

# Talk of Institutionalising Parliamentary Democracy Leading Nowhere

## A New Mood in Indonesia

Indonesia celebrates its National Day today in an upbeat mood, one that reflects the republic's confident view of the future as well as of its readiness to cope with the challenges on several fronts.

By far the most important task facing Indonesia now relates to the Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that the country hosts next month and takes over the chairmanship of what can be best described as a loose alliance but one whose potential remains largely unexplored. To what extent Indonesia will be able to give NAM a new lease of life remains to be seen. But friends of Indonesia, like Bangladesh, have reasons to be optimistic. After all, having played the host to the first Afro-Asian Conference, better known as the Bandung Conference, in the late fifties, Indonesia has a special commitment to the concept of solidarity among the Third World nations. The Bandung legacy now remains as much a part of Indonesian history as it is of the changing scenario of the developing world.

Indonesia might have taken over the leadership of NAM much earlier, especially when Yugoslavia was running it — or, to put it more appropriately, mismanaging it — if only Belgrade had shown the willingness to step down. Perhaps, President Suharto, a cautious leader, was not ready either to give his leadership to an organisation whose ideals and objectives must indeed be redefined.

The readiness in Indonesia to take over a prominent role on the international scene coincides with changes in the country's domestic front. In his State of the Nation message delivered on Saturday, President Suharto has indicated that the size of the presence of the military in the country's legislative assemblies may be scaled down. The statement will be welcomed by a cross section of educated elite, especially the academic experts, who have been critical of the army's role in politics. Whether President Suharto is responding to the popular feelings on this matter or indicating his confidence in the stability of the internal system is beside the point. There may well be a combination of both.

As Jakarta takes up its new role in NAM and readjusts the power equations in domestic politics, Dhaka will wish it well, in the belief that a stronger Indonesia would be a source of strength to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and indeed to Bangladesh. Our two countries are bound together by several common interests. It was no surprise, therefore, that Indonesia, like Malaysia, was forthright in supporting Dhaka's position on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees who have crossed the border into this country. It is in our mutual interest that we — Indonesia and Bangladesh — should work closely together, strengthen the existing bonds and explore new areas of co-operation, especially in the field of trade, commerce and joint ventures. The new mood of confidence prevailing in the national life of Indonesia should find the right echo in Jakarta-Dhaka relations.

## SSC Results from Wonderland

This year's Secondary School Certificate results could have come from Alice's wonderland. Once the first euphoric bubbles gave way to more realistic cognition, together with those whose children took these exams, the whole nation readily knew they were up against something very pronouncedly bizarre.

We are not joking. Far from it, we are seriously concerned while the nation tries to recover itself from its befuddled and dizzy state. Let us take the figures. Nearly four times as much students passed in the first division as crossed the Rubicon on the third class carriage — or 146 thousand to 39 thousand. And the second divisioners were far more numerous than the tailenders of third division — 132 thousand to 39. The twist of the turning knife into the bowels of what passes for our education system becomes crueller as up it goes. While 100 per cent of the candidates from the three cadet colleges under the Rajshahi Board were placed in the first division — 90 per cent of them got stars. There is no reason as to why results of the other cadet colleges should be any different. Fiftyfour students took the exams from a Mirpur school with a German name. Only one got first division. No cause for alarm — the remaining 53 got star.

There must be something very seriously, very grossly — very grotesquely — wrong with this year's new evaluation system based on the so-called 'objective' type questions. The chairman of one of the three boards has already called the new-fangled 'system' into question. Pupils scoring less than 2 per cent where language skills were required, raked in 50 to 80 per cent mark in the other and predominating areas of the exams. There are reports that the same has been the case with mathematics. Examinees failing miserably where they were asked to do sums, excelled where they were required to tick off.

We are concerned. We should indeed be angry but that wouldn't possibly help. Last year the Boards, in consultation with each other, gave a general grace of 20 marks to lend some respectability to the percentage of passes. This year the whole evaluation system was changed to turn in even better pass percentages — without needing to give any grace marks at all. And look at the miracle the new method has worked. But for this the nation wouldn't ever know that there were so many thousands of very distinguished students among these examinees — many stars as can form a mini-galaxy. One sign of all round brilliance was the unprecedented crowding at the top perches. One of the boards squeezed 55 into the combined merit list of 20. Another followed closely by accommodating 40.

