

The Gulf Returnees

One of the inadvertent victims of the Gulf War was the Bangladeshi community working in the Middle East countries, especially those in Kuwait and Iraq. It was indeed a sad plight to see thousands of our workers and professionals being forced to return home for no fault of their own. These Bangladeshis, many of them having spent their last Taka to buy themselves their respective jobs, in many instances literally so are now destitutes, looking for new ways to put their life in order.

The interim government, has finalised a proposal to set up a welfare foundation for the rehabilitation of the repatriated workers. The Manpower Ministry has prepared a project costing Taka 113 crore which will finance self-employment schemes. According to the scheme government will provide an initial fund of Taka 3 crore to get things going. Of the rest, Taka 88 crore will be borrowed from the banks and Taka 30 crore will come from the beneficiaries themselves.

While we welcome this step, we must hasten to point out that urgent follow-up actions are needed to implement concrete programmes that are likely to benefit the Gulf returnees in the immediate future. What we have so far is a plan to set up a Foundation. The Foundation will then take up schemes, look for possible funding, select the people who will implement them and after all this, and much later the Gulf returnees may start receiving relief. Time is of essence here and we should do everything in our power to expedite the process of putting this scheme into operation.

We support the basic thrust of the project proposal, namely that of generating self employment. The returnees from the Gulf, at whatever level or profession they might have worked in their country of employment, are people who have been exposed to a more dynamic working environment and to relatively advanced technology. The very fact that they left their homes and familiar environments testify to their drive for self improvement and to their capacity to take risks. These special facets of their personalities and background set them apart from others. Let us build on them. Herein the idea of self employment fits well. These people should be given all possible encouragement and opportunities to put into practice the skills they have learnt abroad. Having had a comparatively higher income these people will have the necessary motivation to work hard enough to generate the same here, thereby contributing to the rise of overall productivity.

We are aware that Bangladesh continues to be essentially a sellers market. Literally everything that is locally produced sells, and sells well. Low and medium level technical items have a large local market, that is currently being filled by imported goods. This is where, we think, the project to rehabilitate the Gulf returnees can fill a useful vacuum.

The interministerial committee which will determine the functioning of the Foundation should include in addition to those mentioned in the scheme representatives of the private sector, technical bodies, scientific research bodies and perhaps some marketing experts and of course the representatives of the banks who are expected to fund the lion's share of the project.

The Gulf returnees, because of their special exposure and experience should be considered as assets and not just a new group that swells the ranks of our unemployed. Given an initial help, they may provide a well needed impetus to the local production scene.

Qamrul Hassan

When the nation pays its homage to the memory of Qamrul Hassan on the occasion of his third death anniversary today, it will be honouring not just a great painter but also a liberal humanist, a pioneer in the country's art movement and, above all, a staunch defender of democracy against autocracy. It is in the last-mentioned role played by the artist, in circumstances which were both heroic and painful, when he drew a caricature of Ershad as the world's "most shameless" autocrat and then passed away as a result of a massive heart attack, that he will be remembered most. After all, the painter's anniversary today falls within less than two months of the fall of Ershad. So, the sadness we all feel at the loss of "Qamrul Bhai", as thousands called him fondly, only casts a shadow over the country's jubilation on the end of autocracy.

One day, when the memory of the eight-year authoritarian regime of Ershad will be no more than a bad dream, Bangladesh will honour Qamrul Hassan in the right perspective, as a painter, one whose contribution to the setting up of our art movement was second only to that of Shilpacharya Zaimul Abedin. The two had a lot in common. Both drew their artistic inspiration from the lives of the ordinary people and both treated their subject matter as more important than stylistic innovations. Like Abedin, Qamrul became a mentor to younger artists who, in their turn, contributed their weaknesses and strength of our ever-growing art movement.

