

For a Consensus Constitution

For a nation which is only 20 years old, we have experimented a few times too many with what form of government we want for ourselves. We started with the parliamentary form, changed quite arbitrarily to one-party presidential form, changed again to multi-party presidential form. All this with intermittent periods of direct and quasi-military dictatorships. Now once again we are in the process of selecting — this time democratically — the type of government that we hope will be durable and popular.

The question of the form of government is far too important to be dealt with in any manner other than dispassionate, objective and truly non-partisan, keeping the national interest above everything else. Unfortunately there is a tendency to consider this as a partisan issue rather than a national one. This must be avoided at all costs. It is the duty of all parties, especially the two leading ones — BNP and AL and of their leaders, to approach this question with an open mind, without prejudice and pre-conceived notions.

Without taking any side in the debate, this journal feels that the existing form of government — the Ershad type with an all powerful president and a rubber stamp parliament — is totally unacceptable to the people. We have decidedly opined against such a government, and in favour of drastic changes in the existing system. To this end all political parties — especially the leading ones, the BNP and AL, are fully committed as expressed in their "Joint Declaration" of last November and numerous subsequent public pronouncements.

Following from the above, there is another point on which an unanimity of views exist among BNP, AL and its allies, 5-party alliance, Jamaat and others regarding the sovereignty of the Parliament. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia made it clear in her address to the Parliament on 7 April. Differences of opinion however exists between BNP and AL as to the implication of the term "sovereignty" of the Parliament. AL considers that only in a parliamentary form is the Parliament a sovereign body. BNP feels that a Parliament could be made sovereign with appropriate constitutional provisions, regardless of the type of government.

It is clear that we require expert advice on these complex legal matters. Under no circumstances should these issues be turned into matters of party politics. Let the legal experts, not necessarily from only within the Parliament but also those who are outside, give the nation their views. If necessary let us learn from the experiences of other countries like United Kingdom, India, France and the United States where the forms of government under consideration here, exist.

Please, no rhetorics and no populist sloganeering on this vital issue. What we need is a durable and permanent form of government that will last changes of parties and of policies. God save us if in every future election (are we being too optimistic in assuming that we will have regular elections in the future?) form of government becomes an issue.

To prevent that eventually what we need is a consensus among the major, if not all, political parties. The arithmetic of the current parliament membership does not give any party or its alliances the requisite votes to bring about constitutional amendments. The best scenario for BNP, assuming that it wins all the by-elections (ten in all), plus support from Jamaat and all the independents, leaves it short of the requisite two thirds majority. Therefore co-operation between the leading parties is the only answer. But will BNP and AL co-operates on this vital issue?

This journal calls upon all parties, especially BNP and AL to undertake intensive but sincere discussions between them and see what compromises they can make to give the nation a consensus constitution. It is the need of the hour and the patriotic duty of all those who profess to uphold national interest above everything else.

Saving Our Tomorrows

Yesterday, April 22, was the Earth Day. Presumably. For no inkling of it could be had anywhere in Bangladesh except on a page of one Dhaka daily. In its twenty years after launching the Earth Day had become quite a big international event promoting environment-consciousness. It is being observed by about 200 million people in about 140 countries of the world.

The theme of this year's Earth Day is "Make every day Earth Day", and according to Gaylord Nelson, the American Senator who started it, it has been designed to encourage people to change their daily lives to better the environment. There couldn't be any better recipe for a nation that was, according to Dr Salim Ali, the bird-man, suffering from a worst kind of 'environmental anarchy'. The great man was so disgusted with the goings on in Bangladesh — environmentally, that is — that he could not hold himself from such outburst of candour and outrage.

Things seem to have changed hardly after his last trip. From Baitul Mukarram to the Science Laboratory, dozens hawk hunted down migrating Siberian birds come to Bangladesh on their wintering expedition south. This is punishable by law — thanks to the law-makers. But no one to date has been punished for that so far, thanks to the Metropolitan Police. But those unfortunate birds are only a small symptom of a dreadful and fatally consuming disease that has come to take hold of this nation.

