

Dhaka, Monday, March 11, 1991

Fair deal for behind the walls

Lawlessness reigns supreme inside the Dhaka Central Jail. This is not acceptable. The prisoners must be disciplined. And if the jails continue to fail to be the most secured preserve of the nation — and disciplined — the jail personnel must all lose their jobs and the walls brought down. There is no point in leaving a jail — any jail — where prisoners can violate law and commit fresh crimes at their own sweet will.

Before we turn to that ultimate in frustration, we shall be well advised to see into whether the administration has ever taken care to keep their part of the bargain — to be helpful and fair to their charges who, once pushed in, have little recourse to reverse their fate as individuals that have forfeited freedom.

Fairness has long been a fugitive from our jails. The jail administration people suffer from a complex that criminals do not merit anything better than criminal behaviour in return. That is grossly wrong — and serves only to make criminals of those who are there to see that a bad one's mind and habits change into good.

All inside the jails are not criminals. Due mostly to a strange and a most special unfolding of the political destiny of this nation, more than half of all jail residents in this country are under-trial prisoners and detainees — something far removed from convicted criminals.

If the jails are a different and unfamiliar world it may mean that men enjoying authority there must also be different from those of the other world outside. But jail administration is not an ordinary part — if a little extended — of the ministry of the interior and no warden or his superior may indulge in what is not liked by the top ones even at the directorate-general level. All our jail problems originate now from one first sin — putting a dozen to where a foursome could not live. And this is no jailor's making. Our governments — all of the past so many ones — have been callously oblivious of their obligations to those that they take into charge.

Whatever the text-books say, jails are no reformatory here as well as in most other countries. The successive governments' indifference and apathy towards the jails and their inmates are sort of squared off by intermittent jail eruptions — and more remotely — by today's jail-makers turning into tomorrow's jailed. These two factors between them should have changed the jail into a place better than it is now. But no — the situation inside keeps on worsening inexorably. The prisoners keep on swelling but prisons must not show it by getting big and many.

Early in the decade past prisoners rose in rebellion in the Khulna jail and for days on end occupied the whole place and ran its administration all by themselves. They did not give in before being brutally subdued by commando action. The Khulna rebellion touched off a chain of eruptions in other jails and the whole nation was convinced that the prisoners were fighting and dying for a just cause. Government was forced to constitute a jail reforms commission and take a somewhat yielding posture vis-a-vis the issues focussed by the jail unrest.

No one knows of anything coming out of that. How is it that institutionalised practices of injustice and inhumanity inside the jails have always to be protested only by jail inmates and it is only they who must suffer violence and die in order to challenge those wrongs? Aren't all of them as good a part of society as the rest of all of us?

Never before a near relation gets beyond the bars does one see the point of a fair deal there. The society is still very much divided in two completely separated compartments — those thousands herded in there and the crores yoked to poverty and illiteracy and substandard existence out here.

The problems now plaguing specially the Dhaka Central Jail may be resolved in a matter of weeks, if not sooner. But let us not anymore settle for ad hoc solutions. The prisoners deserve a better deal — humanity to be precise — from us all.

A Civic Duty

Between March 12 and 15, 215,000 enumerators, supervised by 54,000 officers will begin the third population census of Bangladesh. The first was held in 1974 and the second in 1981. Some more statistics : 22,000 zonal officers of the Bureau of Statistics, along with 94 district and 29 regional coordinators will conduct the census under the overall direction of one national coordinator.

Statistics are all-important here. But a census is not merely a counting of heads. To assume that would be to miss the essential point of the exercise.

A census should provide us with a comprehensive picture of the country's demographic, social and economic state of affairs. It should provide a wealth of information, unmatched by any other study or survey. The problem is, our past censuses have failed to provide all the answers necessary to find the authentic socio-economic status of the population. We hope 1991 will be an exception.

At the first instance, the census will tell us the growth of population over the past 10 years. We trust the figures will not be doctored to suit government targets. More importantly, we expect to acquire reliable economic data. Without that, planning for future development would be based on assumptions, and run the risk of setting wrong priorities. If the questionnaire used is probing enough, and the census carried out thoroughly, we should find out everything from the level of literacy to the impact of rural landlessness on growth of urban population. In short, we expect to gather data essential for a scientific approach to development.

None of that will be possible unless we, the citizens, cooperate with census authorities. Taking part in the census and providing all the required information accurately is the civic duty of us all.

