

# There is No Choice but Privatisation

## A Stark Choice

Violence, in any sphere of society and under whatever excuse, is abominable. But the violence which is threatening to throttle the education of our young and influence the easily impressionable youth in the most deviant of ways, is perhaps the most objectionable of the lot.

Take the killing on the campus last Thursday. There is little doubt in the public mind that Maniruzzaman Badal was the victim of a fratricidal conflict within the student wing of the opposition Awami League. Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, who was addressing a function a stone's throw away from the spot where Badal was gunned down, had a brutal reality exposed to her. The violence that can be used against opponents can also turn inwards and threaten to tear her own party and her credibility as a responsible national leader apart.

That truth is applicable not only to Sheikh Hasina alone. The student wing of the governing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is far from averse to the use of firearms in the pursuit of their sectional interest. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia too is aware of the threat that infighting within her student wing and the use of terror methods pose to her authority as head of the government. In a nutshell, both the leaders are riding on identical boats, with the watching multitude not quite sure which hands are really on the helms.

As incidents upon incidents in the past have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, the issue or problem is not the individuals involved in terrorism, but the practice of armed politics itself. There is every chance that Sheikh Hasina may take some drastic action against those responsible for Thursday's violence, much the same way Khaleda Zia expelled a number of stalwarts from the BNP's student front not so long ago. Expulsions have become, for some curious reasons, a favourite demand among politicians, who seem to pretend that if a handful of hooligans were thrown out of a particular party, then everything would suddenly become what we wanted them to be all these years.

This, unfortunately, is nothing but a pipedream. The brutal fact is simply this: musclemen and arms-bearers thrive inside political parties not because they are psychopathic individuals, but because the politicians themselves, for a variety of reasons, often consider it necessary to patronise such elements and tactics. Expelling a dozen would merely allow another dozen to move up the party ladder, under the patronisation of a leader on the ascendancy.

Use of street power during the anti-Ershad movement, with heavy reliance on the daring and the desperate, was considered a necessary evil because the regime had not left open any democratic avenues for protest. But times have changed, and use of musclepower can no longer be regarded as a bonafide tactics in the politics of this country.

Time, however, has not run out to put the situation right. Both the leading parties should now accept that the practice of keeping armed cadres is destroying all prospects for the growth of healthy politics in this country. That cannot be what the parties themselves desire, because if democracy cannot flourish then politics, of the kind they claim to preach, cannot survive either. It is a stark choice between democracy and anarchy. The answer does not lie in the expulsion of a few goons, but the utter disavowal of arms, and the refusal by all parties to grant political shelter to all those who may wish to continue in the old ways. The decision to throw the philosophy as well as personnel of violence onto the rubbish heap has to be unequivocal and irreversible.

## US Navy in Singapore

It is good for the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) that the differences within the six-nation alliance over Singapore's agreement with Washington to have the US navy use the facilities in the city republic have been resolved. It is now clear that far from setting up a full-fledged base in Singapore, only a part of the US naval force, now using the Subic Bay in the Philippines, will be using the ultra-modern facilities in the island state for repairs and renovation. Whether the people, especially the media, will describe the area where US ships will be berthed for repairs as a "base" remains to be seen. At the moment, Singapore's partners in ASEAN, that is, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei, are assured that the US navy is not finding a new home in Singapore, after leaving the Philippines by the end of this year.

Not surprisingly, at the initial stage, serious reservations over the Singapore-Washington agreement came from Kuala Lumpur. After all, it was the initiative of Malaysia that, in 1971, led to the signing of an accord among the then five-member alliance, declaring ASEAN as a "zone of peace and neutrality." This kind of declaration is open to many interpretations. However, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 1971 would have lost a good deal of its meaning had one of the members of the grouping had offered a military base to an outside power.

