

## Full speed towards election

14-party alliance should call off the siege programme

ASSUMING that the proposed package is accepted by the alliances and nothing contrary to the positive trend so far happens, it is heartening to note that the leader of the 14-party alliance has instructed her party men to prepare for elections. We are heartened because of the fact that such a directive indicates acceptance of the package deal brokered by the CTG and that we are confident that no further issue will be raised by the two major alliances that might compel the elections to be postponed. Thus the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel may not remain a chimera, a prospect that was quite a possibility, given the political stance assumed by the parties so far, till yesterday.

The situation has certainly taken a dramatic turn, and happily the turn is, we can say with confidence, for the better. With the drastic changes that one saw being effected in the top echelons of the civil administration as demanded by the 14-party alliance, and with the new election schedule announced yesterday, that keeps within the time limit laid down in the Constitution, which meets the demands of both the alliances, and with the anticipated changes in the EC, as much as is allowed within the constitutional limits, all the parties should now concentrate on the election itself. However, there is always the option for the AL to revert to the siege programme should some of its demand remain unfulfilled.

It is thus time for the parties, particularly the 14-party alliance to call off the political programmes now that the major three demands of the alliance have been fulfilled. We need hardly mention that these political programmes had disrupted public life severely, although it was indeed a very prudent step on the 14-party alliance to call off the country-wide siege. But the siege of the EC has caused tremendous hardship for the people in the capital. We also feel that the EC should now be left alone to do their job of helping a credible election take place. So far the demands had the support of a great majority of the people. We feel it is time the political parties gave due importance to the hardships of the people.

There is nothing better now for the people to hope for than a healthy campaign in the run up to the elections devoid of animosity and confrontation, which should be conducted with the least inconvenience to the public.

## Induction of terror goons into politics

Bad policy, bad for politics

WE are stupefied by the recent induction of Hemayetullah Auranga into the BNP, and with all the fanfare that went into the ceremony. No less a person than the Chairperson of the party was there to welcome him. He is very likely to be given a ticket to contest election also, something that his previous party had refused him in the last election. For the records, he was arrested for possessing illegal arms during Operation Clean Heart; was convicted and was in custody for a while under the special powers act. His rehabilitation as a party man is a good example of the unholy link between politics and criminals that has defiled the pristine character of politics and polity in Bangladesh.

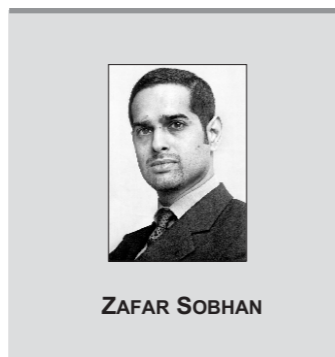
It is sad that over time it has become a tradition with our political parties to harbour criminals with clout as means to enhance their muscle power. This culture must come to a halt. Already the country is reeling under the burden of senseless political murders and numerous vengeance killings. Surely we do not need a stamp of approval by our politicians and political parties to accord protection and legitimacy to dangerous criminals with proven records.

Regrettably, this has come at such a time when more and more the call is being made by the common man to decriminalise politics and when we had hoped that the political parties would have realised that unsavoury elements cannot deliver the goods at the end of the day.

At the backdrop of recent volatile situation prevailing in the political arena and with rising incidences of political killings in the outlying districts in particular, there is the possibility that the situation may aggravate further due to such recruitments.

May we remind the AL that it was for characters such as Zainal Hazari that it had to pay dearly in the last parliamentary election? That mistake should not be repeated, because the likes of Hazari and Aurang should have no place in our politics. As a matter of fact now is as good a time as any to rid the political parties of criminals.

## Forum



ZAFAR SOBHAN

A couple of regular readers (they claim) of my column have been cheeky enough to point out what perhaps ran through the minds of other discerning readers last Friday (though others who might have made the same observation have been too polite to bring this to my attention).

The first reader made the tart but astute complaint that the column was essentially little more than "a big advert for your concert," while the second commented, equally shrewdly: "I read your op-ed from last week. Liked the disclaimer on your shameless plug."