Proper observance of such days as the 'Earth Day' could, by way of promoting a kinder approach to things living around us, to build a kind of understanding in us for them, help us a lot in our awful situation. But, no way. The whole Earth Day thing was nothing more than something salvaged from a foreign mission's daily packet of press hand-outs — by some enterprising newsman on The Daily Star desk.

One of the best ways to make Bangladesh truly value environment and see the whole issue with some enlightened self-interest is for our people to hark back to the age-old 'taboos' and 'prejudices' about trees and water, the eatables and the daily menu, about the chores of relieving and cleansing oneself, so on and so forth. This may, however, again be a case of incurable optimism in a setting where man cringes not from killing man for small or even no profit at all. The society will have to be set on the path of sanity before it can respond to the finer and wiser needs of nature.

HUNDREDS of thousands of New Zealanders have taken to the streets in protest against the new National Party government's labour and social welfare reforms.

The century-old industrial relations system is to be replaced on May 1. Union leaders pledge they will defeat the measure before it leads to "anarchy and chaos."

The government has been accused of arrogantly choosing May Day, the international day of worker solidarity, to launch the Employment Contracts Bill that will strip unions of their traditional rights.

Schoolteachers, health workers and civil servants and other usually restrained labour groups have staged one-day strikes and headed protest rallies. Many of the 250,000 unemployed people have also protested and there have been demands for a national strike.

Several major newspapers stopped publishing for a day and in some city demonstrations, banks and shops were invaded. These were the biggest protests since New Zealand was split over the South African Springbok rugby tour in 1981.

Prime Minister Jim Bolger is already under fire for drastic changes to the state welfare system introduced at the beginning of April.

Speeches by Labour Minister Bill Birch and Finance Minister Ruth Richardson provoked a sharp attack from former National Party Prime Minister Sir Robert Muldoon, now a backbench MP.

He accused Richardson of smugly making the "usual clap-

New Zealanders Take to the Streets over Union Reforms

David Robie writes from Auckland

The New Zealand government has chosen May Day to introduce a radical industrial relations system. The drastic reforms effectively strip unions of their traditional rights. They have produced the biggest national upheaval since demonstrations against the South African Springbok rugby tour took place in 1981.

trap of cliches and slogans." If the government did not change its policies soon, he said, it was heading for defeat.

Although the government commands 70 per cent of the 97-seat Parliament, it gained barely 48 per cent of the vote in a general election last October. It is also troubled by rebel backbenchers.

Birch accused protesters of "selfishly ignoring" the country's economic plight, and claimed the unions were distributing "propaganda and lies" to their members.

Police Minister John Banks was booed and jeered at a rally when he declared the days of compulsory unionism were over and "useless" unions would go out of the back door.

Opposition Labour Party Leader Mike Moore endorsed the protesters—"If I was teacher I would be out on strike"—and pledged to repeal the legislation if Labour were re-elected.

Council of Trade Unions president Ken Douglas told protesters: "It takes away all previous protection that the union has been able to establish. It gives employers the right to lower our wages, worsen our working conditions and to tell you that you either accept their conditions or get the sack."

In a heated television exchange Douglas challenged Birch to show any guarantee that employers could not slash wages or sack staff. Birch could not answer.

The Labour government, which lost power last year, embarked on the most radical free-market reforms of any industrial country. The nation has now seen no net growth for five years and is suffering deep recession.

For many New Zealanders the Rogernomics policy—named after its architect, then Finance Minister Sir Roger

Douglas—became discredited. Former Prime Minister David Lange had growing misgivings and finally sacked Douglas in 1988 before he himself resigned a year later.

The Labour government's modified Rogernomics policy failed to save it at the election. Now the Bolger government has effectively re-embraced Rogernomics.

However, the new government has seemed increasingly frayed. It chose former Defence Secretary Denis McLellan, a bitter opponent of New Zealand's nuclear-free policy, as new ambassador to Washington in March.

Reaction was strong. Lange accused McLellan of being "the highest paid shoeshine boy in the world—and he'll not need a brush."

