

We Expect More

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has set a good example for all political organisations, including those which will be in power in future, with its decision that no minister can campaign in any of the by-election constituencies where polling takes place on Sept 11, after Sept 7. Together with this decision we have the announcement of the resignation of the BNP nominee for the Dhamondi-Mohammadpur seat, Barrister Zamiruddin Sircar, as the State Minister for Land. In resigning from his ministerial position, Mr Sircar has impressed upon all concerned that he would be fighting the by-election under his own steam and that of the party, without using any of the facilities which once went with his official position.

The thinking behind the two moves is commendable. These are the first ones made in this country by a political party in power to reduce the use of its official position during an electoral contest. However, one would have liked the ruling party to go further in the same direction, perhaps by barring ministers from campaigning in the by-elections by an earlier date, if not with immediate effect. Here, one difficulty was perhaps posed by the fact that BNP chairperson, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, and the secretary general, the LGRD Minister Barrister Salam Talukdar are expected to campaign for the candidates of their party, notwithstanding their official positions. In this context, it might have seemed reasonable to the BNP leadership to extend the deadline for participation by ministers in the campaign until Sept 7, instead of making the decision effective immediately.

Having taken a right move at the right time, the ruling party should now consider next steps in the process which, we hope, will meet with the approval of other parties, especially the opposition Awami League. The process is simply one of separating the party from the state, with their respective activities kept as far apart as possible. Here, a firm rule prohibiting a minister from collecting financial contribution or any other favour for the party would be as important as the decision by the Prime Minister to desist from holding party meetings or welcoming new BNP recruits at her official secretariat. Indeed, the same rules should apply to the Leader of the Opposition who, it seems, uses her official residence for party activities. True, a complete separation of the two sets of activities is hardly possible. But it is important to take measures which reduce the mutual dependence between the two, the state and the ruling party.

If the process is taken several stages forward, we should reach the ideal situation in which the organisational chief of the ruling party and the head of the parliamentary group, the latter appointed as the Prime Minister, are two different persons, which is not the case here today or unlikely to be the case in the near future. The separation of the two posts exists in a number of democracies in the West and, at one time, it was practised in this country, during the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Keeping the two positions apart and, for that matter, giving the secretary general of the party a full-time job in the organisation, without any position in the government, would go a long way in setting up the right type of barriers between the ruling party and the state. This would also give the party chief more time to concentrate on organisational matters, leaving the Prime Minister relatively free to devote her time and energy to her official responsibilities. Through this process, the organisation of the ruling party may well start playing a role which goes by default in many countries, its watchdog role, with the authority to monitor and evaluate the activities of the government and provide the Prime Minister with a dependable channel of communication with the rank and file in her party — and indeed with the people at large.

Let Nazrul Disc Collection be Made Public

One assumed that to mislead was the exclusive prerogative of politicians. But newspaper headlines can also be misleading and continue in that habit. A national daily, you have guessed it — The Daily Star — on Wednesday proclaimed in a bold italicised three-column spread 'Artists sing only 50 out of 900 Nazrul songs'. It was a rare conjunction of ministerial and journalistic confusion — for the journal was only quoting a minister in its headline.

It requires one to go through the story beneath rather closely to know that a state minister has indeed observed that our singers perform from among only 50 much too familiar Nazrul songs, whereas he said, notations of about 900 of the rebel poet's songs were readily available in the market. The minister also put the number of the total musical output by Nazrul at 3,500.

If the headline was unfortunate, the minister should also be requested not to be so statistics minded about such things as art. What he plainly meant to say was that our singers use far too little a part of the vast treasure trove of Nazrul songs. And that's absolutely true. The Nazrul singers may indeed be doing in rounds a total of their small repertory of about maybe two to three hundred songs — and not just 50 which the minister must have mentioned more as a figure of speech possibly. Even in that case decidedly less than 10 per cent of Nazrul's full tally of songs are in currency, thanks to the inertia of our singers. And as for the total tally, it still continues to be a matter of conjecture. While the minister's figure of 3,500 can be a very down-to-earth approximation as against most improbable claims of 7,000 and above, there is to date no way to settle for even a plus-minus 500 figure.

Tagore once observed if any one item of his vast creations were to survive the ravages of time — that would be his songs. We know it applies more to Nazrul's songs. Till the end of the thirties the whole of the Bengalee society was much too intoxicated with Nazrul's haunting tunes. We are happy that there has lately been a very lively revival of interest in Nazrul songs on both sides of the border.

We take the occasion of Nazrul's death anniversary to request the government to see that the Nazrul Institute's collection of Nazrul song discs are made open to public by way of publishing series of hundreds of cassettes of those. That will be one sure way to salvage the society from being bonded to a repetition of 50 or 100 or 300 of the songs of the great composer.