Again, to varying degrees, both Malaysia and Indonesia, two of the closest neighbours of Singapore, are anything but comfortable with the acquisition of the latest weapons by the city republic. The understanding reached between Singapore and Washington only added a new dimension to the shared concern of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

While we do not question the right — or perhaps even the need — of Singapore to offer some limited facilities to the US navy, we cannot help wondering if the ASEAN is adjusting itself to the post-cold war era. There is no set course for any country, or a member of ASEAN, to follow in the new climate prevailing in the world today. However, there is little doubt that the course does not lie through rising defence budgets or increased involvement in new military arrangements. Let us hope all members of the alliance will start seeing the situation from this perspective, sooner rather than later.

**N**APOLION habitually refused to answer his correspondence for six months on the assumption that it posed problems that might go away if he ignored them. The best way to solve a problem is to avoid it, that seemed to have been the underlying assumption of the autocrat. Perhaps it was ideal for a regime whose primary purpose had been self-perpetuation or self-aggrandisement. In the modern world, even for the dictators problems must be resolved. They would not evaporate into thin air over time. In Bangladesh, the world's poorest country, facing the most serious challenge of development, there simply cannot be any running away from problems, save and except to the graveyard.

Decisions are therefore a must and it is more important to take decisions on time instead of waiting for the decision to be right. Timeliness is critical in decision-making. It is the essence of development. To err is human. Mistakes are bound to be there. But in search of the right decision if time is lost, we lose everything. Hit the iron, when it is hot; otherwise the stubborn difficulties, the irksome constraints cannot be overcome.

Government of Bangladesh today, in search of the right decision is missing the forest because of the trees. There is a tremendous lack of decision in every sphere. As a result, almost half the financial year is almost over, the construction season, particularly the ideal time for all sorts of earthwork, has arrived already, but decisions on projects and programmes are still pending. In order to find the delinquents, the wrong doers, the entire economy cannot be ravaged. Even if it appears to be outright fraud, prima facie, the compulsions of economic growth are of over-riding importance and must not ever be compromised.

Of vital interest to the nation is the transition to liberal market economy. Privatisation must not only be in words, it must be firmly established through meaningful deeds. In this all important task, the opposition of the vested interests must not be allowed to vitiate the decision. Government must be firm. Any indecision will be the death knell to the democratic process.

**Indecisions and Violence**  
Indecisions and lack of decisive actions are breeding violence in every sphere of society. Opposing groups are resorting to violence in order to promote their self interests. Groups are joining hands and trying to realise their claims through violence. Everywhere, there is violence. Lack of security has become a serious threat to urban peace. This is simply intolerable. Law and order must be established. When the international press flash across the world the story of mob violence, burning of cars or wreckage of the railway lines, reverse economic growth or counter — development is immediately set in motion. If such conditions are allowed to continue, administration is bound to collapse. It is as inevitable as the night after the day.

How can we continue to drop stones, huge ones at that, right on our own feet? There is simply no alternative but to firm up the vital set of decisions on time. And, the time is right now. Let the decisions not be perfect. But, decisive actions are must.

First, is the effective restoration of peace and tranquility on campus, factories and work places so that classes are held in double shifts to make up for the losses, factories run in three shifts and at least 900 shifts per annum, while 9 to 5 as the established practice the world over, all other work places function efficiently round the year. To realise this objective, the key decision involved is to empower the law enforcing agencies to act decisively without any fear or favour.

I wish to particularly emphasise the last two words — fear or favour. Whoever breaks the law, the authority must act against him or her. The decision is, there must not be any discrimination. If there are boomerangs in the decision, let it be so since it is for the good of the nation and therefore the best resort of any good government.

However, neither tranquility nor peace can be brought about until and unless there are legitimate avenues to ventilate the grievances of the aggrieved through due process of law. Once adjudication through due process of law has been completed, the outcome is binding on all concerned.

This is Rule of Law in its true sense. When well established, violence is ruled out by definition in the sense that it would be the exception as is usual in a civilised society; not the rule which has become the pattern in Bangladesh today.

Judges in the courts of law pronounce judgements which often lead to death or rigorous imprisonment, stretching upto 14 years. But have we ever heard of violence that any judge has ever suffered as a consequence? No, it had never been the case nor will it ever be because the punishment has been the end result of the due process of law.

