

Dhaka, Wednesday, October 2, 1991

Was it Necessary?

The most charitable comment that can be made about BNP's promulgation of the Ordinance amending the Election of the President Act of 1991 is that it has shot itself in the foot. The most uncharitable comment would be that it has shot democratic spirit in the heart. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. In one not so well thought out move the ruling party has plunged itself into a major political controversy, revealing a serious lack of finesse in its capacity to navigate through tricky waters of politics. The Ordinance brings to the fore fundamental legal, moral and political questions that the ruling party has quite unnecessarily brought upon itself, raising widespread doubts in the public mind about its political maturity and capacity to operate within the norms of parliamentary democracy.

Given the fact that the Presidential election process was already on, and that even the date was announced, the promulgation of the Ordinance can be construed as little else other than a direct interference in that process. If the intention was malafide — we would like to believe it was not — then certainly it is a bad start to the parliamentary democratic system. And if, on the other hand, the intention was bonafide — to believe which we need to stretch our imagination quite a bit — then we need to ask what sort of political judgement could lead a party to use a constitutional amendment to take care of what is essentially an issue of party discipline.

The Ordinance raises some fundamental questions as to the role of the members of parliament. How do we balance the obvious need to enforce party discipline alongside the far greater need to uphold the spirit of democracy? How can we have a 'sovereign parliament with members whose actions are to be governed by ordinances as the one just promulgated? We have to find a balance.

The promulgation of the Ordinance has stupefied BNP's supporters and has given its opponents a genuine cause to rally behind. In one hasty stroke BNP has made the presidential contender, Justice Badrul Haider Choudhury, a much more formidable candidate than he could have hoped to be. A reaction to the Ordinance may fetch him more support as the candidate of the opposition, which the political pleading of his main backer, AL failed to give him over the last few days.

Leaving aside the question of political fallout outside, the promulgation of the Ordinance has perhaps dealt the 'unkindest' blow to BNP's own MPs. There could have been no clearer indication of the party hierarchy's lack of confidence upon their own members. Whatever the party may gain through this draconian disciplinary action, it will have lost far more in terms of goodwill and repressed resentment. Those who have advised the Prime Minister to take this course of action are, at best, guilty of political naivete of the most rudimentary kind. Questions have been raised as to the process in which the Ordinance was adopted, raising serious doubts as to the democratic functioning of the ruling party itself. The decision was hasty, ill-advised and one in which a significant section of party leadership itself was not taken into confidence.

However this political drama should unfold, all parties must try their utmost to avoid any constitutional crisis. Whatever happens, we must remember that our democracy is still at a nascent stage, and that in our eagerness to make the parliamentary system perfect we should not complicate matters in such a way that democracy itself suffers.

Putting All Old People on Pension

Yesterday Bangladesh, with the other states of the world, observed the International Day for the Elderly. It is but natural that the seriousness of the observance will be in proportion to the relevance the problem of the old ones has to each society's prevailing reality and the amount of importance each of them attaches to each. It is perhaps universally accepted that with the rise of the nuclear family in the West the aged people started losing those that would stand by them in their hour of need. And the process has reached a stage where on the whole the elderly are being treated as no better than social rejects. There is no doubt that the Day for the Elderly is an attempt to right that wholly wrong social phenomenon.

Although in the oriental scheme of social forms and equations, the elderly are much better placed than their western counterparts there is little scope for compliance. Nuclear family is fast replacing the traditional joint family of the Indian subcontinental vintage. There is no question of stopping the march of the nuclear family and as such we should better be starting to devise ways to stop alienating the old ones from the family as well as the society right now.

There are three aspects to the problem in our situation. In the professional and service classes people past sixty are retired from active life as well as from 'society'. The society, in one of its stranger manifestations, chooses to send them into exile. This is silly. The capacities and capabilities of all persons retired from professions and services must somehow be pressed into social profit. Top scientists, educationists and intellectuals should be very usefully re-employed. So should be the case of all retiring from managerial and administrative jobs.