At seminars organised today, we will hear authoritative discussions on the art of Qamrul Hassan. If the painter himself was with us today, he would have preferred the discussion to be more on the art movement than on an individual artist. Perhaps, he would have also liked us to pay increased attention to giving art a more visible place in our every day life, a task in which the private sector could well a role, perhaps in setting up commercial art galleries. We would surely like to see more books on art published here, a bigger coverage of art exhibitions in the local press and indeed more attention paid to this all-important aspect of life by the country's electronic media. This is the kind of tribute to his memory that Qamrul would have loved most.

The long cherished, hard won and eagerly awaited general election is only 24 days away. The nation is looking forward to a healthy, well fought, free and fair election. Much to the credit of the Election Commission and all the political parties we have a 16-point code of conduct to regulate the behaviour of all those concerned during the coming polls. It is a step in the right direction and a heartening development that many thought would not ultimately come about.

However not all our steps can be so termed. Increasingly we are witnessing a campaigning trend, especially among the two leading political parties that can be termed as 'politics of discrediting the other' or better still, 'politics of resurrection of the past'. Yes, political parties must do everything to expose the weaknesses of their opponents, focus on issues where their position has a better public appeal and make capital out of the other fellows' shortcomings. This is in the nature of campaigning and makes for good politics.

However when campaigning is a rehash of innuendos, exaggeration, half truths and oversimplifications then we have reasons to be worried.

At the moment according to BNP, if Awami League is voted to power then our independence will be in danger. Awami League says that if BNP forms the next government then we will have autocracy. So as voters, according to the two foremost political parties of the day, we have a choice between endangering our independence or losing our democracy. What bright prospects we are holding out to our people? Are these the rewards that they should be offered for having struggled to oust a corrupt regime? Dreadful imagery of people and dogs

The Election : Enough on the Past, Let's Talk of the Future

eating out of the same dust bin is being invoked in the public mind by one party, including that of the famous or infamous 'girl in the fishing net'. The other party sees no difference between the rule of Ershad and that of Ziaur Rahman. What can we expect the general public to learn from all this? As Awami League will find nothing good in the regime of President Zia and as the BNP will see nothing but hooliganism, mismanagement and corruption in the AL rule, then is it unrealistic to assume that the people might conclude that both of them are bad and that we should look elsewhere for national leadership? Can we not imagine the devastating consequence of such public disenchantment? Therefore stop, for God's sake, being so taken up by the exigencies of electioneering. Do not throw facts to the wind or interpret them only to suit the party position and parade personal prejudices as undeniable facts.

What we are witnessing is agitational politics spilling over into agitational campaigning — meaning that it is overly simplistic and fundamentally negative. The message is 'vote for me because the other fellow is bad'. Absent here is any reference to how good I am or my commitment to public service. An essential feature of such campaigning is that events are placed before the public divorced from their historical contexts, issues are discussed de-linked from the complex web of national and international factors that affect them and a social reality is so

over-simplified that it fails to serve as an example that we can learn from. Left out in this muddle is responsible campaigning. Campaigning that educates the public and not confuses them further; one that restores people's faith in the institution of election. When our people participated in the anti-Ershad movement they were quite satisfied with vague promises of a better future. For their main focus was on ousting Ershad. But now the time has come when our people want and must know what plans and programmes our leaders have

made for our future so that we, as an electorate, can make the most judicious choice. There is, in today's campaigning, too much talk of the past and too little of the future. One possible explanation for it could be that talk of the past is cheap, and that of the future is difficult. But it is on what the various political parties are going to do in the future that should determine who we should support. As I understand, so far only one real issue has emerged at the political level. The issue of a parliamentary or presidential form of government. The two types of governments are not our inventions. There are highly successful democratic countries who are practicing either of these two forms. The debate here should be, not how good they are but which suits us better, given our socio-economic and political traditions. But in-

stead of improving public understanding of the underlying issues, we are having what is an emotion charged, vitriolic attack by the proponents of one system on the other. Both the AL and the BNP are citing the failures of their opponent's governments as the failures of the systems that they represented. Ershad's corruption was not intrinsic to the presidential form of government nor was AL government's shortcomings a feature of parliamentary system. The two systems, and how they were practiced, are two separate issues and should be discussed

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

The debate on the form of government is too important to be conducted in the present fashion. It cannot be imagined that in a country where literacy rate is only 29 per cent, a meaningful discussion on the subject can be had through mass rallies. Instead both parties should organise discussion of constitutional experts and hold public debates, including on television, on the related merits and demerits of the two systems as to our specific needs.