Then disclosures that many senior civil servants were earning salaries nudging \$200,000 a year at a time when weekly benefits to

single parents, sickness beneficiaries and the unemployed were going up by around 35 per cent stirred resentment. Charity agencies began food parcel handouts to deal with this new "poverty."

The labour legislation has stirred the most anger. "United we bargain—divided we beg" was among the slogans adopted by unions trying to defend their membership. Government officials accused the unions of "irresponsible fear-mongering."

Many workers see that everything they have worked for in life, including their children's futures, is under threat.

The New Zealand labour market has been tightly regulated by an industrial conciliation and arbitration system since last century.

The new law is believed to go further towards deregulation than the industrial legislation of any other Western nation—including the United

States, where unions at least enjoy legal recognition if workers choose to join them.

More than 700,000 workers belonging to 92 unions in a population of 3.4 million will be affected. About 500,000 New Zealanders are already under contract-type arrangements earning salaries or commissions.

Features of the old system to be removed include monopoly union rights to bargain collectively for workers' wages and conditions; compulsory union membership determined by three-yearly ballots; and employment awards with provisions imposing coverage on workers and employers not involved in negotiations.

Replacing them will be a contractual employment system in which agreements will cover only direct parties to negotiations. Workers and employers can negotiate either individual or collective contracts and may appoint bargaining agents to represent them.

However, the legislation fails to include any formula for appointing bargaining agents. Critics say employers will legally be entitled to block collective bargaining and force workers into individual contracts. — GEMINI NEWS.

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India Embarks on Literacy Revolution

by Sumanta Banerjee

The Daily Star Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI: For the last four decades since Independence, India has passed through a number of Revolutions. First, it was the Green Revolution in agriculture. Then came the White Revolution that increased its milk output. This was followed by the Blue Revolution to develop its fisheries. The latest is the Black-and-White Revolution, aimed at removing one of the darkest spots of Indian society—illiteracy.

The government has initiated an ambitious programme—known as NLM, or the National Literacy Mission—to bring about total literacy in the country. The programme is already underway in 36 selected districts all over India covering a target population of 15 million from the age group of 15 to 50, the under-15-year age group having been targeted for enrollment in the primary schools. The 1991 census indicates that a little less than half of India's total male population and about 65% of female population still remain illiterate. It is expected that the NLM will be able to bring under its fold these people in the next few years.

The NLM has certain unique features. First, the classes for imparting literacy—known as LCs or Literacy Centres—situated in every village, are run by Voluntary Teachers known as VTs, who are mainly recruited from among high school students, primary teachers or unemployed educated youths of the localities. They are first trained in crash courses to enable them to teach the unlettered the elementary three R's in lessons that run for 200 hours—spread over several months. Classes are usually

held daily for two hours, mainly in the evenings to allow the agricultural workers, daily wage labourers, artisans and women from poor households to attend them after the end of their day's work. Changes in the timings are often made, depending on the nature of work of the rural poor. Thus, in some villages classes are held in the afternoons for fishermen who have to go out for their catch in the rivers in the evening, or for housewives who may be reluctant to move out from their homes in the evenings.

Secondly, the NLM programme does not limit itself to

porated in the campaign. This has encouraged community participation. Villagers are composing songs on their own on the changes in rural life brought about by the mass literacy drive.

Let me hasten to add that the NLM experiment had not been a smooth sailing affair from the beginning. Young committed bureaucrats (the district collectors, sub-divisional officers and block development officers at the village

strations as well as door-to-door propaganda. The campaign seems to have yielded the desired results, as evident today from the enthusiasm generated among the rural poor—at least in some of the areas.

One of the areas which I visited in March this year was Burdwan in West Bengal. What impressed me most during visits to the villages was the tremendous enthusiasm demonstrated in particular by

replies: "I'll be able to make out whether I'm being paid the exact amount by my employer when I sign the receipt for my wages." "I can read the number and the destination plate of the bus which I have to board to go to the town." "The local grocer cannot overcharge me now that I can read the price tag of the commodity that I'm buying." "I no longer feel that I'm small in front of the 'bhadraloks'."