NEW Delhi: The paragraph in the Indian Congress Party manifesto is short, sweet and simple, yet it has given rise to no end of confusion and speculation.

The manifesto promises: "Hitherto, broadcasting and telecasting has remained the monopoly of the government. Technological advances have made obsolete the validity of any claim to such a monopoly. The Congress will offer to public corporations, which conform to parameters to be laid down by law, broadcasting and telecasting rights. Such corporations will be allowed to function in competition with Prasar Bharati, the proposed autonomous agency to take over the government's existing radio and television facilities."

The paragraph, neatly typed out, adorns the desk of Information and Broadcasting Minister, Ajit Kumar Panja, 55 whose job it is to translate it into action within one year. Panja has embarked on his job with zeal, but is at the moment looking for ideas more than candidates for running private channels. Although a dozen major players have shown an interest, the task of privatising the airwaves is a complex and daunting one which will test the resolve and ingenuity of politicians and professionals alike.

If India opens up to private television, it will be the single most significant break from the closed door society and economy of the past. And this at the hands of a party whose former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, long clung to the view that India was "not ready" for private television. The change came during Gandhi's months out of government. In 1990 he began to tell reporters what the rest of the world had learned long since, that with satellite television a reality and global round-the-clock broadcasting reaching India, there was no longer any question of a monopoly on broadcasting, and that if the government-owned network was not to lose its audience, it would have to reform and compete. And what better way of competing than with home-grown private channels rather than imports

India Faces a Challenge of Deregulating Television

beamed in from the skies.

Indeed, the Gulf war in January made CNN a household name in metropolitan India with its unregulated neighbourhood cable networks clandestinely pulling down signals from the sky. The same thing is happening now with the Star TV signal coming down over much of northern India on a trial basis from AsiaSat. "Global television is here, and India had better respond to it — fast," says one candidate for privatised television.

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Of greater concern than CNN and Star TV, with their limited-appeal English language programmes, is the challenge posed by Pakistani programmes which may well be bounced off AsiaSat over northern India in Urdu, a language which Hindi speakers can understand, causing audiences to tune out India's own Doordarshan.

The Congress party has gone much further than any promises of the past, which were limited to granting the government-owned network some form of autonomy along the BBC or Australian patterns. Twice before, once in 1977 and then in 1989, when non-Congress governments took charge the public were promised an autonomous television network. Political interference, red tape and bureaucratic regulations combined to provide an indifferent and lifeless fare most of the time, driving audiences to seek diversity in unregulated, piracy-based primitive cable networks or the video magazine industry.

Needless to say, on neither

of the past two occasions did the governments concerned live up to their promises. Speaking immediately after the 1989 election, Janata Dal External Affairs Minister said, "We have to give Doordarshan autonomy before our arteries harden" implying that in 1977 too much time was wasted in discussion and procrastination. Unfortunately, the Janata Dal government's arteries hardened faster than anticipated, and the move was lost in the labyrinths of the bureaucracy.

Now the urbane Panja, who

matter has been discussed thrice in Parliament. The transition is feasible but not painless. Old methods of functioning will have to change. control will have to pass to professionals and an independent authority who will have to convert a rambling, over-stuffed and undermotivated outfit into a leaner, efficient and goal oriented unit.

But the additional course of privatization is unlikely to run smooth. The existing television network has an investment of over 25,000 million rupees.

subsidized by the government. With India's total advertising spending no more than about 12,000 million rupees last year, there is little chance of a private national channel being economically viable — at least not until per capita income rises to the point where advertising spending multiplies four or five times.

Couple that with the absence till very recently of a mobile market for producers, artists and creative television talent, and severe foreign exchange constraints on the

import of equipment, and you have a recipe for inaction. One way out being considered is time sharing on the national network by private production companies who have blossomed in the last five years since Doordarshan began to buy programmes from outside. But this obviously does not amount to competition.

Another is to think of leasing out or selling the second or local channels which already exist in Bombay, Delhi, Madras and Calcutta in addition to offering second channels to private parties, letting them compete with Doordarshan. With limited, relatively high-income audiences to focus on, such channels may well be profitable though they may well divert revenue presently going to Doordarshan.

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Along with the available satellites over India, this will open up dimensions hitherto unknown in television in India. Lured by the prospect of big markets and expanded reach, several key news organizations are gearing up for the challenge of privatization and cable. The newly formed Observer group of the Ambanis, the Times of India group, the Hindustan Times group, the India Today group, the Business India group and the Press Trust of India are among those who have made or are considering concrete options. "The television business threatens to become big enough to dwarf our newspaper business," says one leading contender.

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to use their resources to finance such channels. The idea has a precedent: non-resident Indians are permitted to bring in aircraft to set up what are described as 'air taxis' but are essentially the small beginnings of private airlines in a field dominated by state-owned Indian Airlines and Vayudoot.