It is called The Lodge, the leafy, double-storey mansion behind high security walls in suburban Canberra that has for decades been the official residence of Australian prime ministers.

As things stand, the likely next inhabitant of this antipodean 10 Downing Street will be a 44-year-old nouveau riche, Ferrari-driving, former academic and corporate wizard. His name is John Hewson.

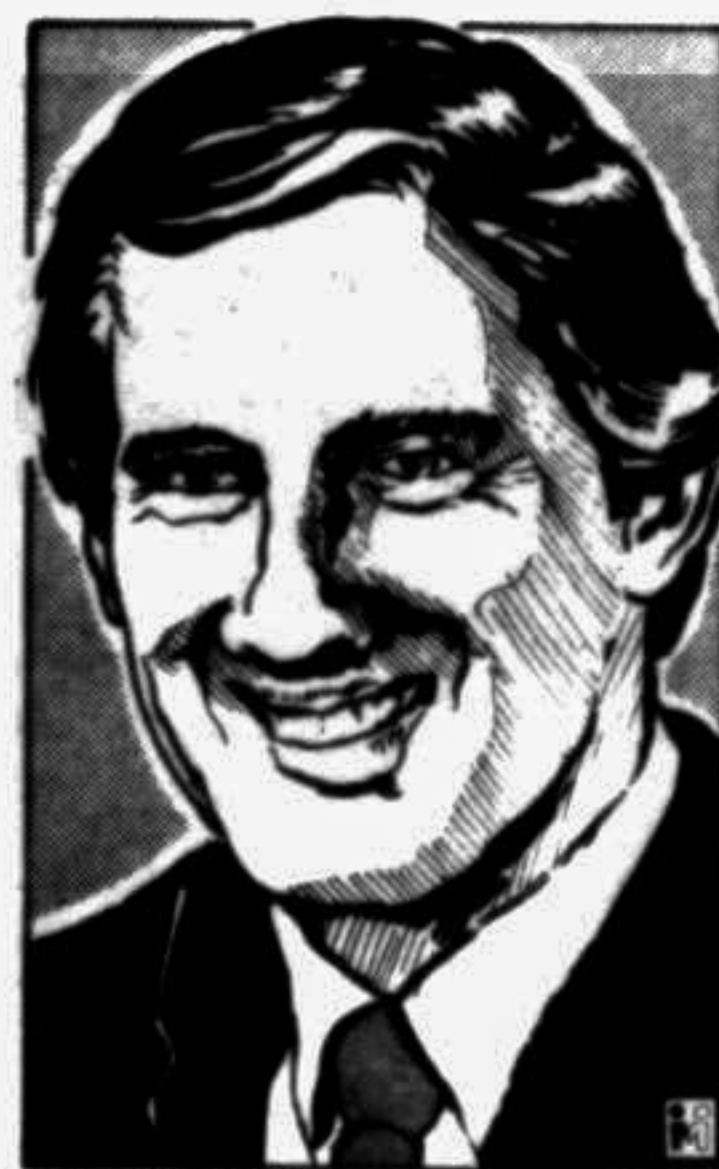
The eight-year-old Labour Party government is in trouble. Bob Hawke, the most phenomenally successful Labour leader in Australia's history, has beaten off a Thatcher-style challenge to his Prime Ministership from his deputy and Treasurer, Paul Keating, but he still seems destined for the scrapyard at the next federal election.

Only a year ago Hawke miraculously survived a general election. After that, the conservative Liberal and National party coalition decided the time had come for a bold response to Labour's near total domination of Australian politics at all levels in the Eighties.

The powerbrokers of the political right ditched the two former leaders, John Howard and Andrew Peacock, whose vicious personal rivalry had done so much to play into Labour's since Malcolm Fraser's conservative government fell in 1983.

Promoted to the leadership was the novice Hewson. Tall, elegant and photogenic, he potentially solved the Liberal party's No 1 problem.

For years, Howard, the former Treasurer to Fraser, had been rejected by the people because he lacked



JOHN HEWSON
Poor boy made good

charisma. Peacock, the flamboyant former foreign minister, had the colour but no depth and was no master of the big economic issues.

To the coalition Hewson appeared to bridge this divide.

Ferrari-driving Academic Tycoon Overtakes Hawke

David O'Reilly writes from Canberra

After eight years in power Prime Minister Bob Hawke of Australia is facing a formidable new challenger. The leader of the opposition has taken his coalition into the opinion poll lead by an unprecedented 17 points. John Hewson is the first politician to beat Hawke on personal approval rating.

