in the country, which appears bleeding to white because of the fratricidal conflict.

Meanwhile, discussions, speculations, and debates in the South Asian scenario are revolving around Bangladesh more and more, centering on the upcoming national elections and complications ahead of the polls. Foreigners are also taking interest in this stalemate, ostensibly to see that the democratic process is upheld and democratic institutions are strengthened here.

Important countries and

institutions that generally care for representative government and a healthy political situation in Bangladesh are understandably concerned over the stand-off, which may take further nosedive unless the major players in the spectrum demonstrate greater wisdom, sagacity, and understanding for the sake of people and the country. These are largely lacking and in the process things are getting stuck in a murky quagmire. People want to have a sigh of relief, but none really knows whether this is in the offing.

It is in this way that Bangladesh is hogging prominence in the international arena in a contrasting fashion. On one side, the unprecedented glory of the Nobel Peace Prize and subsequent visit of sporting legend make us feel proud. On the other, our failure of resolve our own political problems is definitely not anything that helps raise our image and dignity in the outside world.

Our people, too, are disenfranchised with the state of affairs, and, in turn, their concern and

anxiety are heightening with the passing of each day. Can we really come out of this extremely frustrating condition and see light at the end of the tunnel?

After all, Bangladesh can ill-afford such an impasse for long and a way out has to be found soon. Much time has already been lost while people seem to be beginning to believe as if the sordid situation is a fait accompli. This condition notwithstanding, we cannot resign to fate, as the nation has to go ahead.

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Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.