We couldn't agree more with the student who making a very brilliant showing, nevertheless denounced the new system. The whole idea of education, the ideals behind it and the goals in front — is being dangerously undermined by the new evaluation strategy's de-emphasizing the cultivation of language skills and the power of appreciation and of conception. The first ten-year schooling — the base of our educated and skilled manpower or indeed prime mover of the nation — has been encouraged to know nothing of any single subject and earn nothing by way of imagination, feeling, comprehension and articulation.

The whole fiasco warrants a very urgent scrutiny and remedial action.

It should be quite a readable piece if one puts together snippets of conversation heard at government offices and receptions at hotels, at banks and financial institutions, at the corridors of the secretariat and, last but not the least, at diplomatic get-togethers.

Readable and even spiky? Most certainly. Authoritative and responsible? Perhaps not. After all, how many of these snippets, these fragmented pieces of talks can be attributed to sources? How many of them would be responsible enough to be printed?

However, these casual talks reflect a certain mood (or moods) and give a patient listener like this writer an idea as to what issues have been dominating the thinking of people, at various levels.

In this sense, the last week was an extraordinary one, packed with events ranging from the visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to Bahrain and Pakistan to the parliamentary debate on the no-confidence motion against the government, from the deadlock over the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to the split court decision over the Golam Azam issue.

Any of these topics can be the subject for a long conversation or figure in the agenda of a day-long seminar of the Democratic Forum. Unfortunately, a majority of knowledgeable people do not want to be as forthright and direct in speaking at a seminar or in writing for the media as they would be in the so-called private conversations.

There are some who decline to speak on the record, for publication, with a plea, 'Not yet'. Such an apology would suggest that he (or she) would not burn the bridges just now or that he (or she) was not quite clear on the issues involved — if not a combination of both.

Notwithstanding these reservations, one single broad topic that seems to have been dominating the thinking of people we meet relates to the evaluation not simply of the Government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) but of the parliamentary democracy as a system, an evaluation that would cover the performance of the opposition Awami League (AL) as much as of BNP and, for that matter, of other political groupings. Needless to say, such an evaluation, seldom comprehensive or cohesive, rarely produces a satisfactory rating. More often than not, the answer is, we are in a dismal situation, only a part of the reason being that the parliamentary democracy as we see it today here is not functioning in the way it should.

This is one issue which has produced an all-party consensus. Both Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina have said again and again, 'We must give parliamentary democracy an institutional shape.' No matter how it is put in Bangla, the plea, as translated into English, is always the same: 'Give parliamentary democracy an institutional shape.'

This is where the consensus ends. We, then, have charges and counter-charges, and mutual recriminations as to who is at fault for preventing parliamentary democracy for acquiring an institutional shape or from gaining roots.

On this score, criticisms against the ruling

BNP — more specifically against the Prime Minister — are direct and precise. It is suggested again and again that Begum Khaleda Zia has been operating a presidential system under the cover of a parliamentary democracy. At the mildest hint, critics provide you with examples as to how she has taken over one presidential privilege after another to give her office of the prime minister an extra dimension. This explains, so say some critics, why Begum Zia had been so indifferent to participating in discussions at the Jatiya Sangsad, even to attending the parliamentary sessions.

By her unwillingness — or failure — to play her role as the Leader of the House with effectiveness, Begum Zia has reportedly created a vacuum in the system itself, thus weakening parliamentary democracy from within.

It sounds a fair criticism, but up to a point. What is overlooked is that since she may not be conversant with the details of the two systems — the presidential and parliamentary democracy — she has been obliged to rely on her cabinet colleagues and senior civil servants for advice and guidance. It is hard to know if Begum Zia has actually done so. If she has, it is

likely that both the groups have given her the wrong advice — or none at all.

As one critic who has served successive governments in senior positions puts it, most cabinet members of the Zia Government probably have no idea of collective responsibility of ministers in parliamentary democracy — nor any particular liking for it. Again, once used to taking orders from the late President in the first BNP administration, the senior ones in the present administration feel more confident in working directly with Begum Zia individually than in acting collectively as a team. Again, many of these senior ministers are said to be more deferential towards Begum Zia than they were towards her late husband, at least during the first half of the previous BNP administration.