In the villages where most of our people still live the old values tarry a bit longer than they do in the towns. The old ones there are decidedly better off in all respects — if only their families are better off. Armed with the traditional all-obligation-to-age privilege and emboldened by the success of keeping the family out of waters in a very challenging situation, the elderly seem to be rather oppressive. Here is a strange case of the elderly creating problems for themselves. They must learn to come to terms with the younger ones coming to take the command.

The situation is reverse for all the famished families of the villages. With no rice in the pot the old world values dry up soon and the septuagenarian father or even the mother is forced by circumstances to find whatever work and fend for themselves.

With even a bit of better organization in our society and a slightly better governance we could possibly put all people past 65 on pension. This could promote all of them, all of a sudden into something that their families would prize until their death. And this is not at all a tall order.

Let the International Day for the Elderly find true relevance in our country.

BANGKOK — Seven out of ten of the world's poorest of the poor live in Asia and the Pacific.

Widespread absolute poverty in fact reflects the fact that social progress has not kept pace with economic growth in the region.

According to recent estimates, the world population of absolutely poor people amounts to at least 1,118 million. Of those, more than 800 million (72 per cent) reside in Asia and the Pacific.

Absolute poverty is described as that level of poverty which is so low as to be marked by deprivation of the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and essential services such as clean water, sanitation, health care and education.

The phenomenon of absolute poverty engulfs entire

Social Progress Out-of-step with Economic Growth

Asian and Pacific countries must allocate 25-30 per cent of their financial resources to social expenditures for a proper balance between economic and social progress

communities and social groups and may be transmitted from one generation to the next," the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reports. "It is responsible for hundreds of millions of lives lived in pain and hunger."

ESCAP recognises the need for sustained economic growth as an essential element to the eradication of absolute poverty. But it cautions that economic growth by itself cannot ensure absolute poverty will be eliminated.

This is why ESCAP is pushing for other means than the 'trickle down' effects in alleviating poverty. The strategy must also look at social policy, planning and programming.

"Absolute poverty contributes to social unrest and political instability," ESCAP says. "It thus reinforces authoritarian patterns of social organisation, which are by their very nature resistant to the resolution of the prevailing poverty situation."

OPINION

For the Sake of the People....

A Political Observer

Under the recently amended constitution the President of the Republic will be elected by the parliament. The People have already elected the Parliament; now their only role is to watch and hopefully learn about the democracy at work. However, at this time our elected parliamentary membership represents some 47 percent the BNP, 33 percent the Awami League group and 20 percent others including the Jatiya Party and the Jamaat. There are 30 female nominated members who swell the BNP percentage in the Parliament to 57, and thus they give the party an overall majority in the House. But, there are more facts in the situation and as well the nuances of a practising democracy.

The opposition Awami League high command had met several times on the issue but did not take any decision for fear that it could be premature.

After the BNP announcement the Awami League immediately got into the act and obtained the consent of Justice Badrul Haider Choudhury to run for the presidency as a 'consensus' candidate. But his nomination has been proposed and seconded by senior Awami League parliamentary leaders. So, despite of his loud claim of political neutrality, Justice Choudhury is hard put to convince his multiparty parliamentary electorate. The confusion has started the flurry of debates.

The backgrounds of our present parliamentary form of government are all too well known. The only point worth repeating here is the principle of consensus which has crowned the anti-autocracy movement and resuscitated a democratic government in the country. For its nuance, democracy never means the tyranny of the majority. The practice of democracy is a process of consensus development with weightage given to diverse interests and opinions. Our 'democratic' government is only some months old. And here in a society of literate minority one would think that the educated leadership has more than its share of responsibility.

