

Dhaka, Friday, April 5, 1991

The Road to Democracy

The country reaches yet another milestone on the road to democracy when the fifth Jatiya Sangsad opens its session today, against the background of a national mood that reflects guarded optimism, mingled with a sense of jubilation. Nothing that we or anyone else can say on the political uncertainties which still cast their shadow over our future can change the fact of the opening of the parliament today represents a major triumph of popular will.

The fifth Jatiya Sangsad is distinguished from all the previous ones in many different ways. In the first place, it has come into being as a result of the freest and fairest election ever held in the country. Again, it was an election that was the product of a historic mass movement which, while avoiding a senseless bloodbath, brought down a discredited administration with the minimum dislocation of normal life.

The second distinguishing feature of the present Sangsad cannot pass unnoticed either. Its representative character is almost unique, which reflects all different shades of opinions, from left to right. This representative character is further underscored by the fact that virtually all major political parties have found their places in this parliament. And they include, somewhat surprisingly, the Jatiya Party of the deposed president, Hussain Muhammad Ershad. This is, in essence, the multi-party system at work. The presence of the former president, brought to the Sangsad Bhavan on Wednesday, under police escort, for the oath taking ceremony probably evoked varied reactions from different sections of people. However, no one — Mr Ershad the least of all — could deny that this was democracy at work.

All this augurs well for the new parliament. This does not mean that one can overlook many contentious issues which may still threaten to disrupt the session. Here, we are relieved that at long last all the major parties, including the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have agreed to let Shamsul Huda Chowdhury, the Speaker of the last parliament to preside over today's session, strictly in accordance with the constitution. It is also hoped that Mr Chowdhury will facilitate the election of the new Speaker and Deputy Speaker, with dignity and honour that one associates with his office.

However, there are other issues which can, at any time, aggravate divisiveness among the parties, create bad blood and even threaten to disrupt the proceedings. We sincerely hope that our apprehensions will prove unfounded. In this respect, our hope lies with the Leader of the House, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. Both must look upon the opening of the historic fifth Jatiya Sangsad as an unique opportunity for putting the country on the road to democracy rather than as an occasion for scoring points against one another. We do not underestimate the importance of issues which divide the two parties, issues which, we believe, should be resolved without too much delay. This is especially true about the system of government that Bangladesh should follow, about the sharing of power between the Acting President and the Prime Minister and, above all, about the fate of a number of constitutional amendments which the Awami League would like to see annulled during this session. There may be many ways of tackling these issues, but the best way lies through consultation, preferably outside the parliament chamber, between the leaders of the two parties. Such a consultation may lead to a consensus. It will, we hope, certainly narrow the differences between the two. If the two leaders do not choose this path of moderation, they will only allow their differences to develop into a crisis, not just for their parties, but for the country as a whole. Such a situation must be avoided at all costs.

Cricket's Future

Another national cricket championship gets underway in Dhaka today, with the country's cricketers fortunes in the international arena still hovering over the thin line dividing promise and failure. There are few sports in which Bangladesh can reasonably hope to make any sort of impact, and cricket is one of those very few. In a limited field, Bangladesh has maintained an honourable place among the second-rankers of world cricket. But the gulf in standards between the first and second rows is so vast that the distinction of an "honourable place" becomes quite pointless in relation to this particular sport. In cricket, real ability is counted in terms of Test status, and Bangladesh seems light years away from that.

Bangladesh has put in some decent performances over the years in limited-over cricket. But that is not REAL cricket, nor does it help cricketers acquire the technique or temperament for the three or five-day varieties of the game. The national championships are also of the quick-fix, limited-over variety. In fact, there is not a single three-day competition in Bangladesh. Until a serious and sustained attempt is made to promote two-innings matches and top level competitions in this country, the idea of breaking into the Test or even First Class circuit will remain a pipe-dream.