There may be some fascinating reasons which explain differences between the two situations. Since the late Ziaur Rahman assumed authority in 1976, without the kind of mass upsurge that brought her wife to power some 15 years later, the late President probably needed some of these ministers as part of his evolving power base or even as his administrators much more than the Begum needs them. So, some of the senior cabinet members developed a different kind of equation with the late Ziaur Rahman, even to the point of getting into arguments with him on policy issues, than one they have with the Prime Minister.

In the present situation, senior civil servants operate from a grey area. The general impression is that while they take orders directly from their ministers and few of them

parliamentary democracy, as the leading opposition in the present parliament, indeed as the alternative government.

Free from the responsibility of running the administration, the party has an unique opportunity of invigorating its entire structure from the grassroots level to the policy-making structure, within the parliament and outside, giving its members a new sense of political motivation and a vision for the future. It must indeed be a vision of creating a new Bangladesh through the release of the immense unused energy of millions, rather than of taking power by toppling the existing government.

To all appearances, this opportunity has been lost, hopefully, not for ever. But the party, rather its leadership, must work hard to regain this opportunity — and its sense of direction.

Sitting between two responsible and dedicated AL leaders at a party the other evening, I heard a whole set of reasons why their organisation had missed the opportunity of playing its due role and what it must do to recapture the lost ground.

Since this surprising encounter — surprising because this writer rarely sits between two top-ranking politicians — took place just on the eve of the JS debate on the no-confidence motion, our first question was how well-prepared — and well-coordinated — was the opposition in facing up to the crucial discussion on the whole range of issues covered in the notice of the motion. The answer was quite clearly in the negative, at least so this writer gathered.

This is primarily because the opposition has

no shadow cabinet or it has not assigned specific areas — Home, Education, Foreign Affairs, Labour, Agriculture and so on — for specialisation to its leading members. To be direct, who among these AL leaders can talk on the law and order situation with facts and statistics, on month-to-month basis, and evaluate the situation better than the Home Minister? Who can offer a concrete plan for reducing our trade balances with India and Pakistan? What can Bangladesh sell to these countries which they cannot buy from other South Asian nations at more competitive prices? Why should Vietnam prove more attractive than Bangladesh for foreign investment, especially from Japan?

One would be surprised if the AL has people, inside the parliament and outside, to deal with these questions. Someone who answers the question in the negative puts it a little crudely, 'The AL is full of jacks of all trades, but masters of none.'

One of the two AL leaders we sat with the other evening, a man in his early fifties, identified another major problem facing his organisation: The generation gap that divides a group of pre-liberation leaders from those who emerged on the scene after 1972, some as recently as in late seventies or early eighties. It is the second group, with its militancy, impatience and a touch of arrogance, that makes a stronger, immediate appeal to the AL leader Sheikh Hasina than the slow-moving older generation which relies on inter-actions, committee meetings, painstaking research on contemporary issues and even on national consensus on basic problems facing the countries.

This drift, marking the AL's reliance on the younger generation, has reached even the district level, where the hold over educational institutions is an important part of the party strategy. And seldom is the strategy pursued without the use of guns, without the support of mastans.

The fact that the ruling party is said to be playing a similar game gives the opposition no excuse for following this volatile strategy. In fact, by its failure to come up with an alternative plan, AL has missed another chance in providing an institutional shape to democracy.

Many inside AL and outside fear that the drift will reach a dangerous phase by the time the country goes for the next parliamentary election. The two parties BNP and AL — will come up with hurriedly put together, loose but populist manifestoes. There will be no outcry against authoritarianism of the ousted regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. That's all in the past.

Instead, each candidate, from the time of his nomination to the outcome of the polls, will see his chances in terms of furs, in lakhs of Taka, and in the use of mastans, with or without guns.

This grim prediction came from a leader who has been a major player on the political stage for nearly three decades. Exhausted and full of scepticism, and left out in the cold by the leadership of his organisation, he still nurses one hope: 'We can still call a halt to this drift.'

Today, we too share this hope. Tomorrow, we may reject it in despair.

## AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

## Western Blocs and Third World Growth

**Former Indian finance minister Madhu Dandavate advises Third World governments to watch the ongoing battle of the United States and European Community battle over farm subsidies. Whatever its outcome, the results and the new European Economic Area (EEA) pose a great threat to the interests of developing countries, reports IPS from New Delhi.**

their individual developmental interests and priorities.

There is also another trade issue that will pose a great threat to the Third World. The new European Economic Area (EEA), which will be established through a commercial merger of the EC and the seven-nation European Free Trade Association (EFTA), will, in the future, emerge as the most powerful trading bloc in the world.

All barriers to the free flow of commodities, finance, services and labour are to be totally eliminated by 1993 among the 19 countries that will form the EEA. This new free trade zone will encompass

a strong streak of political neutrality, arising from the fact that Switzerland, Austria and Sweden were in its fold.

The break-up of the Soviet bloc eliminated the political and military threat to the EC and NATO and this, in turn, facilitated settlement of political differences between the EC and EFTA.

At the trading level, greater harmonisation of trade practices brought the two blocs close. Another factor that contributed to the emergence of the EEA was that 58 per cent of all extra trading was already being done with the EC.

The average per capita income in EFTA countries is much higher than the EC average. It is estimated that after a full merger, EC production can be pushed up to new heights. For EFTA, participation in the EEA will offer it access to new markets.

About 68 per cent of total trade will be between the 19 EEA members, thus the threat of the EEA concentrating on internal trade to the detriment of the developing countries of the Third World is much too real to be ignored.

This threat will grow as

more countries join the EC. Turkey, Cyprus and Malta have already sought membership and five to six Eastern European countries have also shown eagerness to join. Should Yugoslavia break up and more republics of the former Soviet Union secede, the number of applicants might rise even further.

The unified EC of the future will then become a super-powerful trading and regional bloc. This has important implications for global trading and poses a great threat to Third World interests.

Unless Third World countries forge solidarity, they will not be able to counter the attempts by the northern blocs to establish links between concessions on access to Third World goods and new areas in which to intrude on these developing countries' sovereignty.

If developing countries do not present a united front, the continuing deadlock in the Uruguay Round will emerge as a serious threat to their economic well-being.

Madhu Dandavate is a socialist leader of India's political opposition party Janata Dal and was finance minister of India.

THE deadlock continues in the Uruguay Round of world trade negotiations. The major obstacle to the successful completion of the talks has been the sharp differences between the United States and the European Community (EC) over the vexed question of agricultural subsidies.

For some time it appeared as if the impasse would end with the announcement by US President George Bush that the United States was willing to scale down its demand for reduction in the EC farm subsidy.

Now it is quite clear that the heads of both governments need to intervene to settle the differences, since ministerial negotiators are unable to do so and no significant advances were apparently made at the Munich Summit in July.

Agricultural export subsidy, internal subsidy and market access are not the only issues that the United States and EC have divergent views about. They also disagree on intellectual property rights, including the specific time period in which to transform process-oriented patent laws into product-oriented laws.

For developing countries like India, the agricultural sub-

sidies decision could create a great dilemma. Even if an acceptable package was agreed upon, it would involve trade-offs that would hurt their interests in a big way.

Or in the event of total failure of the negotiations, there would be grave threats of greatly strengthened protectionism and a re-emergence of unilateral pressures such as the Super-301 article of the US Trade Act.

If negotiations fail, it will mean a total collapse of the system of multilateralism. With all its defects and inadequacies, multilateralism is still preferable to bilateralism because it provides a wider forum to weaker nations, particularly those in the Third World. Erosion of multilateralism will be detrimental to Third World interests.

On the other hand, if the United States and the EC at long last can agree on agricultural subsidies, developing countries will have to bear the burden of their combined approach to ensure agreements in fields like textiles, services, intellectual property rights and investment measures which are not in unison with

## 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.

### Garbage disposal time

Sir, Dhaka is the capital and the main metropolis of the country. But it is a matter of great regret that we, the dwellers of this capital city, are being deprived of the envisaged municipal facilities that a modern city should have offered to its inhabitants.

The concept of municipality is an old one. Municipality means a town or a city local self-government. It ensures a hygienic and comfortable life to its denizens. In olden times, municipalities in different parts of the world were not equipped with modern instruments that we see today to remove garbage. And the people then also would not expect any better service than their respective municipalities could provide. But those days are gone. The modern civilization is almost at its apex and it has blessed us with so many facilities. A better municipal

service is one such. But we, the natives of Dhaka city, are hardly getting any better service from our municipal corporation. Rather, its unwise actions often cause our irritation.