In the above context it was most misleading to read the lead columns of an English language weekly of the 27th September, and the BNP Secretary General's statement reported in the Daily Star of the same day. In the article published in the weekly couple of misconstrued facts led the author to his apocalyptic conclusion on the fate of Justice Badrul Haider Choudhury's candidacy. The right perspective of those facts were that in 1972, Awami League, the only party in the Parliament, elected nonpartisan Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury to the office of the President. This precedence was followed again in 1973 after the national election held on the basis of 1972 constitution. On the Indian scene, the first head of state of India was Lord Mountbatten. Even later, Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was a nonpartisan President of the Republic of India. And as far as I know the Congress government of India has nearly always discussed its presidential candidate very widely within the electoral constituency and in the media. The BNP Secretary General in his reported state-

ment has hinted lack of judgement on the part of Justice Badrul Haider Choudhury in consenting to become a nonpartisan candidate and said that to elect a president "on the basis of national consensus, was not reasonable."

Obviously those views and opinions and the different campaigns have confused the total electorate and panicked the majority party BNP to rush through an ordinance amending the Election of President Act 1991. The meeting of the MPs to elect a President is not a session of the Parliament. This meeting, as has been already announced, has been called by the chief Election Commissioner to convene as an electoral college. Here, the different party whips can endeavour to maintain their respective position which is partly enforced by the procedure of open balloting. But, the ordinance to apply the provisions against floor-crossing on a non legislative issue vindicates a serious lack of the party high command's confidence of its own parliamentary membership.

The new situation cites a greater proof of Justice Badrul Haider Choudhury's nonpartisan claim than what he could have achieved by his own efforts in the first three days. It also belies the contention of the BNP Secretary General quoted earlier and suggests a consensus candidate as the mood of the time. So, next week even if the BNP should win they election it will be said to be on account of the ordinance. Therefore the prognosis either way is unfortunate for our inexperienced and fragile democracy.

of institutions in which the poor can air their grievances.

"In virtually all countries of the region, the issue of human rights requires urgent attention," ESCAP says. Universal basic education, including literacy, is one essential means to that end as it can provide the necessary awareness on human rights.

Improved access to the formal justice system is the second means. A third essential avenue is land reform which can provide the landless poor with the means of achieving self-reliance.

People must also participate in decision-making processes. Most people in the region are unable to contribute to decisions that affect their own lives. This inability, ESCAP says, is directly linked to people's exclusion from the decision-making processes which control their social situation.

ESCAP suggests that the year 2000 should be designated as a benchmark year for the attainment of specific results in the Social Development Strategy's objectives. Countries in the region should also formulate national programmes of action for social development.

Each country, in turn, must use its own resources for financing national programmes of action. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has estimated that governments should allocate 25-30 per cent of their total financial resources to social expenditure if a proper balance is to be maintained between economic and social progress.

The region has been witness to innumerable sporadic efforts to address the challenge of social development," ESCAP notes. "Most of these efforts seem to remedy social problems as they appear."

Instead of this "band-aid" approach, countries should prevent the emergence of social problems by guiding the course of social development directly towards defined social objectives. Some countries have done this by devising social development programmes within overall development planning.

"Rarely, however, has planning for social development in the region considered the need to account for the interaction among social development issues and between social and economic development issues," ESCAP says.