But the problem with cricket goes much deeper, starting at the root of sporting activities, namely the schools. Although cricket is a highly popular sport among the urban youth, the game is not patronised in any serious manner by the schools or colleges. There is hardly any coaching programme, and very few schools provide equipment. Schools are the key to success in any sport, and it is vital that our schools are brought under a national policy for development of cricket, with regular inter-school competition, perhaps even a three-day championship involving school teams at the district level.

The Nirman Schools Cricket Championship, which has had a revolutionary impact on the development of cricket at the junior level, is an example that needs to be repeated. The schools and colleges are the nurseries of the game, but the talents are unlikely to grow unless they are tended properly. At the higher level, although overseas players are helping to instill greater professionalism into local players, cricket authorities should look beyond that and introduce three-day competitions at the national level at the earliest opportunity.

As the fifth Jatiya Sangsad starts its session today, a Sangsad that is the product of the freest and fairest parliamentary election ever held in this country, the foremost question facing us all is how to ensure the continued success of the democratic process in Bangladesh.

In the first place, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the continued democratic process is essential for political stability and sustained economic development and that only an accountable government can improve resource base and promote investment.

Again, there is no doubt it is the unity of democratic forces and the clarity of purpose of the three united fronts that ultimately succeeded in undoing General Ershad's long record of military dictatorship on that fateful day, the 6th of December, 1990. Since then parliamentary polls have been successfully completed.

There may be questions about accuracy of voters list, the intrigues in electoral alliances, the unrepresentative nature of the electoral system in which representation is not proportional to the popularity of the party, or the sinister role of black money. But on the whole, the nation has successfully established the integrity of the electoral process. The practices for fair elections established by the neutral Government should stand the nation in good stead in the future as well. The holding of a fair election is no mean an achievement considering the wanton destruction of the integrity of the electoral process in the past.

In our twenty years of existence as a free nation, we had governments led by Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party. We had one party rule of BKSAL for little over six months and we had prolonged periods of direct martial law. We have miserably failed in establishing any tradition of government for the people. All the governments have been highly partisan or insensitive to peoples' wishes.

In a democratic polity, the majority party or coalition of parties certainly will form the government but it is expected to exercise power for the good of all people and not only to promote the interests of the party or the ruling coterie. The larger section of the population is generally non-partisan. A little less than 59% do not exercise the right of franchise. Many of those who vote choose a party for the purpose of voting only without being partisan all the way. The government

ISSUES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE NATION—I

Government Should be Non-partisan and Rise Above Party Politics

by A. M. A. Muhith

Special to The Daily Star

although formed by the dominant party or coalition must, therefore, learn to be the government for all people.

Whoever is being unjust or unfair, whether he belongs to the ruling party or not, must be punished.

The right of all people, irrespective of their political beliefs, must be safeguarded. Even the most discredited here on, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, for example, must get the protection of law. Enterprising spirit and efficiency, wherever is available, must be encouraged for the good of the country. A mastan, a corrupt

should better change laws before acting without authority in any matter. Let us hope that after the second revolution the country will really start setting up the tradition of fair government. Party rule is a tenet of democracy but it must be the rule of law. In the discharge of state functions there should be subjugation of partisan interests to the common weal. The interim government has left some worthwhile precedents to follow. It is very important that we imbibe in our behaviour all the democratic values. We behave individually in a democratic fashion and learn to have consideration for

Government in a country functions not because it exercises coercive powers but because people want a system to operate. It is the willing allegiance of people to government rules and regulations, orders, restrictions and delimitations of rights and duties that lie at the root of the authority of the government.

public servant, a fugitive in the eyes of law, even if he is a stalwart of the ruling party, must be subjected to the due process of law not after the fall of the regime but during the exercise of power by the regime. Such a pattern of behaviour is a must for the establishment of the rule of law. And rule of law is both the objective and the foundation of the democratic process. It is easy to admonish politicians to rise above party politics but it is not very easy to actually act accordingly.