The problem was his political inexperience. In the two years before Peacock lost the 1990 election to Hawke, Hewson had been shadow Treasurer.

He entered parliament only in 1987, and his quick promotion to the No 2 job in the opposition ranks was as much an indictment of its lack of talent as a tribute to his inherent capacity.

As economics spokesman, he was the one glimmer of hope for the opposition during the election campaign. When the powerbrokers got together in Melbourne in the wake of Peacock's defeat, someone raised the idea of pushing Hewson right to the top.

As the Peacock-Howard forces went on squabbling, other candidates seen as allies to either side were discounted. Hewson, the clean-skin who had been an ally of Howard but managed to keep Peacock on side, was handed the prize he maintained he never sought.

Hewson only ever claimed he wanted to be Treasurer. Being drafted made him unique in a party where madly ambi-

tious men had fought for years to inherit the Fraser mantle.

Hewson supporters pointed to his strong credentials for leadership. Coming from a working class Sydney family, he was the poor boy made good. He studied hard, found a niche in economics and won an appointment as a university professor at a surprisingly young age.

He worked for the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and for a time as personal adviser to both Howard when he was Treasurer and Howard's predecessor, Fraser's first Treasurer, Sir Philip Lynch.

Along the way Hewson made a financial killing in real estate, acquired properties including restaurants and a garage full of exotic motor cars, most notably his red Ferrari. He was divorced then married Carolyn, herself a smooth corporate careerist.

At times since he became leader Hewson has shown an over-sensitivity to criticism. He is a workaholic, who can be

in the office for 18 hours a day and drives his staff relentlessly.

As Christmas 1990 arrived, the federal parliament in Canberra went off into recess with the Labour government aware that its electoral grip was slipping not so much because of Hewson's progress, but through its own misdeeds.

Labour has failed to deliver, as it promised, the big manufacturing industry turnaround to trade the country out of its debt crisis. It has brought on instead a recession that may prove in 1991 as politically deadly as the one in 1982-3 that helped finish Fraser.

The people are gradually deserting Hawke. The latest opinion polls suggest that not only is Hewson heading for a landslide win in the Lower House, but he may get control of the Upper House, the Senate.

This would clear the way for him to implement, unhindered, his radical programme of savage government expendi-

ture cuts, wholesale dismantling of government programmes and tax cuts funded by the introduction of a consumption tax. For years government of both persuasions have been impeded by Senate interference.

The latest Morgan Gallup poll puts Hewson's team 17 per cent in front — an unprecedented turnaround from a situation where Howard and Peacock were damaged for never being able to translate voter disenchantment into votes for their team.

Hewson is the first politician ever to beat Hawke on personal approval rating and recently went three per cent clear as the country's preferred prime minister.

To counter Hewson's freshness, Hawke and Keating have manoeuvred into place tax cuts and wage rises. They intervened in some desperation to force interest rates down as it became clear how deep would be the recession spawned by Keating's intentionally-high 1990 interest rate regime.

Luck has always seemed to smile on John Hewson. For now his momentum towards The Lodge is driven by the opinion polls. Hawke and Keating at least have the asset of time.

It is still too tall the next election. They know that to survive, they have to exploit Hewson's inexperience and draw him out into the open to turn around what are, for now, runaway public perceptions about him. — GEMINI NEWS

DAVID O'REILLY is Canberra political correspondent for The Bulletin, published in Sydney.

Political Will : between Compromise and Confrontation

by Muhammad Abu Zaafar

stittencies. It is now being said by many that a number of persons of other shades of political ideals voluntarily opted for looking after the BNP interests. The fact however remains that worker or no worker, the voters have pushed the BNP to a position for which it was perhaps not as much prepared.

Ordinary analysis

Many causes are being found out through the ordinary analysis by the ordinary people. A few of those are : the most uncompromising attitude of Khaleda since she had decided to oust Ershad; her refusal to contest election under Ershad; her accommodation of the religious sentiment of the Muslims of Bangladesh, particularly assuring that the Constitution of Bangladesh will continue to have 'Bismillah' in the preamble; her preliminary efforts to adjust with religion-based parties; her decorum and tolerance that she displayed during her address to the nation over TV and Radio etc. People who approved of these traits and tendencies, promises and possibilities were further antagonised by what Hasina said and did. Those who feared possible 'trial' for 'murder' and 'misdeeds' were supposed to engage their last ounce of energy to ensure her defeat. She failed to convince many of the voters that the acts of sending away the Indian Military from the soil of Bangladesh, getting allotted 44 cusecs of the