— *Depthnews Asia*

Intrigue Slows Summit Pageant of Progress

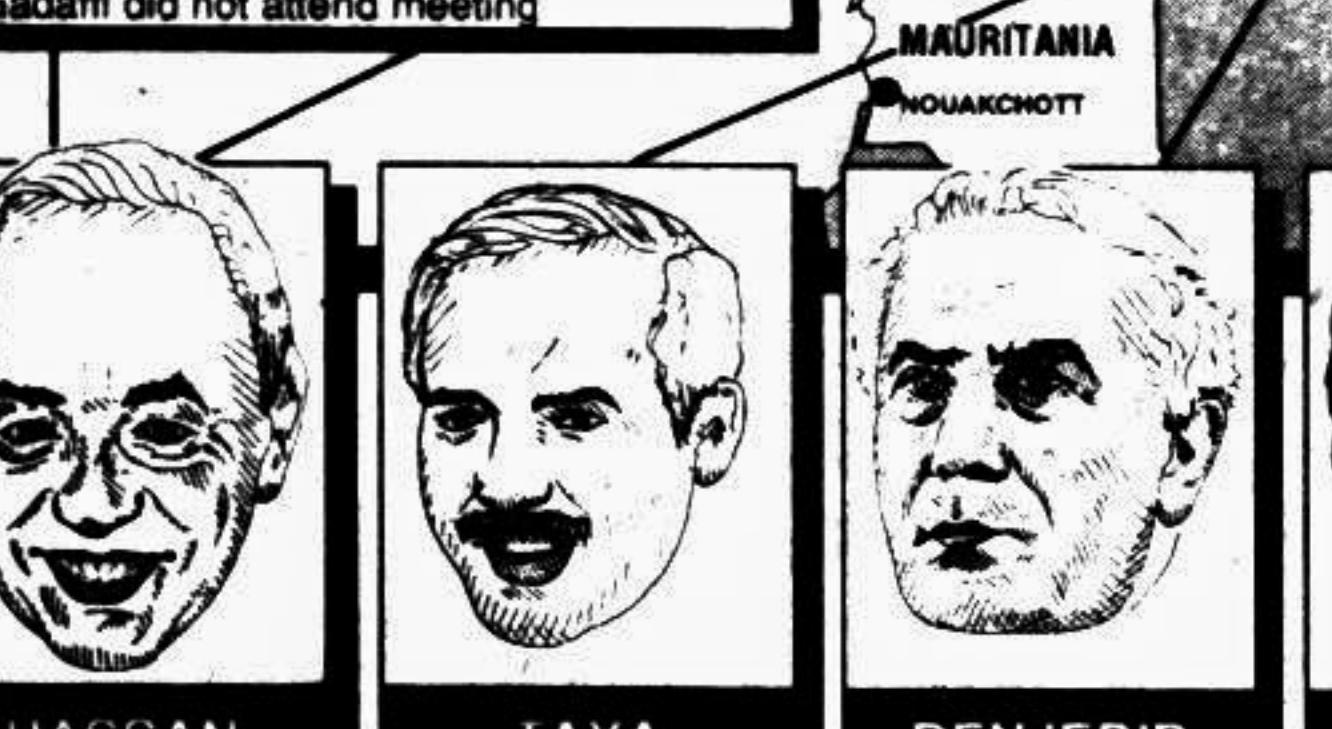
Allan Thompson writes from Casablanca

After two days of hard bargaining at their summit meeting in Casablanca, leaders of the five Maghreb countries of North Africa agreed to establish a permanent Arab Maghreb Union secretariat in Morocco. The move is a step towards creating a supra-national body over and above the five governments. But, in the flurry to agree on a permanent seat in Casablanca, little else was done to advance the Union.

Summit decisions

- Permanent secretariat in Morocco
- Parliament in Algeria
- Investment bank in Tunisia
- Maghreb court in Mauritania
- Maghreb university in Libya
- Move to agreement by majority, not consensus

*Gaddafi did not attend meeting



(Islam), but were long divided it wanted to house the permanent secretariat in the massive structure built in Tunis for the Arab League, since gone back to Cairo. In exchange for giving up its claim to the secretariat, Tunisia was promised that the first secretary-general of the AMU would be a Tunisian.

The five countries of the Maghreb — which means "the west" or "where the sun sets" in Arabic — share a common culture, language and religion

That would mean complete freedom of movement for both

goods and people.

But despite an impressive list of accords on various aspects of economic integration since AMU was created, little concrete action has been taken to make the Union work. Critics blame leaders for their unwillingness to give up any of their sovereignty, but creation of a permanent secretariat would seem to be a positive step forward.

The leaders also agreed effectively to do away with a rule

that all agreements must be reached by consensus. While consensus is preferable, a majority vote will now carry a decision in all cases except war and peace. Morocco's King Hassan announced at the closing session of the summit.

In the last-minute flurry to make a deal on where to base the AMU bodies, there seemed little movement forward on what those institutions should be doing.

The leaders also agreed effectively to do away with a rule

There was no announcement on the long-awaited Maghreb identity card that would facilitate freedom of movement (it is still hard enough moving within Maghreb countries, let alone between them), and with a proposed free trade zone only two years away, there were no details on how it would come about.