On economic issues the two parties' position is not radically different. The BNP has come out fully behind market economy, to which AL has also expressed support. AL wants to improve the efficiency of the nationalised sector to which BNP is not averse. Both parties have ruled out further nationalisation. As to their commit-

ment to agricultural output, industrialisation, education, health etc. their respective positions are not too different. This brings me to the all important issue of cooperation between AL and BNP in the future development of the country. By all accounts, economic development of Bangladesh will require far more ingenuity, energy, resourcefulness, and drive than was required to oust Ershad — itself a formidable task. It has been stated over and over again that no one party or group can really galvanise the nation towards a collective mass effort which is what is needed to breakaway from the vicious cycle of poverty.

Experiences show that for a democracy to function properly there must be a working cooperation between the government and the opposition. If it is true for other countries, it is more so for Bangladesh. Because of the enormity and diverse nature of our problems, such collaboration between the opposition and the government is a must. Given their public pronouncements, as discussed earlier, there is the only one major difference between the two leading parties — the form of government they are. Even here a framework for cooperation had already been worked out during the anti-Ershad campaign.

Consequently the possibility of a working cooperation between these two parties, as the government and the opposition, is not really far fetched.

Therefore it is important that in the campaign stage these two parties should not create too much bitterness and animosity that they find it impossible to collaborate at a later stage. We are not talking about these two parties forming a government or a coalition. But of working together for national development, strengthening democracy, reinforcing public faith in political parties and preventing the forces of reaction and dictatorship from gaining ground.

BNP has already announced its party manifesto. AL is likely to follow suit in a few days. Let this be the turning point in this vital election. Let us now have a campaign based on programmes and policies. Not vague, populist slogans. But plans, realistic and realisable. Let us have a campaign that talks about the future possibilities and not of the past mistakes. It might be argued that talking about the past is necessary to avoid similar follies in the future. But the trend of campaigning is not one of learning from those mistakes but of repeating them.

Together all political parties, especially AL and BNP provide an excellent opportunity to establish a functional democracy. With a strong government and a strong opposition, the country will have a real chance of establishing an accountable, representative and responsible government. The seed of it has to be sown now; during the electioneering. Too much bitterness, animosity and mud-slinging now, will inhibit co-operation that the country will need in the future.

Let us stop looking into the past and focus our attention on the future. Past only divides. The future may heal.

(The author is the Executive Editor of this paper. This column will appear weekly.)

Dragon Lady and Film Idol Take on Aquino

Abby Tan writes from Manila

Presidential elections in the Philippines are still more than a year away, but already candidates are lining up to take on the embattled Cory Aquino. Leading the pack are a former top government official, Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who has been sacked by Aquino, and a movie star/politician, Joseph 'Erap' Estrada.

Among the gaggle of presidential candidates poised to take on Philippine President Corason Aquino are two who have soared to the top of the popularity polls, often surpassing Aquino herself.

They are Miriam Defensor-Santiago, a judge and former government official sacked by Aquino, and Joseph Estrada, a one-time mayor of a Manila suburb best known for his 30-year acting career.

Santiago, an outspoken warrior against corruption, rose to the cabinet under Aquino but was removed, many believe because of Aquino's suspicion that rebels wanted Santiago as president.