So it seems that I have been busted! Found out, exposed. It's all true, of course. I can't deny it. My column last week was something of an "advert for [the Take Back Bangladesh] concert" and it would certainly not be wholly inaccurate to describe it as a "shameless plug."

I hasten to interject, at this point, that since I received no financial benefit from the concert (quite the opposite, in fact, he says, with perhaps a touch of bitterness), there was nothing

overly unbecoming in such choice of subject.

Indeed, I should also point out that, while substantially true, it is not wholly accurate that my last column was nothing more than a shameless plug. If memory (and *The Daily Star* archives) serves, I believe that I opened with a gloomy report of where the current political situation seemed to be heading (nowhere good), segued to an appraisal of Prof Yunus's "peace formula" (not bad in theory, less promising in practice), before deftly (I thought, perhaps erroneously) weaving in the issue of participatory democracy and the plug for the concert.

And, of course, the concert itself was certainly news-worthy and comment-worthy. Even had I not been involved with it. In the end, thousands attended what can only be described as a landmark free concert that could be the first step in a US-style "Rock the Vote" type movement to bring young voters back into the political mainstream.

The performances were passionate and top-notch, and the fact that so many artists were happy to perform free and that so

### STRAIGHT TALK

Hopefully, the magazine will be what it aspires to be: a forum. A platform where serious issues can be debated and discussed within their appropriate historical, sociological, and geo-political contexts. We hope to be able to help set the agenda every month and be indispensable reading for everyone who wants a seat at the table of our national discourse. The December issue of *Forum* hits the news-stands next week. Please pick up a copy and see for yourself.

many people sat in the sun for hour after hour to listen to the message as well as the music perhaps demonstrates that neither the younger generation nor the underground music scene is as divorced from the everyday concerns of everyday Bangladeshis as some might think.

This lengthy preamble, as you may have guessed, is offered by way of pre-emptive justification for this week's column, which is even more questionable than last week's.

Instead of using my column to plug a free concert to build political awareness and spur political participation among the younger generation (and in which I have no financial stake) I am today using my journalistic real estate to plug a new *Daily Star* publication: the monthly magazine, *Forum*.

Of course, I personally have no financial stake in the new magazine (being but a humble employee), but the fact remains that *Forum* is a commercial enterprise and my bosses would obviously like to see it do well, for that reason, as well as many others.

But there is far more to *Forum*

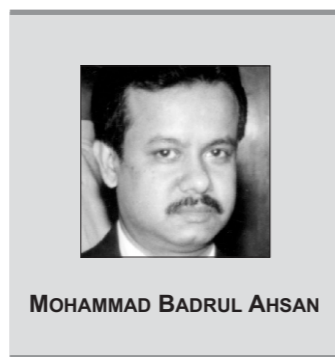
than that. The original *Forum*, of course, was launched in 1969, with Hameeda Hossain as editor, Rehman Sobhan as executive editor, and Kamal Hossain as publisher, and for the next one-and-a-half years was a constant thorn in the side of the Pakistani military authorities.

The outspoken and provocative weekly made the case for Bangladeshi autonomy and self-determination, and provided an entire generation of thinkers and activists with a platform to voice their ideas about the economic, political, and sociological self-determination of what was then East Pakistan.

The last issue of the original *Forum* to come out was the issue of March 20, 1971. The March 27 issue was still at the press when Operation Searchlight was launched by the military authorities and the publication shut down as the country was plunged into the nightmare of the Liberation War.

Now, *The Daily Star* has relaunched the magazine. There are many differences between the original and the new version. Today's *Forum* is a monthly and

## Chaos in the court



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LAST week, there was lawlessness in the legal heartland when the familiar scene of street vandalism was enacted in the Supreme Court. The unruly mob shuffled and scuffled, bashing and burning in protest against the tampering of a court ruling by the Chief Justice. The former law minister fled with his tail between the legs, and the Attorney General scooted from the scene hounded by an angry crowd. A luxury vehicle owned by the former state minister of law was torched, and the offices of the Deputy Attorney General and the Chief Justice had to bear the brunt of their occupants' actions. All that time, the irate demonstrators screamed for the serial resignation of those who were involved.