For women in particular, the NLM programme has brought about a sea-change. Apart from teaching the alphabet and simple arithmetic, the primers emphasize lessons on

newly learnt alphabets. She reminded me that she was keeping the 'rosa'—but added that it did not prevent her from keeping her other obligations—the need to attend the literacy classes.

The rural literacy programme initiated under the National Literacy Mission has indeed generated an enthusiasm in the Indian countryside. But the question remains: can literacy alone bring about the socio-economic change that is necessary in the rural society? The new generation of rural neoliterate people, groomed under the NLM, conscientised about issues like health care, land legislations, environmental protection, will demand that the administration pay heed to these issues. Will the administration be able to meet these demands, given the prevalent rural socio-economic structure, where health centres do not have the necessary medicines and health care facilities, where private industrial contractors—in league with the local bureaucracy—are destroying the environment by felling trees, where vested landed gentry continue to cheat the agricultural labourers of their due wages? The reality at the grassroots level in Indian rural society demands a total, comprehensive policy of radical socio-economic changes in the villages. Functional literacy, as envisaged by the NLM, can only be a part of such a package programme of basic changes. It can accelerate the changes by motivating the rural poor, by conscientising them about the relevant issues. But ultimately it depends on the political will of the ruling powers to bring about the transformation of the traditional rural society—the objective of the mass literacy programme.

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teaching the unlettered only the three R's. Moving beyond the strategy of training them in signing their names or simple arithmetic, the programme aims at conscientising them in matters like health and medical care, eradication of superstition, communal harmony and the provisions of land laws that are meant to benefit the rural poor. Primers which are being taught at the LCs have lessons which seek to link training in literacy with issues which crop up in the daily experiences of the poor villagers.

Thirdly, the NLM has drawn upon the local cultural folk forms to create the favourable environment for the mass literacy drive in the different regions. In West Bengal for instance, traditional folk styles like Gambhira, Tarja, Baul, Bhatiali, Jatra, Koiri Lalar, and tribal dances have been incor-

level who had been in charge of the campaign) as well as the young VTs had to overcome numerous obstacles in the semi-feudal rural society where upper caste landed interests still feel that their servants and agricultural labourers may get out of control if they become educated, where the male heads of family think that their womenfolk may go astray if they go to schools, where the small farmer fears that his son may not continue to help him in cultivating his little plot and seek instead better opportunities in the cities once he becomes aware of the advantages of education. A long and patient campaign to convince and persuade the villagers had to be initiated before the actual starting of the LCs. In 1990—the International Literacy Year—this environment-building campaign was organized through countryside demon-

the tribal Santhal daily wage labourers and Muslim women from poor households. It was mainly the poorer strata of rural society—the agricultural labourers, the artisans, the socially deprived sections like women and backward caste people—who came to attend the night classes braving the fatigue that invariably tended to depress them at the end of a hard day's labour. I watched their tired and wrinkled faces, but their eyes lit up by a fervour when reading the letters on the blackboard, and their fingers laboriously writing out those letters in their tattered exercise books in the dim light of the kerosene-lamps. When asked why they were taking the trouble to attend these classes, their spontaneous replies gave an inkling of their daily compulsions which were driving them to the LCs. Here are a few samples of their

topics like equal rights for women, their right to decide on issues like having children or on the dowry problem. This emphasis seems to have touched a hidden chord in the rural feminine psyche. What struck me was the response of the Muslim women who come out from their sheltered environs—often defying the constraints imposed on them by the local 'mullahs'—to attend the LC classes. I visited an LC in Durgapur, conducting classes in the afternoon, specially for the local Muslim women. It was run by two young Muslim women VTs—girls who had just sat for their secondary examination. The women who attended the classes were wives and daughters of local Muslim shopkeepers. A middle-aged Muslim woman came up to me, proudly showing her exercise book where she scrawled her

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.

Ingratitude!