Carrying garbage during busy hours particularly in day-time is an inescapable sight for any denizen of Dhaka city. But in a city not only of the developed West but also of the developing East it is almost unthinkable. A citizen of Singapore or Seoul cannot imagine it even in dream. But we, the citizens of Dhaka, are to experience this unhealthy thing in our everyday life. It is a matter of great regret that hardly anybody is conscious of it.

Trucks and lorries full of filthy garbage moving through the busy thoroughfares, tell upon the respiratory system of people in the streets. We may be lacking in sense of beauty, but what about our sense of hygiene? And we should not be unaware of it anymore. When a big vehicle full of

dirty matters on its carrier goes from one place to another, it simply creates a nuisance. The foul smell that emanates from the filths causes unspeakable disgust to the people. This also plays havoc with our health. When an open lorry of Dhaka Municipal Corporation passes with filthy matters, during day time through busy streets, it spreads millions of germs that are detrimental to public health. Specially, the children are the most affected ones since they are more vulnerable to different diseases.

How many more problems are being created by this day service of transporting garbage, we never know. But we should not have any doubt that this is a threat to our public health. And now it is time we solved the problem.

As there is a problem, there is a solution. My suggestion is: Dhaka Municipal Corporation should change the scheduled time (as apparent, it is day) of carrying garbage. The cleansing operation may take place at the dead of night when the whole Dhaka city is asleep and it should be finished before day break. Only shifting the time of carrying municipal filths alone could solve this particular problem which demands no extra fund. Now what is needed is the honest intention

of the respective authority.

Transporting garbage in day-time is also a common sight in any other city of our country. So, we see that it is a national problem and naturally its solution demands a national decision from our parliament. Now the responsibility of taking a decision as regards the issue stated above rests on the shoulders of the MPs. Since this is a common problem, there is hardly any possibility of controversy over this issue. We nurture the hope that our venerable MPs will be able to take a wise decision.

Rushayad Ehsan Supal, Dhaka

### Afforestation and flood control

Sir, It is heartening to see the enthusiasm of our Forest Department and the plantation of millions of saplings through out the country. We would however, request the Forest Department to kindly let us know the total amount of public money spent on tree plantation weeks, the number of saplings distributed and planted and the number of surviving saplings trees during the last 20 years for the sake of accountability and scrutiny.

Undoubtedly the more we would grow trees the more we would enjoy our environment,

health, wealth and as such our economy would also prosper.

We would like to mention here that we have a total river belt of more than sixty thousand miles long. Almost every day we are losing large tracts of land due to river erosion. Almost every year we are also affected by turbulent floods in different parts of our country. It is not possible for a poor country like ours to spend hundreds of crores of taka for construction of concrete embankments on both sides of our numerous rivers to control flood and check erosion. We may, however, to a great extent control flood and check river erosion with our limited resources provided we take the following steps.

(1) Declare all land on either sides of all rivers at least two hundred feet wide from the river bank as lean season Khas Land and acquire land where necessary and earmark these afforestation.

(2) Stop human habitation, cultivation of land, construction of houses, markets etc within 500 yards from the river bank.

(3) Develop and encourage afforestation both in the public and private sectors.

(4) Start afforestation and earth embankments simultaneously. Forest Department and Water Development Board

should cooperate and coordinate with each other in this respect.

(5) Lease out the proposed riverside forest-cum-embankments each not more than one mile long and as proposed 200 feet wide to private parties for a period of say, five years at a time on easy terms for development, care and maintenance.

Trees provide natural and lasting protection against erosion. And the minimum to erosion the lesser is the havoc of flood.

O H Kabir, Dhaka-1203

### Land deed records

Sir, It has been recently reported in Chittagong many deed records were missing, washed away during the tidal surge of 1991 (29th April). This loss of deed records will create complication regarding ownership of lands at the concerned sub-registry offices and areas.

Government is required to chalkout effective plans for the security of such deeds in the coastal areas and also for other areas where cyclones and other calamities occur every now and then.

M A Mothi Majumdar, Survey of Bangladesh, Dhaka