Ganges water from India, joining OIC in opposition to the wishes of the then Indian Government almost nullifying the secular character of the State of Bangladesh etc. do never prove that the Awami League turned the just-salvaged Bangladesh subservient to the Indian expansionism, as they call it. Be it borne in mind that the task was not that easy. No explanation might appear satisfactory in the backdrop of the Indian refusal to handover Berubari and the deployment of the Indian Navy in the Talpatty Island. The situation aggravated further when the Hill Tract people who are engaged in insurgency are reportedly being sheltered and trained in India.

When her father fared in politics, he had at least one major national Bengali daily to support him all through. This time she had almost no such support that could competitively reach rural readers who were being swayed away by the other ones, obviously working against her. Besides these, her bracketing Zia with Ershad, candid attacks against Zia and BNP, talking herself less on Ershad's misdeeds and leaving the subject to the people saying that they already thoroughly know about his misdeeds, and her aggressive posture and offensive language while she had been addressing the nation over the TV and Radio had undercut her own possibility to a great extent. Lot of people also pointed out that the families and the areas that fell victim to the inhuman

torture by the Rakkhi Bahini have turned out to be and would remain anti-Awami League. All these and many other factors contributed to the decrease of the prospect for Awami League and to the increase of same for BNP.

Stark realities

Defeat is a bitter pill. And even a saint would not swallow it. But there are unavoidable realities; realities of defeat and realities of facing the situation that now has engulfed Bangladesh. It is the most populated area of the world and the most poor : Poverty of character is so rampant that even some of its best sons who came out of the universities as the most meritorious turn out to be highly corrupted anti-people; at least that is the current accusation of the ordinary people of Bangladesh. Over and above that, a horde of Munafics (cheat or traitor) hang as the sword of Democles over the head of any man who has any intention of doing anything good to others. Honest politicians are their most sought after prey. So it is quite difficult to say who is and would be the ultimate loser. Normal calculations and values do not always hold good in Bangladesh. But in case of victory and defeat, it might be otherwise. Stark realities here are quite different. Form of Government: Possibilities :

Awami League is committed to Parliamentary form of gov't. Hasina has not elaborately spelt out why she has now de-

viated from the Presidential form which her father so zealously had introduced. Whether expediency or experience? And explaining elaborately means owning responsibilities. That such a political stand gives more dividend is yet to be realised in this part of the world. As for Khaleda, one would wonder why the Parliamentary form must not suit her. Since she has already been voted to be the majority party, why should she go for another election to ask the same people to give her the mandate. Moreover, the same religious-minded people may turn against her on the simple but very important question of election one particular person as the one to represent all the Muslims of Bangladesh, who is supposed to lead the prayers at times and in whose name Khutba is to be delivered. The uncompromising religious preachers might announce a Fatwa denouncing female candidature for the presidency.

Voters may not be induced to choose a lady-president in that case. It should not be forgotten that in the struggle for power, a number of people never hesitated to do away with secularism and paved the way for total conservatism. It is most likely that Khaleda would opt for the parliamentary form, take over power and would become the chief executive of the gov't. de facto. If she does so, Hasina might have to support her. To fail has already paved the way. The reality is that there are times when the defeated party

does not have many an alternative.

But the pinch would start immediately as she starts doing so. She has to form the cabinet and pass the budget as leader of the real majority what she does not have now; she would not have that unless she forms a coalition with other party/parties. That clearly means compromising with a number of elements whom she might not have confessed to be considered fit as her partners. BNP has been consistently being charged with collaborating with the collaborators and rehabilitating those on the very blood of the martyrs. Normally, every govt. endeavours to survive. But all ways going for that without considering the consequences may turn out to be fatal.

Whether BNP is going to compromise right a way or opting to remain as such, and to struggle hard to cooperate with the democrats of liberal character allowing some concessions or trying with full vigour to win the by-elections to bridge the gap between the present position and the limit to simple majority is yet to be seen.

Compromise or no compromise, a really democratic party would have to confront the fundamentalists or fanatics in the end. Their motives can only be satisfied by subjugating others. If a democratic party refuses to listen to them, confrontation is inevitable. This is more true for a party which is on the edge of just reaching the majority but it can not do so on its own immediately.

So far as Ershad is concerned, BNP has displayed completely uncompromising attitude. That bore fruit. But in the crisis of the present, only political sagacity may help.

