

IT IS TIME FOR THE OPPOSITION TO SET UP A 'SHADOW CABINET'

# Awami League Should Offer an Alternative Government at the Jatiya Sangsad

### Why Teachers Strike

The lingering teachers' strike, in its 11th day today, threatens to disrupt the country's new academic year. Teachers from the country's non-government schools, colleges and madrasahs have been pressing for their 15-point demands that include, among others, the readjustment of their pay scale corresponding to the new national pay scale for the government employees, employment of new teachers in the existing vacant posts, reintroduction of welfare trust for the teachers, promotion to higher grades for four categories of teachers and also nationalisation of services of non-government school teachers. The striking teachers numbering as many as 2,39,000 have happily kept their doors open for discussion for we are sure they are very much alive to the situation that no less than 45,00,000 students are going to be badly affected by their strike at the start of the new academic year.

The government responses to the strike call, though, are bafflingly cool. Perhaps the authority's best hope rests with the fact that the non-government teachers, with their known economic vulnerability and even pulls and pressures from within, will be forced to quit the street. Then it should also be admitted that desperate and organised people can sustain in the face of overwhelming odds for longer times than the government thinks them to do. To ignore the genuine demands of teachers is to further complicate the issue and in turn jeopardise the streamlining of the education system.

As things presently stand, the non-government teachers are really discriminated against. Compared to the teachers of primary schools, they have, most of the time, better academic qualifications and/or higher degrees. Yet their emolument is lower than those of the primary teachers. That the quality of secondary education in villages is gradually falling can partly be explained by this discrimination. When the financial incentives are poor or nil, how can one expect bright and qualified young men taking up teaching at secondary schools as a profession? Undoubtedly, the jobs at primary schools are comparatively more lucrative but unfortunately — and inexplicably — the corresponding improvement in primary education with the rise in salaries of the primary teachers has not taken place so far. It is unjust rewarding some people and depriving others when both are endemically suffering from the same set of drawbacks.

Evidently, some of the demands placed by the striking teachers are overstretched and those are meant for bargaining maneuverability. But then there are certainly some reasonable demands too that have to be looked into — sooner or later. By delaying the process, you risk the already messy education system to get messier. It is however noteworthy the government side has admitted that in principle it is agreed to a pay rise for the non-government teachers. But the crux of the problem is that the government cannot afford to be generous enough to allocate a further amount of Tk 120 crore at this stage because it had no preparation for such a huge contingency expenditure.

Now the question is: if others can have their ways notwithstanding the government financial constraint, why make the poor teachers to sacrifice? At present, those teachers are just getting a modicum of government grant and forcing them to forgo what they genuinely deserve you deprive them doubly. The excuse of financial constraint looks flimsier still when the government is not particularly averse to expenditure in unproductive sectors. So what is the way out? It is definitely to settle across the table and through mutual concessions. Maybe, some of the demands have to be met without much ado and others deferred for solution at a convenient time. But first the government has to bring the representatives of striking teachers to the negotiating table.

### An Expression of Deep Love

There is a column of juicy reports in this journal — appropriately titled 'Off the Record'. It is understandable that not all entries to the column would be equally salivating — you don't get a generous supply of that on God's every good day. Inclusion in this column of a Hong Kong dated story headlined 'Broken-heart's Seclusion Ends with Fire' must set readers to brood over the connection between the column title and the subject of the report.

Lau Yi-Man was jilted by his girlfriend ten years back when he was having a rather late affair at 40. Lau decided to live with his depression in perfect seclusion in a 50 square-metre cubicle. For the whole of the last ten years some neighbours, funded by his family all of whom had migrated to Australia, supplied him with his daily necessities. At the end of the decade of unmitigated anguish, a fire broke out on the premise and fire fighters had to bring him out of his hole and break his self-inflicted exile from the world around him.