Side by side, the Congress government is pushing ahead with writing up regulations for the burgeoning cable television market. Cable owners flout copyright laws with impunity, pull down and distribute signals they aren't authorized to, and break municipal regulations (which prohibit them from crossing the street, for example) without hesitation.

The head of the Telecommunications ministry, which handles cable, San Pittroda says, "We recognize that cable is here to stay and we want to regulate it, not discourage it." A series of studies have been undertaken and rules are being framed. Pittroda, who holds several patents, owns a multi-million dollar telecommunications business in the US and returned to India six years ago inspired by Rajiv Gandhi's ideas no modernization, expects the new regulation, expects the new regulations to be in force before the end of this year.

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By arrangement with the Executive, Hong Kong

The data is impressive: it has 500-plus transmitters beaming programmes to three quarters of India's population in more than a dozen languages on a complex pattern of local, regional and national telecasts through the day. Yet, commercially it is a non-starter, heavily



Satellite dish: Pulling signals from the sky.

Namibia Begins to Pull in the Foreign Investors

Tony Figueira writes from Windhoek

Almost unnoticed by the outside world, Namibia is already well into its second year of independence and multi-party democracy. The signs are good. National reconciliation has worked and even right-wing Afrikaner politicians admit they are pleased. But, whites' considerable fortunes remain intact in a land where blacks pose no threat to the economic hierarchy.

Hage Geingob: "It's like building a house, you have to lay solid foundations. Moulding one nation out of eleven ethnic nations is a big task, but I think we are succeeding."

"Ons kry swaar, (we struggle)," says unemployed Paulus Shikongo as he goes from door to door looking for work. Most businesses display handwritten "no work," signs next to warnings of security protection. Unemployment is rife and the crime rate has soared in the capital.

Opposition leaders criticise Nujoma for the budget deficit, an overcrowded civil service and for launching a state-owned newspaper into an already crowded market.

"Still, it's different now," said one man. "We are free and we can vote." A poorly spelled slogan on the wall at Oshakati market echoes his feelings: "VIVA NAMIBIA." There have been great suc-

cesses too. One example: creation of a cohesive national Defence Force from the previously warring factions of South African-led counter-insurgency units and members of SWAPO's military wing, Plan.

Since the departure of the United Nations watchdog UNTAG, the group monitoring the transition to independence, Nujoma's government has fostered the climate of peace by giving trade incentives based on the principles of a market economy.

Investors were also attracted through an investment code guaranteeing free repatriation of profits and international arbitration in the event of legal disputes.

Some major investments have already materialised. French motor vehicle producer Citroen plans a factory near Sobabis, close to the Botswana border, where work on the Trans-Kalahari highway linking Namibia to neighbour-

ing countries has begun. Another gateway to central Africa is being built along Namibia's north-eastern Caprivi Strip where Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana meet. Reconstruction in Angola is expected to give Namibia a boost.

Other milestones include the setting-up of a central bank, the Bank of Namibia, which takes over from the South African Reserve Bank. A new currency, the Namibian dollar, will be introduced by the central bank over a two-year period. During the transition period the South African Rand will remain legal tender.

Immediately after independence Namibia proclaimed sovereignty over a 200-mile economic zone along its coast and asked foreign trawlers to stop fishing in its territorial waters.

In April the government earned more than US\$35 million in fines imposed by the

Windhoek High Court on skippers of five Spanish ships fishing illegally. Ships, equipment, instruments and fish cargoes were forfeited.

In July, a national conference on land reform and land issues co-ordinated by Geingob reached key decisions on socio-economic equality and redistribution of wealth.

In colonial days farmland was expropriated by the German and South African regimes. Land was allocated exclusively to white settlers and Namibian farmers were confined to reserves or homelands.

Among 23 resolutions adopted by consensus at the conference were recognition and protection of farm workers rights and prohibition of land ownership by foreigners.

Although Namibia is proud of its independence, the issue of the South African-controlled enclave of Walvis Bay remains

unresolved. Foreign Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab, says: "Our objective is to recover Walvis Bay, to integrate it into the rest of the country." Talks are going on about possible joint administration.

In Namibia, any vestiges of racism are criminal offences, against the constitution. When Outjo owner Burchart Friedrichsmaier refused deputy minister of Wildlife and Conservation Ben Uelenga access to his hotel, the cabinet withdrew its licence.

The move was widely criticised by the media and the legal profession as an interference in the judicial process, but many Namibians approved. A flood of letters to newspapers supported the Prime Minister's stern warnings that "racism will be stamped out."

Nujoma's government is often criticised for sheltering white settlers through its policy of national reconciliation. Namibian independence has brought peace and stability, but the whites' considerable fortunes remain intact in a country where blacks still pose no real threat to the existing economic and social hierarchy.