To recount that story is not to remember what had happened on that fateful day but to grapple with the shock by piecing together its abominable horror.

Insofar as our national life is inured with political violence, one more vehicle torched or two more offices ransacked shouldn't make any difference. But the horror is about crossing the line, the violation of yet another inviolable institution, perhaps one of the few things that still should raise concern or cause disdain in our self-respecting minds.

And minds are like muscles, where the loss of ability to feel the pain could be a sign of degeneration. Last October, we saw the skirmishing doctors in a hospital, as one group chased another, again smashing and setting ablaze a few offices while the frantic mob looted a medicine store. If anybody cares, there is a common thread running through the chain of events. People are growing uniform in their political outrage across professional uniforms, the white coat of the doctors and the black coat of

### CROSS TALK

In Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* Mr. Brownlow says that the law assumes Mr. Bumble's wife acts under his direction. Mr. Bumble replies that if the law supposes that, then the law is an ass, an idiot! On that day when the highest court of the country looked like a vanquished land, flames, smoke, wreckage of doors and windows forming the background of clashing mobs, it was clear that the lawyers and judges had acted under the direction of anything but law. The law looked like a consummate ass in the confines of its own house.

the lawyers blurred in the gray dementia of a terrible arrogance.

In short, what happened last week was the contempt of a contemptible court. Come to think of it, a court is a place where a lawyer can be found in contempt if he appears before a judge without his gown. By that standard, how do we calculate the level of contempt when the decision of the Chief Justice was outright rejected, his office attacked and his resignation demanded by hordes of lawyers? Long after the dust is settled, long after this nation finds an end to its political crisis, it will still struggle to calculate what was lost in the madness of a single afternoon.

It all started God knows where, blame it on the politicians, blame it on the bureaucrats, on the Chief Justice, Hawa Bhaban or Sudha Shadan. Prima facie, it started

in the cerebral cortex of those who are deluded between decency and obscenity, people who cannot tell the difference if they are naked or clothed, their minds confiscated in a vegetating state. If the Chief Justice was clumsy in his meddling, his opponents were callous in their muddling. One side may have been unlawful, but the other has been lawless. The shame is that the showdown in the house of law was a criminal business.

The wigs, the black coats, the robes and the bands make the attire of learned lawyers and judges, which, besides their legal knowledge, are set to distinguish them from the rest of us. But what these features make of those folks is an institution that upholds the law, which is a set of rules that controls the behaviors of citizens supported by the power of government.

So when the government was weak, sorting out its existence

has all the advantages of a major media group behind it, in comparison to the original, which ran to 16 pages of close-set type on the cheapest newsprint available, and had a no-frills, hard-scrabble quality to it that was a part of its charm.

But the essential idea is the same. The idea is to provide a platform for the creation of a national discourse on the crises that continue to trouble the country and the society, and to thus help work towards their resolution.

The *Forum* team here at *The Daily Star* has worked hard to provide its readers with something that we feel that Bangladesh has been missing all these years: a "think magazine," in which people can read thoughtful and thought-provoking essays on the current social, political, and economic situation in Bangladesh (also in the region and the world at large), which focuses, not just on the current crises, but also takes a broader and more in-depth perspective on how we got here and how we should move forward.

We have tried to assemble the most insightful and knowledgeable commentators and analysts in the country and given them the space they need to explore their ideas fully and give the readers something new and original to think about.

The inaugural November issue will remain in news-stands for another few days, and includes original pieces by such luminaries as Tariq Ali and Ahmed Rashid as well as must-reads on Bangladesh from the likes of Kamal Hossain and Afsan

Choudhury. The December issue, which will hit the news-stands in the next day or so, is another winner. It includes thought-provoking essays on the current political turmoil in Bangladesh, as well as high-quality original pieces from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Not to be missed is a special in-depth investigative report on the Rapid Action Battalion that will shock and disturb even the most sanguine, and keeping the upcoming December 16 in mind we also have some superb pieces of historical interest that I recommend to everyone's attention.