Perhaps there would be some among the readers who, lapping up the story in one good gulp, would smile and let slip a half-contemptuous 'Fool'. We are sure there would be others whose hearts would be touched. They would feel sincerely sorry for Lau, the lover extraordinary — a kind of Devidas. And there would be still others who would be inspired by this rare show of strength of love. For the Romeos of the world, it is rather an easy way out to put an end to life in a fit of desperation. But then there are Majnus and Farhads in the world too who carry on the burden of love's pangs and pains for every living moment over ages. And Lau seems to be a worthy successor in that glorious tradition.

However, there will again be some who would be intrigued by the editors treating the news, if not juicy with clever underpinnings of 'porno' suggestions, but decidedly as something bizarre. Now what is there in Lau's enduring anguish that can warrant such rash dismissal which is by itself borders on the odd? Love has a myriad ways of expressing itself. And deep love has the power to transcend the dictates of the sensible and burst in a thousand rays rivaling the aurora borealis. There is no reason to take our hats off to Lau's depth of love. It was not a case of infatuation as most fleeting passions are — and yet are claimed as love. Lau has made that one very important with ten years of suffering like some saints of yore. Perhaps we would not like to follow him in this — that's a measure for our limitation as creatures capable of love. But surely we can think with true love and admiration of this sweet breeze come from the classical world.

By and large, there is growing disappointment in the country over the working of the Jatiya Sangsad — so far. Some would say that only good thing about it is that it exists and, however unsatisfactorily, functions as the most vital institution of our democratic system. Under no circumstances, we can think of doing without it.

This being the case, one wonders if the political parties represented in the parliament, especially the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL) have not been taking undue advantage of the situation. The two either assume that their positions remain impregnable no matter how they conduct themselves within the parliament or are unaware of the rising disenchantment among a cross-section of the public, especially the media, with their role inside the Sangsad.

If the major parties are unaware of the public disenchantment with their performance, they may also be out of touch with the feelings and thinking of their own mid-level members or their back-benchers. To quote one such member, "After being in the parliament for nearly a year, I am not yet quite sure what exactly I should do as a member of the parliament and in what way my role today is different from that of a political activist outside the Jatiya Sangsad."

The general complaint among most members, especially of the ruling party, is that meetings of their parliamentary committee are few and far between, that they get little or no briefings on bills presented by the Treasury Benches and that they are generally discouraged from bringing up too many local problems of their constituencies for fear of causing embarrassment to the government. Then, says another member, "We get caught in the internal bickering within the top leadership and we keep on watching one another as to who is getting the limelight or the attention of the Prime Minister."

The overall situation is particularly frustrating for new members of the Jatiya Sangsad.

According to one veteran parliamentarian, these new members need training and orientation courses on parliamentary practices and norms, held in between Sangsad sessions, more time spent in their constituencies, more homework on legislations and, above all, more meetings of the parliamentary board.

The situation on the opposition front is no better. In fact, it is worse, since the AL has more time and opportunity than the ruling party to play the role it does not seem particularly conscious of, the *alternative government*.

During the anti-Ershad movement and later in the election campaign, both BNP and AL had got away without placing before the people their respective socio-economic agenda, under their common premise, "Let's get rid of Ershad and the rest, including the reconstruction of the country, will follow in due course."

Not surprisingly, therefore, an impression has gained ground in public mind that there are really no major differences between the BNP and AL in most major areas, the only dividing issue being the pace of effectiveness and implementation of their shared commitments. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that no matter which party — AL or BNP — is in power, the economic policies of the country may be largely influenced — if not dictated — by the conditionalities imposed by the aid agencies and, in the field of foreign relations, by the external realities over which Bangladesh has no control.

An effective opposition in the parliament, which performs the role of an alternative government, can dispel such an impression. In the context of Bangladesh, it can make a case, inside the parliament and outside, that it can develop a new relationship of partnership with

donor nations and aid agencies, that its policy of disinvestment in the industrial sector will be more carefully planned than it is today, that it can restore academic atmosphere to the country's educational institutions so on and so forth. Again, a responsible opposition would not turn these issues into subjects for rhetorical pronouncements at public rallies. Instead, they will be major policy statements and, what's more, with convincing explanations on the contents and implementation of these policies.