— GEMINI NEWS
TONY FIGUEIRA is an Angolan-born freelance journalist, now living in Windhoek.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Faulty electricity bills

Sir, Harassment of innocent consumers by giving them faulty and inflated electricity bills by PDB has reached its peak now-a-days. It is alleged that some meter readers, inspectors and engineers of PDB have been transferring the burden of their corruption or inefficiency onto the shoulders of innocent consumers, who cannot connive with them to keep their monthly electricity bills lower than the actual consumption in exchange of illegal gratifications: Highly inflated (some time 2-3 times the normal) bills are given in order to pressurize the sincere and honest consumers to come to an unwritten deal with them.

On the other hand, it is also alleged, some other consumers who have underhand deal with such PDB staff get their bills at an abnormally low consumption level than their actual consumption. With the present system of meter reading, billing and overall revenue collection system, it seems, both PDB and its honest con-

sumers are put to the mercy of some corrupt personnel.

In our opinion, privatisation of electricity distribution system is the only solution to this problem. Formation of DESA (Dhaka Electric Supply Authority) is a right step towards this direction. Similarly Chittagong Electric Supply Authority (CESA) should also be formed.

In the meantime the following urgent measures should be taken in order to save the innocent consumers:

- 1. Make a system of taking and documenting meter reading jointly by PDB staff and consumers.
2. Notify the consumer about the date and time of joint meter reading and documenting at least one week ahead, so that the consumer or his representative can remain present during the meter reading. No meter reading should be done without the presence and signature of the consumer.

3. Unless the meter reading is jointly documented, electricity bills should be on the average consumption only.

4. Random checking and inspection of the works of meter readers by the higher officials of PDB. Load connections in suspected houses vis-a-vis their monthly electricity consumption may be checked.

5. Open of complaint cells in the offices of Executive Engineers/Dy. Directors (Commercial Operations) to give hearing to the problems of consumers.

6. Form Parliamentary Enquiry Team to look into the problems of electricity consumers.

7. Electricity Consumers' Associations in each city/town/U Z II Q to monitor and co-ordinate consumers' problems.

8. Segregate each commercial distribution area by separate load despatch centres to identify high system loss areas.

I would request the democratic government to take urgent remedial measures as proposed above. Otherwise, staggering system loss may cross 50% by next 2/3 years and sufferings of consumers will aggravate further.

Sarwar Morshed Monjur East Nasrabad, Chittagong.

Campus violence

Sir, Many suggestions have been made, opinions sought, discussions held at regional and national levels, anxieties expressed, sessions held in the national parliament to find out ways and means to eradicate violence from our educational institutions. But the situation on the contrary, shows no sign of improvement as yet. Even opinion was expressed in your item published on the 7th instant that limited powers of the authority of Dhaka University seemed unable to check the violence on the campus. The poignant question in whether the laws of the land are adequate enough for the law enforcing agencies to check the criminal activities on the campus. The answer is quite in the positive. It should be borne in mind that the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code not to speak of Special Powers Act, 1974, are adequate enough to nab the law breakers and put them before the court of law to face trial. But it has been observed again and again that the campus turns our laws inoperative, and the law enforcing agencies with their combat gears into incompetent silent observers. Many innocent lives were lost at the hands of the law-breakers who brandished unauthorised fire-arms at the very nose of the law enforcing agencies (with all immunities).

And unfortunately no one has been punished not to speak of bringing the law breakers and murderers before the court of law, as if the campus is above the law.

It does not require discussions, seminars, rallies to find out means to eradicate campus violence, but determination on the part of the law enforcing agencies to discharge their responsibilities as required in the Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance, 1976 and nothing else.

Nowhere has it been said that the law enforcing agencies should obtain clearance before taking action against any criminal activity whether it is within campus or without. And, finally, as a law abiding citizen I would like to see the law enforcing agencies discharging their duties.

Zaved Hasan Dhaka.

Bottled water

Sir, I am a chemical engineer by profession and a regular subscriber reader of The Daily Star since its inception. I was very happy with the style of reporting, news coverage and get-up of your esteemed daily. But recently I was frus-

trated seeing a report (Aug 16) under the caption 'Bottled Water Traders on without BSTI Approval.' To me the writer appears either ignorant on the subject or motivated. The logic of my saying so is: Under the existing law of the country it is not required to obtain the BSTI certification for marketing bottled water. Mr. Khalilur Rahman has misled the public by his caption of reporting. Secondly he is also wrong in reporting the WHO's drinking water standard. He has only mentioned the chemical analysis of it while completely ignored the micro biological part. As per WHO's estimate 70% of the world's infectious diseases is caused because of micro biologically pollutant drinking water.

I would request, to keep good standard of your daily, reporters should be advised to study properly the subjects in question. Because faulty reporting creates doubt in the public mind and may damage the credibility of your newspaper.

Engr. A Matin Choudhury Dhanmondi R. A., Dhaka.