It is only a fond hope that the experience of immediate past has taught us a good lesson as to unfairness, corruption, repression, injustice, inequity and deprivation suffered under the anti-people dictatorship of General Ershad. We have repeatedly made it very clear that Government should be largely non-partisan and it should not only uphold but follow the normal law of the land as well.

There is an usual tendency for government to act illegally through executive orders. This tendency must be resisted and government

others. It is indeed heartening to experience an atmosphere of tolerance in the country and absence of hostility which marked the society in the last four years. Democracy in the last analysis is so much a matter of attitude and human behaviour.

Government in a country functions not because it exercises coercive powers but because people want a system to operate. It is the willing allegiance of people to government rules and regulations, orders, restrictions and delimitation of rights and duties that lie at the root of the authority of the government. This is why legitimacy of the rules and a minimum popularity are pre-conditions for effective government in any country. The illegitimacy of the Ershad regime has eroded faith in government, and the exercising powers on behalf of the government have lost people's confidence. Even when the government try to do something fair or beneficial the measures are suspected or resisted. Thus, decentralisation of retailing of electricity,

although it is a very sensible and economically justified measure, is drawing resistance. Conversion of government enterprises into public limited companies under holding companies fully or partially owned by government, is a good measure from the point of view of efficient management and financial autonomy of the enterprises. But the measure is suspect because the government is undertaking it, was illegitimate and corrupt. For good government, for restoration of people's natural obedience to authority and for instituting rule of law, a change of attitude is required on the part of mobilisers of public opinion. Political parties must learn not to oppose a measure for the sake of opposition. They must agree to support good measures even if they are introduced by a party to which they are opposed. This is the essence of a democratic system. Democratic opposition is reasoned consideration of steps taken by a government and supporting them when they are good. It has to be borne in mind by all parties that they can be in power today and out of power tomorrow. There is no permanent lease on Banga Bhaban or Gonobhavan by any one party.

To sum up, the basic elements of a democratic system for us are the following:

Neutrality in the exercise of administrative authority.

Rule of law and complete blindness towards party affiliation, social status or wealth of people in the docks.

Tolerance for others points of view and consideration for others.

Non-partisan approach to the common weal and economic welfare of citizens.

An open government where peoples' access to information is assured, justification of government measures are explicitly provided and the shroud of secrecy that surrounds government activities removed. (End of Part I)

This is the first of a three-part series on the issue and priorities facing the new government. A former Finance Minister of Bangladesh, A. M. A. Muhith has had a distinguished career as a civil servant, as an alternate executive director of the World Bank and the Executive Director of the Asian Development Bank and more recently, as a consultant to the United Nations Development Programme. The second article of the series will appear tomorrow.

No 'Disneyland' to Amuse Indians Perhaps

Jagan Nath writes from New Delhi

THE sun never sets on Disneyland, someone once said.

Unfailing crowd drawers, Disneyland amusement parks have sprouted in Japan, China and France in addition to the parks in the United States — in California and Florida.

Disneyland, too, would have risen in South India on the sprawling banks of the Hussainsagar Lake in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh state. Elaborate plans for it, however, were abandoned when its proponent, former State Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao, lost in the elections.

But the fancy for Disneyland is not shared by many in the North Indian state of Haryana, another prospective site for the park.

Mooted by Mr. Om Prakash Chautala when he was State Chief Minister, the project received assurance from Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal that it will push through come what may.

As a result, land has been earmarked for the project. The problem is that it spans 28 farming villages, whose inhabitants are now protesting its construction.

In a rally near Parliament House in New Delhi early this year, some 6,000 protesters demanded the shelving of the project. They presented a memorandum to the Prime Minister pointing out that although the Haryana government will compensate those to be displaced, farmers would be deprived of their only source of income.

Also, many of the inhabitants own large herds of cattle which they graze on the hills around the project site. These hills would be made off-limits by the project.

Another point is that some plots of the disputed land had earlier been allotted by the State Government for war widows.

While the original park in America is on 200 acres, the planned Haryana site is all of 28,000 acres. Surely, some say, it looks like a scheme for land-grabbing.