If parliamentary democracy is to fulfil its potential in Bangladesh, the opposition Awami League must start playing its role as an alternative government, by raising the level of its performance within the Sangsad, in debates, in policy statements, on the private members' day and even during the question-answer session.

As an alternative government, it can perform its role by setting up its own research cell — or 'think tank' as one may call it — which uses the best experts in the country in the formulation of position papers, even policies, on wide ranging national and international issues.

The opposition AL is still without any spokesman in any area, whether it is the economic field, foreign affairs, media, education, health or agriculture. We see the appointment of such spokespersons on specific areas as an essential prerequisite for an effective opposition, provided it leaves room for a role played by back benchers. Needless to say, these spokespersons will rely on the party's research cell for collection of materials, statistics, background information and even overall guidance.

Would these spokespersons constitute a 'Shadow Cabinet' for the opposition, like in a number of parliamentary democracies? However, if the setting up of such a 'cabinet' triggers off new bickerings within the party, the opposition may just stop short of making such an innovative move. But it cannot just stay where it is today, static, stagnant and immobile, if it at all wants to play the role as an alternative government of Bangladesh.

### AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

On its assumption of power, the BNP government of Begum Khaleda Zia went about formulating its programme, under both internal and external pressures, on carefully selected issues — some directly prompted by the aid agencies — taking its own time, but more often than not, without any outcry from within the parliament. At long last, the country has some kind of an outline of the government's policies in such areas as disinvestment in the industrial sector, foreign policy, regional co-operation, female education and population control. It is still very much incomplete, and rather ad hoc in nature but a start has been made.

This is exactly where the opposition AL has faltered, with its case going by default. On the issues, just mentioned, the opposition has much

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### UN Going Broke

# Fund Lack Endangers Peacekeeping Effort

An enduring irony of the United Nations' rising popularity is that the organisation is going broke.

Before his term ended December 31, former UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar warned member states that the UN is on the "brink of insolvency" without a major infusion of funds.

Indeed, Mr Perez de Cuellar revealed that UN peacekeeping operations have been effectively running on empty since mid-1991. "By mid-August, these reserves were completely depleted," he told the UN General Assembly.

"From mid-August until mid-October, I was obliged to borrow from the few peacekeeping operations which had cash in excess of their immediate requirements, to meet both regular budget obligations and the cash requirements of other new peacekeeping operations."

A handful of nations bridged the mid-year crisis by coughing up some of their

unpaid dues, but only after an urgent and direct appeal by the Secretary-General to their Foreign Ministers.

UN obligations currently include 10 peacekeeping operations — three of them completed and seven on-going. They do not include peacekeeping plans for Cambodia and Yugoslavia.

In 1992, the projected cost for the first six months in Cambodia are about US\$19 million. A cash advance of US\$200 million which will also be needed to underwrite the procurement of equipment and supplies for the UN Transitional Authority which is to be established in Cambodia.

The UN's current accumulated shortfall includes US\$24.6 million for its regular budget and US\$46.5 million for peacekeeping.

"My capacity to resort to stop-gap financial measures has been virtually exhausted," Mr Perez de Cuellar told the

Ian Steele writes from the United Nations

UN General Assembly. "It is a source of profound concern to me that the same membership which deems it appropriate to entrust the UN Secretariat with unprecedented new responsibilities, has not taken the necessary action to ensure, at the same time, that the minimum resources required to carry out those responsibilities

one billion dollars (US\$988.1 million) — an obscene sum of money in the context of the world community's expanding agenda for the organisation.

When assessed contributions for the UN's regular operating budget fell due and payable in January 1991, only 11 member states had met their obligations in full. By

US\$126.8 million, respectively; South Africa, US\$45 million and US\$16.5 million, Brazil and Argentina, US\$17.8 million and US\$14 million, respectively, for the regular budget; and Japan, which is withholding US\$43.2 million from peacekeeping.

A review of the UN's working capital fund shows that the majority of Member States have come to accept default on their financial obligations as the norm. In the first 25 years of the UN's existence it consistently had working capital in excess of 25 per cent of its approved budget expenditure. But by 1991 its capital had eroded to just 6 per cent of appropriations — sufficient for just three weeks operating expenses.