**Extra-judicial Influence**  
The rule of law cannot be established if extra-judicial considerations tend to exert any influence whatsoever. Political interference is bound to vitiate the due process of law. Violence begets violence and it grows exponentially unless due process of law, maintaining its absolutely non-discriminatory character is allowed to play its full role.

The police in our country is viewed as the instrument of oppression because it had been in the past utilised to perpetuate the autocracy of the day. The government must realise that it has no need of the police to perpetuate itself since its power has been secured through the ballot, not bullets or brutality. Rule of law is the hallmark of any democratic government and sole purpose of the police is to assist in the enforcement of rule of law. If there is any breakdown or infringement of law, police must act against the violator, whoever he or she may be. From the Prime Minister down to the municipal garbage collector, from the multi-millionaires down to the landless labourer, the law is one and the same. It is of paramount importance to bring into focus the true image

created, their job security is seriously threatened. These are genuine grievances. Simultaneously, the upsurge of trade union activities to increase salaries and wages in the wake of privatisation have created an untenable situation. If wages are enhanced, the losses to the public enterprises would further increase. As a result, losses are subsidised by government reducing resources for development or increase in inflation due to deficit financing.

There is no preferred option since the possible means to finance the additional wage bill would only perpetuate poverty by undermining economic growth. If further borrowing from the banking system is allowed, the incapacity to payback the borrowed funds by insolvent enterprises would inevitably force the banks to go out of business. Remember what happened to BCCI. Other banks is likely to meet the same fate.

Enterprises must become profitable to pay for the remunerative wages. They cannot become profitable within the existing public fold. All such enterprises must be privatised. If not feasible, then the debt and loss-ridden enterprises ought to face liquidation. Whether public sector enterprises are privatised or liquidated, retrenchment of workers is inevitable. As regards ghost workers, they must simply vanish.

This is the immediate decision that is necessary to plan for privatisation of government run entities which are already commercial (jute and textile mills for example) or should be running on a commercial basis (railway, telephone, BADC etc.) as soon as possible.

## From LDC to NIC by Shahed Latif

Once the absolutely non-partisan police force have been meaningfully established, the next equally important decision is to reorient the trade unions as the bargaining agent on behalf of the workers who would interact with the employers on a regular basis through established mechanisms. Workers grievances should be directed for resolution through these mechanisms; first, employer-employee negotiation failing which the matter decided upon by non-partisan, independent commissions as the final arbiter of compensation for work. The rush to ministerial level at the slightest provocation or opportunity is not the right approach.

**Industrial Workforce**  
Our industrial workforce like their counterpart in agriculture lead a hand to mouth existence. In the face of privatisation and at the same time, extreme inadequacy of new jobs that are being

created, their job security is seriously threatened. These are genuine grievances. Simultaneously, the upsurge of trade union activities to increase salaries and wages in the wake of privatisation have created an untenable situation. If wages are enhanced, the losses to the public enterprises would further increase. As a result, losses are subsidised by government reducing resources for development or increase in inflation due to deficit financing.

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**Retrenchment**  
The key issue is how to give effect to retrenchment of workers. Lack of alternative job opportunities is a grim reality. Trade unions would therefore

resort to available means, violent or otherwise to perpetuate their unviabie vested interests.

The problem boils down to decide on an attractive compensation scheme so that reform in harmony is possible. First the retrenched workers should be paid an attractive compensation package consisting of provident fund contribution wherever available, lump-sum pension commutation and advance salary for a fixed period of time. This is one part of the compensation package. The second part consist of long term investment loan with low interest and easy repayment terms. The third part consist of advisory services and training to the retrenched workers and assistance for obtaining physical facilities, access to utilities, government authorisation, license, etc.

The entire purpose of the three part compensation package both in cash and kind is to enable the workers to set up business, manufacturing or other types of service enterprises either alone or jointly with other such retrenched workers who in the process, would graduate themselves from being employees to entrepreneurs and traders, employing other people in turn.

With the trimming down of the salary bill as well as other liabilities, profitability of public enterprises could be enhanced. The units are then ready for transfer to the private sector. The alternative to privatisation will be liquidation. Many enterprises are already so much in the red that they are beyond redemption. Instead of carrying on with the dead weights, let us bury them for good and start on a clean slate.