The delicate nature of relations between the five leaders was highlighted by the fact that Libya's Muammar Gaddafi did not attend the summit and gave no reason for his absence. Instead, he sent his second in command, Abdussalam Jalloud, in a clear snub to King Hassan — who, incidentally, did not attend the last summit in Ras Lanouf, Libya.

In their final communiqué, delivered in the splendour of the Casablanca Royal Palace by the Moroccan Maghreb Affairs Minister, Abdussalam Barakat, the five reaffirmed their support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

However, they remained vague about what their position would be on a Middle East peace conference. They would "follow with interest" efforts towards an international conference, they communiqué said.

While the Maghreb leaders can verbally support the PLO, their opinions differ greatly when it comes to what to do about a peace conference.

Gaddafi is a member of the hardline, anti-Israel school and would surely refuse to take any part in such a conference. But Hassan, who has one of the largest Jewish populations in the Arab world, has gone so far in the past as to meet with an Israeli prime minister.

Indeed, it is even rumoured that Morocco could play host to the international peace conference, scheduled for October, which would allow Hassan to act either as host or Maghreb representative — which ever fits best.

The Maghreb leaders also agreed to work together to defend the rights of the estimated three million Maghreb who live and work in Europe. They condemned the continuing

embargo against Iraq and said that more effort was needed in the Maghreb to develop relations with other economic groupings in Africa.

Most of the action will be taking place on the European front — by far the most important for the Maghreb. A meeting will be held in January of the heads of state of the so-called "four plus five" group of the five Maghreb countries and Portugal, Spain, France and Italy.

The Casablanca summit was marked by all the usual pageantry — and intrigue. Hassan personally gave each of the heads of state a red-carpet reception at the airport. There was an uncomfortable awkwardness when Jalloud stepped out of the Libyan Arab Airlines jet instead of Gaddafi, but the king had already dispatched a lesser figure than himself out onto the tarmac to receive the Libyan Number Two.

After a brief opening ceremony, the five went into the first of two closed-door sessions that day. Throughout the day, small herds of briefcase-toting officials moved back and forth between the Sheraton Hotel, where they were staying, and the elegant Hotel Mansoor, where the heads of state were meeting.

When a gala dinner scheduled for 8 pm still had not begun by 10, it was evident something was amiss. King Hassan arrived just before 11 pm and, notably, did not receive any of his guests at the door.

Tunisia's Ben Ali and Jalloud arrived together, as if they had been in conference, while the Algerian press service reported Ben Ali and Algerian President Chadli Benjedid had also had a separate meeting during the day. There was hard bargaining going on.

The next morning it was rumoured Ben Ali and his team were already on the way to the airport, but when the closing session opened at around 3 pm, Ben Ali was in his seat.

In the end, the summit was productive in that it began the process of creating some supra-national institutions. It also illustrated the disproportionate importance of personal relations between the leaders of five non-democratic countries.

— *GEMINI NEWS*

Traffic jam in Motijheel C/A

Sir, The citizens of Dhaka city are very pleased to see that the Prime Minister has recently taken personal interest in removing the traffic jam. She has directed the concerned authorities to take positive steps by way of constructing some link roads and thereby diverting the traffic from the main roads. Unfortunately the perpetual jam in the Motijheel Commercial Area has not been taken into consideration. This is one of the most important areas in the city. People of Motijheel area can also be re-

moved considerably by opening this road to public.

Safdar Ahmed Chowdhury

Dhaka

Cantonment Education Board

Sir, Many among us feel that there should be a separate Board for conducting SSC and HSC examinations of Cadet Colleges and cantonment schools and colleges. So far I know, there is a Cantonment Education Board in Pakistan. Why not create such a Cantonment Board in Bangladesh?

In fact, students in cadet

colleges are being taught under special conditions, quite different from the learning situation of a general school or college. Hence, students of general schools and colleges should be allowed to sit in SSC and HSC exams under general Education Board while the examinations for cadet colleges should be conducted by the Cantonment Board. This will create an impartial and healthy competition among the students as well as among the institutions.

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