One of the leaders of the campaign, former Union Minister Rajesh Pilot, alleges irregularities in the project. He also says that such an amusement park "does not suit the Indian cultural setup."

Proponents of the project

point to the benefits to be derived from having a Disneyland — notably its potential for generating jobs and earning foreign exchange. The State-owned Haryana Tourist Development Corporation also maintains that the hills are barren and of little use.

The appeal of Mickey Mouse may be universal, but not to villagers who stand to be displaced by a proposed amusement park

But a senior professor of economics counters: "India ranks among the 10 poorest countries in the world. Millions of professionally qualified youth roam the streets in distress. How many such people can be absorbed by the Disneyland complex? Does the government know how much it should earn in a day to make it self-sufficient?"

The emotional state of the affected villagers is illustrated by a 70-year-old farmer who says: "We are now set to con-

vert these green fields into battle fields. We would rather die fighting than part with our land."

Because of furore over the project, the Haryana government has decided to reduce the project area to 4,000 acres.

OPINION

REJOINDER: Reforms in Pakistan

This refers to an article entitled "Nawaz Sharif Serves Warmed-over Plans" by Babar Ayaz from Karachi published in your esteemed daily of March 17, 1991. The contents of the article are misleading and need to be corrected.

The writer's contention that the Pakistan Government's de-nationalisation and privatisation policies have not enthused the country's entrepreneurs is not borne out by facts. The response from the private sector has in fact been overwhelming. The Government's offer of opening a private airline, for instance, drew instant response from 35 applicants. Similarly, 31 big business houses responded promptly to the Government's announcement permitting opening of private commercial banks. The private enterprise is also looking with deep interest at the wide area of entrepreneurship opened up to it by the government. This ranges from the development of infrastructure like power generation, telecommunications and road-building to services like banking, shipping and airlines. Already, about a dozen private firms have made their debut in the telecommunications sector. This big responses of the business and the industry can in no way be construed as a sign of skepticism of the government policies.

Ayaz's branding of the government reforms as a warmed-over version of the policy intentions of previous regimes is equally invalid. These reforms are quite distinct in their comprehensiveness from the piecemeal efforts of the past as well as in their well defined objective of creating a totally liberal environment in various spheres of economic activity. No less distinguishable is the government's willingness to give away powers and authority which in the past were used for political patronage. The other unmistakable distinction is the speed with which these reforms are being implemented. The previous government, for instance, had declared its intention of privatising the Muslim Commercial Bank. But this intention remained confined merely to the paper. It was Nawaz Sharif's government which not only took the decision but carried it out.

As a matter of fact, the government has announced by now a whole body of packages, concessions and reforms which are being vigorously implemented. Industrial investment has been completely deregulated. The entire country has been opened up to industrial ventures of all types except alcohol production. Security printing and defence

industry. Generous tax exemptions and credit facilities for industrial enterprises, especially in backward and rural areas, have been introduced. The money market has been freed from various controls and restrictions through the foreign exchange and payments reforms. Necessary legislation has been enacted to sell the nationalised commercial banks and other manufacturing units to the private sector. A high-level Deregulation and Disinvestment Committee headed by the Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee of Finance, is fully operational carrying out the task of disinvesting banks and financial institutions.

Ayaz's concern about non-cooperation of Pakistani bureaucracy in implementing the government's deregulation policy is misplaced. What he has failed to mention is that the high-level Privatisation Commission which is charged with carrying out this measure, is headed by the Chairman of the Standing Committee of Finance of the Senate, Upper House of Pakistan's Parliament, and includes from among the bureaucrats only the Secretaries of Ministries of Production and Industries whereas its main composition is formed by representatives of the Parliament, chartered accountants, economic experts and businessmen. The Commission has all the powers to invite applications for privatisation of public-sector industries and enterprises, evaluate bids and formulate recommendations for government's consideration. The Commission has already completed work in the disinvestment of 115 state-owned units out of a total 160. The 115 units will be disinvested in the next six months.