This is the forceful restructuring which if the nation accepts, the workers cannot disagree. It must be borne in mind that a handful of trade unions cannot hold the government as a hostage. The ransom is too big to swallow.

# No-nonsense Nellie Has Clout in Canada

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

*Nellie Cournoyea is the leader of Northwest Territories, which covers more than one-third of Canada. Its politics are unlike anywhere else in Canada. There are no political parties and each member is elected on merit. The legislature conducts business in six languages. Since 1980 talks have been held to divide NWT into two. A plebiscite is due this year. Gemini News Service profiles the strong-willed woman who is the only native person in charge of one of Canada's governments.*

**M**OST Canadians see their politics revolving around the federal government of Brian Mulroney and its relations with the ten provincial governments and worry whether Quebec will soon break away from the other nine provinces.

Few even know that a strong-willed woman wearing aviator glasses and named Nellie Cournoyea is in charge of government across more than one-third of the country.

She is government leader of the Northwest Territories, which stretch 4,250 kilometres from Baffin Island, close to Greenland, west to the Yukon, and 3,560 kilometres from the 60th Parallel up to the North Pole.

Most of the 50,000 residents of the Northwest Territories (usually called simply NWT) are native people: either Dene (Indians), Inuit (they do not like the term Eskimos), and Metis, or people of mainly mixed Dene and French-Canadian background.

Nellie herself — nobody calls her anything else — is of mixed ancestry. Her father came from Norway in 1925, and was a trapper and hunter. Her mother is Inuit, born on Herschel Island, and taught her the local dialect of the Mackenzie River delta, Inuvialuk.

She grew up in tough wilderness conditions, with 11 brothers and sisters in a bush cabin near Aklavik in the Western Arctic. She took her high school diploma by correspondence course while working a trap line.

Later she came to Ottawa for an office management course. In the Delta area men and women did the same work of hunting, trapping and looking after fish nets. The work was really equal, sometimes too equal," she has said.

Now 51, she has been a member of the territorial legislature for 12 years. In the 1983 elections natives won 14

of the 24 seats, and Nellie became minister of renewable resources.

She was a hardworking minister, although she disliked sitting at a desk. In a recent radio interview she said: "I try to get out as much as possible. As you sit regurgitating this paper, you say to yourself, 'It's about time I got out and killed something.'"

Her whole working life has been devoted to the recognition of native rights. Even when she worked for nine years for CBC Radio in Inuvik, first as an announcer and later as station manager, she spent part of her week on native rights.

Her perseverance paid off. The organisation she helped launch, the Committee for Original People's Entitlement (or COPE), was the first NWT to settle its land claim with the federal government. Cope represents the 2,500 Inuvialuit who live in the Mackenzie Delta and around the Beaufort Sea, and they are now her faithful constituents.

She flies round her constituency by charter aircraft, and has kept a big house in Inuvik, which she built herself, open for all visitors. It is famous for the parties she throws for old-timers, with native drumming and fiddle music.

She is also famous for a no-nonsense and hands-on approach to people, inside or outside the legislature. Some years ago, she came across one man violently kicking another man in a Yellowknife street. She waded in, kicked him in

the groin, broke her nose and, when he ran away yelling "Leave me alone," shouted back: "Come back here, I'm not finished with you yet."

In the last legislature, Nellie was minister of health as well as Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources. She negotiated the transfer of health services from the federal to the NWT government, and was also negotiating with Ottawa on an energy agreement.

Politics in NWT are unlike anywhere else in Canada. For one thing, there are no political parties and each member is

elected in her (or his) merit. Also, the legislature conducts its business in no fewer than six languages. One day last year, the sitting had to be adjourned when a member spoke in the rare Dogrib Indian dialect and the interpreter had taken the afternoon off.

The ministers and the government leader are chosen by vote of all the members of the legislature. Before the voting this time, members subjected Nellie and the other candidate to a four-hour inquisition, in which they were asked 79 questions on their policies.

After Nellie was chosen government leader, she said she wanted the title changed to premier, to match the system in neighbouring Yukon Territory, if not the ten provinces.