US Secretary-General, Mr Perez de Cuellar has asked the General Assembly to adopt a series of proposals designed to establish a normal working cash flow commensurate with

the peacekeeping and other obligation which have grown exponentially in recent years.

The centerpiece of that proposal is the establishment of a US\$1 billion Peace Endowment Fund. If approved by the General Assembly, the Fund would draw on assessed and voluntary contributions from governments, and take the unusual step of inviting funding from the private sector and individuals.

Other proposed steps to put the United Nations on a financial footing equal to the growing demands of Member States, include authorisation for the Secretary-General to: Charge nations interest on their outstanding contributions; Borrow on commercial markets if other sources are inadequate; Establish a US\$50 million Humanitarian Revolving Fund to cover emergency situations, pending the receipt of pledged contributions from donor governments and others. — *Depthnews Asia*.

MIRRORING Armenian preoccupation with the past, the building housing one of the world's most extensive archives documenting the suffering of the Armenian people throughout history dominates the skyline of the capital of Yerevan.

On a hill above this city of 800,000, the two-storey red stone Matenadaran Library stands as a silent testimony to the persecution of Armenians during the past 15 centuries. "One can actually hear the silence," says Armenian writer Derenick Demirchian.

Within the walls of the old library is stored the world's largest collection of Armenian manuscripts. Dating as far back as the 4th century, the 100,000 documents as well as 10,000 manuscripts and 4,000 fragments chronicle the history of Armenians and other peoples in Central Asia.

Matenadaran's manuscripts contain exclusive and invaluable information on the history of Iran-Caucasia, Iran, Russia, Ancient Byzantium and Turkey.

More than 25,000 manuscripts have survived the vicissitudes of Armenian history and are conserved in Jerusalem, Venice, Vienna, London, Paris, Tbilisi and New York, but the Matenadaran col-

### Armenia

# Documenting Centuries of Travail

lection is the best one, and its custodians display them with unconcealed pride.

The library stands at the end of the renamed Avenue of Independence (formerly Lenin Avenue) together with a monumental stone statue of Mesrop Mashtots, the philosopher who devised the Armenian alphabet.

Among the manuscripts besides those written in Armenia are others which come from Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople, Lovov, Teodosia, Rome, Cyprus and the Philippines.

The Russian scholar Sergei Borodin, in referring to the literary treasures of Matenadaran, has stated that "many of their pages are yellow with age, others bear signs of sabre cuts, and many still show traces of tears and bloodshed for the tragic saga of the Armenians."

The geographical position of Armenia as a crossroads between two continents, Europe and Asia, has made the country a continuous battlefield, and its

struggles for liberation against all kinds of invaders have been seen in the epic poem David Sasunsky, which occupies a place of honour in the library. The most ancient manuscripts, dating from the 4th and 5th centuries, reflect a difficult period of Armenian history when the country was divided between Byzantium and Persia.

It was in this epoch that Mashtots spread the Armenian alphabet of 39 letters which enabled people to conserve and treasure their cultural heritage, because in the churches and schools "The Engraved" — as classic Armenian is known — replaced Greek and Assyrian.

The ancient Armenian manuscripts were written on parchment and one notable copy of the Bible, illuminated in silver and on exhibit in Matenadaran, was bought in the 12th century for two geese, two horses and a cow, then later sold to pay the ransom of the owner's brother, daughter and sister-in-law, who were captives of the Turks.

The manuscripts were treated as relics, and it was usual for couples without children to be commissioned by monasteries to dedicate themselves to copying them. The copies are then turned over to the monks, who conserved them down the centuries.

In times of war, manuscripts were deposited in

secret places, but if they fell into the hands of the enemy, the whole community undertook to ransom them at a very high price. But even then, this was often impossible.

In 1170, more than 10,000 ancient manuscripts collected in various monasteries and kept in the fortress of Balaberd were burnt when the castle fell into the hands of the Turks.