Nor is it merely politics. Recurring features are a month-in-review section, photo essay, original translations of classic Bengali poetry, and literary essays, and, going forward, we aim to provide an even wider range of exclusive, original, and in-depth commentary, analysis, and reportage.

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Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

and authority, when the citizens were fighting over their own differences, it was a rare chance for us to see if that institution could function on its own. Instead it proved fickle and fractious, incompetent and inconsequential, impulsive and compulsive in its adaptation of the mob psychology. The people, whose duty is to defend the law, defiled it all the way.

It doesn't matter who did it and for what reason they did it, whether they belonged to one party or another, in collectivity, in totality, these people, who looked like lawyers and talked like lawyers, didn't act like lawyers. Rather it was a very odd scene, the left hand of the law clutching at its right in a bizarre act of deformity.

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That moots the point. How could these professionals in

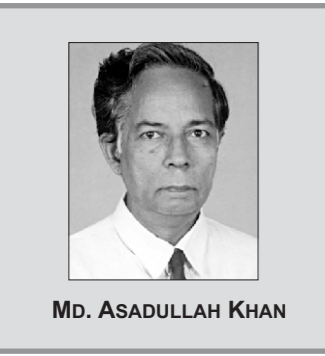
whose hands rests the fine balance of jurisprudence, play up to their raw instincts? How could they, and for that matter, any professionals lower the standards of their own professions by playing second fiddle to the politicians? If the doctors don't mind their patients, the police doesn't enforce law, the army doesn't defend the country, the engineers don't build, the teachers don't teach, and the lawyers and judges don't uphold law, then what we have is a relentless chaos in a jumbled state of confusion.

It is chaos within confusion that has been the outcome of what happened last week in the Supreme Court. The black coats in the melee posed a visual shock as much as a mental block, because their rogue behaviors made us wonder if the same people who broke the law on that day will be of sound minds to keep it again. Henceforth, every man who will be sent to jail, everyman who will be sent to death, will have the right to ask whether the same people who could insult the law were fit to interpret it for others.

For the first time in our history, lawyers and judges will find it difficult to look the man standing in the dock in his eyes.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## Flickering hope



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

FROM the beginning of November, all political life in the country has shrunk to a single person and single question. Should President Iajuddin Ahmed continue as chief advisor to the caretaker government, and can he hold the election when the whole country is seething with rage in protest against non-fulfillment of the demand to create a congenial environment for holding a free, fair and credible election? The opposition combines' demands include updating of the voter list, and manning of the EC with persons having no political bias.

With CEC Aziz gone for the time being, the EC still remained controversial because of the two



### BITTER TRUTH

For last couple of months both the 4 party led alliance and the EC have turned a deaf ear to the issue of fake voter list but now, with the Washington based NDI declaring that there are about one crore and twenty two lakh fake voters and asserting that elections held on the basis of such a list will not be credible, the EC has woken up from its deep slumber.

commissioners, S.M.Zakaria and Justice Mahfuzur Rahman, who were chosen by the past alliance government to implement their agenda. The president's action in appointing two more commissioners, ex -IGP Modabbir Hossain Chaudhury and ex-judge of a lower Judicial Court Saiful Alam, added fuel to the fire. In the meantime, the moment CEC Aziz went on leave for three months Justice Mahfuzur Rahman, in an unusual coup-d'etat, declared himself as the acting CEC without concurrence of the council of advisors or the president-cum-chief advisor. The last nail in the coffin was struck when the EC announced the polls schedule, presumably after receiving a signal from the president, without having any

discussion with the major opposition block.