Sir, S.M. Ali's "My World" has become an interesting and occasionally memory-stirring reading for me. It must have fascinated many others equally. I sincerely share his frustration and agony, if I may say so, for not succeeding even to get paper recognition from the post-independence government of Bangladesh for some South-East Asian journalist friends of Bangladesh who did so much for us during the war of independence in 1971 (The Daily Star 29.3.91).

Mr. Ali's reminiscence of the past agony reminds mine! Poet Gobinda Haldar of Calcutta composed a number of patriotic songs for 'Shwadin Bangla Betar Kendra'. Two of his famous songs are: "Moora Ekti Phulkey Bachabo Bale Yudha Kor" (We are at war

to protect a flower) and "Purbo Digantey Shurja Utchhey Rakta Lal, Rakta Lal, Rakta Lal" (The blood-red Sun has risen on the eastern horizon).

Shortly after independence, the then government declared rewards for some of those musicians and composers who volunteered their services for Shwadin Bangla Betar Kendra. Alas! to the surprise of many, while selecting the names of such friends of Bangladesh whose inspirations and writings did really hasten our independence and till to-day inspire many Bangladeshis, myself included, on supreme occasions like Independence Day, Victory Day, the name of Poet Gobinda Haldar was omitted. But in the case of the song: "Shona Ekti Mujbarer Kantha Thekey Lakhbar Kantha Sharer Dhani Protiddhani

Akashey Batashey Uthey Roni" (Listen! from the lonely voice of Mujib millions of voices are created, vibrated and echoed in the air and sky), both the singer and composer were rewarded; whereas in the case of the most enchanting song: "Moora Ekti Phulkey Bachabo Bale Yudha Kor" only the singer, Apel Mahmood, was rewarded. The great composer Gobinda Haldar was thus denied his due credit and recognition. The lapse was no doubt a great shame and created resentment in the literary circles of Calcutta but it fell into deaf ears!

However, Poet Gobinda Haldar in a personal letter to me wrote: "Whatever I did it was done for the people of Bangladesh and not in the hope of any reward. My love for Bangladesh is eternal." Poets are great and magnanimous indeed!

Abdul Kader, Purana Paltan, Dhaka.

the authority for negligence to their duties. Nowadays there is a high incidence of hijacking and other crimes in the city of Dhaka. It has been reported by many victims that the policemen even did not come to rescue them from the hands of the hijackers, although they were seen patrolling near the place of occurrence.

In the past, police authorities took action against a number of policemen who failed to perform their duties.

But the situation has not been improved. People in the metropolis are badly feeling the need of security. Before going to adopt any measure for improving the situation, I think, it is necessary to find answers to the following questions pertaining to why policemen are neglecting their duties: (i) Do they themselves feel insecure? (ii) Don't they have enough training to encounter such situation? (iii) Is there any fault in the recruitment system of the police personnel? (The job of police requires honest and dedicated person who is always ready to risk his life for the safety and security of the

people's life and property.) (iv) Are there any other major problem which is obstructing the policemen in discharging their duties smoothly?

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Public transport

Sir, Dhaka city is expanding at an alarming pace with problems.

Besides creating a population explosion and other problems, this fast growth has resulted in an acute shortage of public transport.

Despite the fact that a large number of private buses, mini-buses have been introduced in the city of Dhaka, it is a common sight to see that these vehicles have passengers beyond capacity not only inside, but quite a good number of them hanging outside.

Therefore, it is very difficult for ladies or for that matter it is quite impossi-

ble for young girls to get on in one such buses. On the other hand, the fares of the other transports like autorickshaw, Mishuk, or even the commonplace rickshaw are quite high and beyond the purse of the middle class.

But it is this middle-class which has to use public transports daily to go to their place of work and return home and also on other compulsions. So a considerable amount from the salary drawn by these people are spent on transports. How much remains to meet the exorbitant house rent, dear foodstuff, children's education and other inevitable expenses?

So it is our earnest request that the concerned authorities please look into the matter, and find a solution. If needed some more vehicles should be brought in to ply on the roads of Dhaka to improve the traffic situation.

This is an urgent problem and needs immediate attention.

Sayeeda Haider Hatirpool, Dhaka.