"All vestiges of Christianity had to be destroyed, particularly books," noted the scholar Anatoly Vidhasan, who for the past 25 years has been doing research on the manuscripts. Matenadaran began its saga as a library of Armenian literary treasures at the end of the 5th century, and it still conserves any letter from the historian Lazar de Pharp to Prince Vagan Mamikonian protesting against the seizure of his writing by the prince.

Pharp's manuscripts were expropriated at this time by the library in Etchmiadzin, the seat of the Armenian patriarchate. This library for centuries became the custodian of works conserved in the

monasteries.

The library of Etchmiadzin was later converted into Matenadaran, "the book depository", Armenia's most important cultural treasure. In 1920, a new period began when the country was transformed into a socialist republic of the Soviet Union. On Dec. 17, 1920, the library was proclaimed the property of the state, and in 1939 it was transferred from Etchmiadzin to Yerevan. In 1959 by official decree it was converted into the Armenian Institute for Ancient Manuscripts.

Trained guides take visitors through the silent halls with their large glass showcases, where the works are on display. They include the largest of the manuscripts, written 766 years ago and weighing 34 kgs, and the smallest, the size of a matchbox, dating five centuries ago and weighing 19 gms.

The hides of no less than 17 oxen were needed to make the former, while the latter was written on the hide of a newborn calf. It can only be read with a microscope.

The large manuscript was stolen in 1204, but some 7,000 silver drachmas were collected in Armenian villages to ransom it.

### 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.

### Experience for Job

Sir, It is worthless to mention that employment has become an acute problem of our country, and number of jobless people is increasing day by day. There are more than 10 million jobless people in our country and among them many are educated, according to statistics.

After spending a number of years in education, one finds himself/herself in the midst of problems when he/she desires

to bring a smile on the lip the guardians who spent a lot on their wards education.

"Experience" is one condition among others set by the employers. There is hardly any advertisement of job opportunity that does not mention experience. But the question is how can one gain experience without working anywhere, and who will give the chance?

Experience is not something that one gains as it might be in terms of education. If this tendency of employers is

continued, soon the country will be a land of jobless people. This will not only increase poverty but also create law and order problems. I would like to request the concerned authorities of the government to look into this problem and make some suitable provisions and save us from frustrations.

Md Reyazuddin  
Dhaka

### Bakar Khani vs Baklava

Sir, The attempt to trace the history of our "Bakar Khani" in your Dhaka Day by Day is commendable. But I am afraid, the comparison of Dhaka Bakar Khani with Turkish Baklava is misleading. Bakar Khani is of two types: "mulam", soft and fluffy

and "khasta" or "neemsukha", semi-dry or crispy. Both the types can be prepared with cheese sprinkled on top, or minced-meat stuffed inside the bread. Usually, ready-made Bakar Khani is sold plain. I have had Bakar Khani dipped in sweetened milk. But then, Bakar Khani is never baked sweet. Whereas, Turkish Baklava is never served salty. It is neither roasted in a pit "tandoor", nor is it served dry or crispy. Baklava is essentially a sweet-meat baked in an open tandoor, and served dipped in a thick sugar syrup with sprinkled pistachio.

Although delicious Baklava never reminded me of our favourite Dhaka Bakar Khani. Unfortunately, I have not tasted the Central Asian delicacy 'lavas', I therefore cannot tell the difference but, as for

Baklava and Bakar Khani they are poles apart.

Hasan Shaheed  
Dhaka

### Sharing values

Sir, We are living in a sort of "unrest condition" which has contributed to our present-day lawlessness, moral degradation etc. Had we been able to share each-other's good views and noble intentions, "individually" and politically, we could have overcome this unstable condition. In reality everyone of us wishes to establish the good values but the problem is, while doing so, one wouldn't like to consider also the good values of one's opponent. Everyone wants to establish one's values under one's own initiative in order to

retain one's full credit and authority. Unfortunately, all of us destined to become 'great' through both individual position and group affiliation. Self-interest is being considered as the main attribute. As a result, often a mass welfare project receives resistance from the other side.

In my opinion, if we can develop the habit and courage of sharing one-another's noble thoughts and genuine proposals, we will be able to solve major portion of our individual and national problems.

M Zahidul Haque,  
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