With pressure mounting from all sides through siege programs and protest marches resenting the chief advisor's action, President Iajuddin Ahmed has now been spending hours with the advisors to right the wrongs in an effort to conduct the election in a free and fair manner. The package formula for reconstitution of the EC, transfer of secretaries of some ministries having important bearing on the elections, re-fixing of the polls schedule and correction of the voter list could, in all fairness, be expected to heal the wounds in the national psyche and pave the way for a successful election.

But a new crisis seems to be

brewing in the EC because of the outright claim of the CEC in-charge, Justice Mahfuzur Rahman, that none of the new commissioners appointed after Modabbir Hossain Chaudhury and S.M. Zakaria go on leave, even if one happens to be senior to him can replace him, as per EC rules. On the other hand, public perception is that the three days time frame earmarked for correcting the flawed voter list does not appear to be enough in the light of past experiences in this area. It is worth recalling here that in the last Rajya Sabha elections in Indian provinces namely West Bengal, Assam and Kerala allegations of fake voter list and party feuding created an unstable situation.

Indian chief election commis-

sioner, B.B Tandon, and commissioner, K.J.Rao, made several visits to these vulnerable places for creating a level playing field for the parties. People wonder if any of our EC officials would be willing to make an on-the-spot survey to assess how far the guidelines they issued from their ivory tower are being attended to by the field level officials and workers. With BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's fresh threat that his party will go into action if the CTG bends under pressure, there is apprehension that the political temperature of the country will soar again. People believe that a series of actions like appointments, postings and promotions was taken up by the alliance government since assuming power. Politicization of civil administration and judiciary was done in a naked way in a bid to ensure their return to power.

Precisely speaking, the all-permeating malignancy has trickled down the tiers to grassroots level, and this is very hard to cure by simple surgery at the top. But in politics everybody knows that nothing is ever certain. In

West Bengal the Left front won the election despite the fact that about eight lakh voters who were primarily the Left Front's vote bank were deleted from the voter list. The undeniable fact was that the landslide in West Bengal came with a reform-minded Left Front leader Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in the saddle. This underscores the fact that a political party trying to win election does not need to resort to unfair deals if it has a fair track record.

What the political parties must understand now is the deadly serious issue of the country's political and economic future. How far can a party, swept to power through a rigged election, go in placating the electorate? For last couple of months both the 4 party led alliance and the EC have turned a deaf ear to the issue of fake voter list but now, with the Washington based NDI declaring that there are about one crore and twenty two lakh fake voters and asserting that elections held on the basis of such a list will not be credible, the EC has woken up from its deep slumber. Much to everybody's shock and consternation, the EC got embroiled on

issues that could be avoided much earlier. With grim experiences over the years, murky politics is the farthest thing on the minds of the desperate people. No one can fully answer these questions, but we do have to analyze the compulsions that drive the brinkmanship of both the alliance and the president-cum-chief advisor.

With clouds hovering on the horizon president Iajuddin Ahmed must understand that governance and neutrality can no longer be kept in abeyance and it will not do to hold the cards close to his chest, he has to unfold his plans. High on his agenda are: Restructuring the EC with appointment of new CEC and commissioners in consultation with his advisors, and fixing accountability of civil servants and transparency in election related jobs. For this job to be done, he needs persons with impeccable integrity, commitment, charisma and dynamism to head the different organizations related to election.

Undeniably true, the president's plans may be inaccessible to folks like us, but not his mind. Shockingly, politicians of all hues

have brought this darkness at noon. With pressure mounted on the President-cum-Chief Advisor Professor Iajuddin Ahmed by his mentors in the past government, most of the organs of the state are either under strain or totally marginalized. The furor over the president-cum-chief advisor's role in running the country at this critical hour, and its repercussions on the country's politics, can be rolled back if the president decides which he values more: the designs of the past government or continuation of democracy and stability of the country.

Undeniably true, people are alarmed at the obvious weakening of state power. The public looks forward to the restoration of the guiding and regulating role of the state to a degree, which is necessary. When hundreds and thousands of people agitate in the streets for their right to vote, and scores of them die, the person in charge of the state and custodian of the constitution must answer questions about his capability, culpability and intent.

Md Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.