"When?" asked a journalist. Nellie, the practical woman, replied: "When we have run out of the stationery with government Leader printed on it."

She has, of course, bigger problems than that. Since 1980 there have been negotiations to divide the huge NWT into two, and a plebiscite is due in 1992 to seek agree-

ment on a line drawn by an arbitrator, John Parker, the former Commissioner of the Territories.

If it is accepted, the Eastern Arctic will become Nunavut, an area dominated by some 17,500 Inuit who have doubled in numbers in the last generation. The Western Arctic is far less homogeneous, and white Southerners may well form the majority, mostly living around Yellowknife.

The division, if agreed, will not finally take place until 1997, but Nellie will be busy preparing for these changes. The Western Arctic faces more intensely the problems of modernisation and disruption. After a ten-year moratorium, a pipeline to carry oil from the North Slope of Alaska and the Beaufort Sea is to be built, and the mineral riches of the territory will increasingly be exploited.

There are other land claims to be pursued. The 15,000 Dene and Metis people in the Western Arctic have split over a deal signed with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1988 which would give them ownership to 10,000 square kilometres of land, with mineral rights.

As well, the future of the DEW-line (or distant early warning radar system) is in question. It was built 30 years ago to alert American and Canadian forces to an attack by Soviet bombers, and has recently been renovated. But such a threat is becoming utterly remote, and the NWT government has an important role in advising Ottawa on nations, from Russia to the Nordics.

Nellie also has a right, whether called premier or not, to demand a place at any table that is deciding on changes to the constitution of Canada. As the only native person in charge of one of Canada's governments, she has clout. And, as her past exploits show, that is something she knows how to use.

## Northwest Territories: vast wilderness of Canada

## 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.

### Looking after pets

Sir, I owned a puppy dog, a few days back but it was stolen by "fakirnis", according to the servant. He was to replace "Rover", my last pet, who died of the recent cold, despite all the measures we took. We kept it warm, inoculated it and took it to the vet as often as we could. We fed it with the best possible food that we could afford. Yet the dog, when it died, while I was away at work, had to be hauled by my servant, and dumped in the garbage bin.

apart from my uncle, she has to constantly feed these cats, keep them warm and check their toilet habits.

As for taking the cats to the vet, it is an operation in which my cousins are constantly engaged, although they would rather carry on with their studies, and necessary hobbies of sewing and cooking.

The expense of keeping a pet, a dog, cat or a bird in Dhaka is high indeed. It is almost like rearing one's own child. It has to be fed, cleaned, put to bed and taken to the vet regularly. When it grows up, you have to find a suitable mate. That is no easy job, I can assure you, with my experience with pets for 25 years.

our pets in school and college as well!

Sameena Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### "BUET situation"

Sir, I am happy to see the reaction to my earlier letter on the subject "BUET situation" in your columns, as expressed by a student. He is rightly affronted by the suggestion that students or the innocent guardians should bear the cost of vandalism by outsiders on the campus. He has asked the vital question: "Isn't there a government?" I have my full sympathy for his feeling of helplessness, anguish and frustration. The same feelings in me at the sight of lost years, the most creative years in the

lives of our children, prompted me to give such suggestion knowing fully well that it would only cause added hardship to me and other guardians.

I want that we all should boldly ask the same question: "Isn't there a government?" And it is heard where it matters.

A guardian Dhaka

### Austerity

Sir, Your first editorial of January 7 (Restricting Official Meetings) could not be more timely. We have yet to make a transition to a democratic culture, from that of an autocratic/dictatorial culture. The

attitudinal change is necessary, if we are to make a real transition to democracy, and make it strong for the future.

"The Government of the people, by the people and for the people" does not need any fanfare, lengthy news coverage, luxurious cars, opening of seminars and newly completed bridges. Unnecessary frills, pomp and grandeur are totally unsuited for an economically backward country like ours. The need of the hour is greater productivity in all spheres of our life. All our actions and activity should be targeted towards the amelioration of the poverty of the people and nothing else.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Dhanmondi, Dhaka