Estrada, known by the nickname Erap, is immensely popular, with the Filipino masses, partly because of the swashbuckling roles that have dotted his movie career, but also because of his brash, anti-American rhetoric.

With the May 1992 presidential elections little more than a year away, Santiago is moving to clinch a deal to secure her place as the presidential candidate of one of the major parties.

As a former judge who became a colourful public figure under Aquino, opinion polls consistently put Santiago in top spot as the country's most popular public personality.

Her terms as Commissioner of Immigration and Deportation and later briefly as Secretary of Agrarian Reform, secured her a place as a woman

of action. As head of immigration she made very public efforts to root out grafters, crime syndicates and drug smugglers in the most corrupt of government agencies.

Aquino plucked Santiago from a sedate job as a court judge in 1988 to clean up the graft-ridden immigration agency at a time when the public was clamoring for a crackdown.

No one was prepared for Miriam the Unconventional. While she had some success in raising alien registration and arrests, she also stepped on toes with such outbursts as

shouting at airport officials: "I'm going to chop you into 1,000 pieces and feed you to the sharks in Manila Bay."

Little wonder her enemies consider her on the lunatic fringe. They hounded her all the way to the congressional commission on appointments that finally rejected her promotion to the cabinet post of Secretary of Agrarian Reform.

Law has not tempered her. When a congressman accused Santiago of corruption, she exploded, calling him "fungus-faced", and challenging him to a fist fight. She asked another to go stick his finger in the

wall socket and suggested to another congressman that he have a frontal lobotomy.

While nicknamed the "Dragon Lady", she wept when Aquino gave her the sack. "I begged her, but Mrs Aquino never gave me the reason," she recounted. She assumed she had been fired because documents captured from military rebels named her as one of those who would be called to form a government if Aquino were overthrown.

The snub propelled her to seek the presidency in 1992. "I felt shortchanged, I felt humiliated, I felt an imperative

need to change the Philippine political culture."

Asked about her opinion of Aquino's leadership style, Santiago struggled to hold her tongue: "What's wrong with Cory? She's surrounded by people contemplating their navels." Her eyes rolled up to her office ceiling.

The candidacy of "Erap" Estrada, the movie actor, for president provokes laughter among Manila's urban elite. Yet the man dismissed as the least qualified for the job may have the last laugh.

"I am not worried that I am not seriously taken by the burgis (bourgeois)," Estrada said. "They are less than 10 per cent. I have the other 70 per cent."

The biggest part of the electorate is commonly known as the barkya crowd, the Filipino masses who adore Erap, at 53, a veteran actor of 30 years. Many forget he was for 17 years mayor of San Juan, a municipality of Manila, and from the testimony of many, a good one at that.

Indeed, his image as movie idol seems indelible. Between administrative duties as mayor, he rushed to the silver screen, swashbuckling his way into the hearts of fair ladies, as champion of the poor, in a type-cast role.

Thus it came as a shock to the other half-dozen serious

aspirants to the presidency to discover Estrada consistently in the top three slots in independent popularity polls.

Estrada won the country's best actor award five times. He says: "Whatever I am now the popularity, the fame, the glory, I owe it all to the Filipino masses. They patronise local movies. I owe nothing to the burgis."

The matinee idol still sports the Fifties look of lowered sideburns and pompadour hairstyle. His barong shirt collar covers his short neck, touching his ear lobes. He is not the Manila middle-class matron's idea of a deadly charmer.

These days he uses such slogans as "The US bases are the root cause of our poverty," or "The International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates our economy."

Some conservatives worry that Estrada is a captive of the left, a non-intellectual who can be easily manipulated. But his supporters assert that he is his tencer who is willing to learn.

Estrada the movie idol has left a path of broken hearts in his wake. He has had three wives and many children. Since becoming a senator, he has tried to clean up his act and now acknowledges his first wife as the official one.

The gossip columnists describe him as having been ravaged by "bed and booze." The movie king makes no apologies. "I am a man, I don't run away from responsibilities," — GEMINI NEWS.