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.

Participation in sport: meets

Sir, Win or loss, participation is what counts most in sports with moral objective to promote friendship. This principle has been the guiding light to the continued developments of world sports as of this late 20th century.

This is the sporting spirit, which is very much alive in disaster-prone Bangladesh, that led a contingent of 89 sportsmen to the Xth Asian in Beijing, China. Undoubtedly, the prospects of winning any medals by this LDC at this highly charged-up competition for Asia's athletic supremacy were unpredictable (save the past marks); but, still, Bangladesh — the 8th most populous country in the world — decided to have her prowess re-evaluated probably for the upcoming Olympiad.

Now that the Asia's greatest sports conglomeration is a part of history, recording China's super domination and her eye-opening stance for stop position with other world leaders (USSR, USA, and Germany), a well-founded stand of "think twice" from now on may save Bangladesh the cost worth more than gold medals; other-wise, "too late to regret" and even "no turning back" may face this enthusiastic nation soon. Hopefully, however, perseverance and diligence together with "learning from mistakes" may help this optimistic country find the way out to the Range of Gold.

M. Rahman
Zila School Road
Mymensingh 2200

Whither Iraq?

Sir, It is sad to note the fall of Saddam, and the

calamity suffered by Iraq. The tragedy looked avoidable. What was the hurry?

The question nobody is asking is : why this country had to face two wars, one after the other? What is the divine will? We always rush to politics for explanation — this is not the Creator's level.

A. Mawaz, Dhaka.

Fads and fashions

Sir, I fail to comprehend the mad stampede seen in many of our women to catch up and stay with fashion. This is so here as in the west. Just because we do not wear slacks and skirts does not mean there are not pattern variation in saris and print and textures. The cut of the blouse, specially the sleeves, and neck line, also changes regularly.

As for the shalwar-kameez fads and styles they are not easy to cope up with as regards money and time. Lately the "kameezes" have begun to get flared with the effect of the dress. The mirror piece work is now nearly out and the heavy "zari" work is in.

Even if you do not personally care for the trend of fashion, your relatives and friends will constantly

remind you of it, even when they have professions such as medicine and engineering to follow up.

With the setting up of the boutiques in the city of Dhaka and Indian fashion magazines swamping the news-stand, one cannot help but be aware how out of date one is if one sports a "chus-pyjama" and "kurta" rather than the flared top fancy.

Another aspect that annoys me is that women follow the fashion at any cost, whether it suits their individual height and complexion or not. At a recent marriage a young woman, shorter than five feet, had three different shades of green in her "shalwar kameez" get up. Despite her pencil heels she appeared diminutive and not necessarily cute.

Not every husband or father is a businessman. I wonder then how the women scrip and save to catch up with their neighbours, colleagues and friends, apart from the endless in laws.

In a country such as ours, could we not economise or practically cut down on the all-out

hunt for the spotlight in fads and fashions? And so far I have not taken into account the money spent on hairdoes, manicure and pedicure. This is a free country, everyone has the right to spend his money as he or she wishes, but there should be some constraints in a country of hungry and homeless masses.

F. de la Harpe, Dhaka.

Portentious and disturbing

Sir, Governments come and go. So do dictators. But the most ominous is that an autocrat who barely three months back had to retreat from the citadel of power before a rising storm of popular protest movement, could win stunning victories in the elections. And 31 of his Jatiya Party candidates, who were supposed to have been discredited for their association with the autocratic regime have also won their seats in February 27, polls which were acclaimed to have been free and fair.

The people of the country have won back the right of free exercise of their franchise taken away by the autocratic regime, after nine years of arduous

struggle and much sacrifices in blood, sweat and tears. And the people in 35 constituencies have elected those very persons who had denied them their rights and who still owe their allegiance to the policies pursued by the autocratic regime. This is portentous and very disturbing.

Democracy is now being imperilled by the volarities of autocracy through democratic means. Meanwhile, the autocratic phalanx is waiting in the sidelines ready to pounce on and reconquer the citadel from which it was driven out.

All those who love democracy and have fought for it for long years should deeply ponder this situation and take appropriate steps to foil the attempts of the dark forces to nullify the achievements of the people's struggle. The fight for the people's democratic freedom can only be won through united struggle of the democratic forces and parties. Petty bickerings and disunity among their ranks would only give an opportunity to the autocratic forces to again trample on the people's rights.

Hassanuzzaman Khan
Dhaka.