Ayaz's apprehensions of increased imports of "expensive" machinery in the wake of government incentives, leading to loss of jobs or creation of less jobs, is misconceived. Rather, the quickened process of economic development and industrialisation to be spurred by the government's reformatory measures would throw up more jobs both for the skilled and the unskilled. And the country's rural areas, contrary to his perceptions, would fare better in the new deal. The Government has announced special concessions, incentives and facilities for industrial ventures in the countryside.

Aftab Ahmad Siddiqi
Press Counsellor
The High Commission for Pakistan
Dhaka.

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.

Traffic situation

Sir, The untimely death of a meritorious student of the Economics Department, speaks volumes about our traffic discipline.

Even before this, there has been many such incidents and accidents, but it has not helped to improve the situation, as, perhaps, nobody cares.

Take for example, the prevailing condition during this Eid season. Those of us who have to go to office at a certain time and return back at a particular time, are the worst sufferers. We have to sit in our vehicle for hours, not to speak of sudden chances of getting a truck on top of us from nowhere. Often, the police controlling the traffic, is seen to be a silent observer.

Often it is those who are passing by get down from their respective carriers, be it private or public, and try to clear the jam. Surprisingly, they are often found to be successful!

Sometimes even, the police is found to be giving wrong directions. Is his training not complete before he is assigned the job?

Will anybody, especially the authorities concerned, please take note and do something about it before

there are more and more deaths and crippled people in this poor country of ours — where making a living for even a healthy person is quite tough — due to too much competition, created again by too many people and too less opportunities?

Taher Ahmed
Fakirapool, Dhaka.

Overbridge needed

Sir, We appreciate the number of overbridges already existing in our city, as they help reduce traffic jams at some points. People can safely cross a traffic busy road on an overbridge.

I would like to remind the authorities that another overbridge is needed, at another very important point of the city, i.e. the Gulistan area. Here the traffic is very heavy, and it takes ages for pedestrians, specially women and children, to cross the road. Often terrible accidents occur due to the high traffic.

Therefore, it will be highly appreciated, if authorities do decide to build the over-duce overbridge in this area. It will greatly help in improving the situation.

Wahid Ahmed
Gopbagh, Dhaka.

TT team

Sir, I was surprised to read in your paper the other day that the Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation have selected a four-member team to participate in the World Table Tennis Championships being held in Japan later this month.

Since its inception the BTTF have sent teams to almost all important tournaments including the World Championships held in Birmingham, England. Besides the BTTF have organised small and medium international tournaments at home also in which our players—male and female—participated and were convincingly beaten by third-rate players from other countries. The most glaring example being the 8th Asian Cup Table Tennis Tournament held in Dhaka last month, in which our players could not even match the Indians or the Pakistanis. Incidentally, these two countries are very lowly-placed in the world standing.

The Table Tennis fans of Bangladesh will have no objection if our team go to Japan as guests of the World Table Tennis Federation at their expenses but we shall certainly object if they are allowed to travel at the cost of public money for bringing shame to the country.

Naheed Khan
Gulshan, Dhaka.

Cement

Sir, I appreciate the item on cement by Khallur Rahman in your columns "Down to Earth" published on the 29th March, 1991. Cement is one of the most important commodities for the economic growth of every nation. Without this no country can be developed or industrialised. Underweight bags can be tolerated but adulterated cement is most harmful to the buildings, bridges and all other infrastructures a developing nation needs.

I request you to take up the matter and write in your paper often, so that the government's attention is drawn to this vital issue.

S. A. Chowdhury
Tipu Sultan Road
Dhaka.

'Green Channel' at ZIA

Sir, The Green Channel' at the Zia International Airport appears to be a farce. Smugglers coming in big numbers easily pass thru' this channel unchecked but genuine bonafide passengers are often made victims of checking. Why not abolish 'Green Channel' and let everyone go thru' checking zone before coming out. Fair treatment to every one, favouritism to none.

A victim
Dhaka.