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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.

Buses for women
Sir, Dhaka has fast developing into a big city, and therefore needs a number of things which a big city deserves. Among these naturally, first comes a wide range public transport system. Although Dhaka has become modern in a number of ways, namely women becoming a part of our income generating force. They have come out of seclusion and are becoming more and more involved in jobs in offices, garment factories, etc.

Women who work, and thus have to avail public transport, need better services than they get now. It may be mentioned, years back BRTC introduced buses for women. What happened to that?
I feel it will be a novel idea again to introduce

buses, and fast moving mini buses exclusively for women.
Ariya Banu
Goran,
Dhaka.

A review

Sir, The advent of another English language newspaper in Dhaka has been welcomed by many avid newspaper readers such as myself. I hope that with a number of dailies engaging in healthy competition to capture the small English readership that exists in Bangladesh, the quality of all the newspapers will improve markedly and English language journalism in the country will be benefited.
I must congratulate you on the quality of the issues that I have seen so far. The columns present a neat and

uncluttered look and regular features such as "The Midnight File" and "Dhaka Day By Day" provide interesting snippets of news. The content of the Editorial and Features pages is also varied, well thought out and of topical interest. However, unfortunately, the Printers' Devil continues to plague you as it does everything printed in this country.

I would like to point out though, that, while there are certain peculiarities of syntax and usage in the English written and spoken in Bangladesh that no doubt add charm to the language and give it a local colour, "journalese" is a language that has demands of its own. Simple, straightforward, factual reporting leaps off the page, so to speak, and gives immediacy to a news story that a more literary style lacks. There is no place either for sentimentality, emotion or personal opinion in a news item. These belong rightfully to the editorial or features sections. I would therefore, urge you, Sir, to exhort your subs to a more ruthless use of the red

pencil. Incisive even brutal editing is called for; that is what distinguishes good reporting from the commonplace.
Let me wish you success. I look forward to many hours of informative and enjoyable reading.
Yasmeen Murshed
DOHS, Dhaka.

Unemployed Agril graduates
Sir, Recently some bonafide ex-students of our college who are now Agriculture Graduate (Krishibid) handed me a copy of the memorandum of their newly formed 'Unemployed Agril Graduate Association'. It is understood that about 1200 Agril graduates of Bangladesh Agricultural University, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Patuakhali Krishi College are still unemployed. These graduates have completed their four years course in seven years and many of them already crossed the minimum age limit for govt job.

Unemployment is a curse, particularly for the educated ones. These unemployed graduates are

passing their days under serious mental and economic stress. Some of them told that nobody is interested to listen to their grievances.

It is true that the overall employment situation in the country is not so promising. Still, there is a scope for filling-up vacant posts in the govt offices while NGOs can create new job opportunities for the unemployed Agril graduates. Through providing Bank loans under govt supervision, self-employment avenues may also be created for them.

M Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

An appreciation

Sir, I felicitate on your bold venture in bringing out a long awaited comprehensive English daily newspaper. Your coverage on news and views are very rational, as well as, quite exhaustive. The reports related to weather, transport timings and Dhaka Stock Exchange are really essential and very good. On top of this, the crossword

puzzler amply meets the appetites of those who desire to enrich vocabularies like me.

With regards to the analysis of the transactions in the Stock Exchange, it is humbly suggested the weekly quotation of all scrips be restricted to previous day's rates only and last dividend declared by a company may also be shown. The daily coverage is superb and helps an investor.
W. Choudhuri
Maghbazar, Dhaka

Hindi films

Sir, Recently I came across a Hindi film titled "Do Qaid" in which Farah and Sanjay Dutt, were dancing and singing Allah Allah with obscene which is definitely not acceptable to me and many others.

Is there anybody who can explain why this sort of films are allowed in our society. Let us free our society from the dirty Hindi films.
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