

Dhaka, Tuesday, September 22, 1992

Challenge Before AL Leadership

The Awami League (AL) council session ended early morning on Monday with a series of policy decisions and amendments to its constitution and manifesto.

This puts the onus squarely on the party chief's shoulder as to how the AL will forge ahead. The challenge now is to harmonise the all powerful position of the party chief, with the hopes and aspirations of other leaders and to devise ways to allow them to function with freedom and autonomy so that people with leadership qualities can make valuable contribution to the party.

It is a welcome move by the council to create the position of party secretaries each of whom will be responsible for a particular area. Such division of responsibility will help, we hope, to increase the expertise of the Awami League to deal with the various socio-economic and cultural problems of our country.

The outgoing general secretary, Mrs Sajeda Chowdhury's candid organisational report is a welcome departure from the practice of our political parties never to admit any fault and always blame others for their own debacles.

It is true that the AL has adopted the market economy as a model. But we do not think that to be enough. There must be a deeper understanding of the concept among the party cadres.

It is to the credit of Sheikh Hasina that in spite of advice to the contrary, she went ahead with the council session and brought in some useful changes and new thinking in her party.

Death from Above

The death of Moslem Khan on Sunday in the financial district of Motijheel was more than a tragedy. It was the product of negligence bordering on criminality. Khan, an employee of a weekly magazine, just happened to be walking by a 15-storey building named Islam Chamber, when a portion of a window came unhinged and fell from the seventh floor.

Sunday's tragedy came as yet another reminder as to how dangerous some high-rise buildings are. Not so long ago, this paper expressed serious concern at the woeful lack of proper safety measures at building construction sites.

Quite obviously, this situation cannot be allowed to continue any longer. And, since the owners, builders and occupiers of multi-storied blocs in busy areas do not seem to possess the common sense to look upon safety measures as their duty, the city authorities ought to become more active.

UNITED States foreign policy is under intense scrutiny these days, with calls from many quarters for 'new thinking' and for a different approach to a world no longer polarised between hostile superpowers.

Most striking about these ideas is common acceptance of the basic premise that has guided US behaviour for the past half-century.

Liberals, moderates and conservatives all agree that the nation should maintain its standing as the world's top military power and be willing to carry out armed interventions to protect its economic interests.

In the midst of a presidential election campaign, the debate over foreign policy is being framed mainly in terms of President George Bush's record. James Baker's recent resignation as Secretary of State has stirred the discussion even more sharply towards appraisal of the past four years.

The Republican administration takes great pride in its foreign policy performance, presenting it as Bush's foremost success. It is generally acknowledged that some triumphs for US diplomacy have been achieved since January 1989.

Management of the demise of the Soviet bloc is cited as a key accomplishment. Bush is widely credited for facilitating the reunification of Germany and for concluding arms-control pacts with Moscow that are considered highly advantageous to Washington.

He is likewise lauded for skillfully assembling a coalition that drove Iraq out of Kuwait. Commentators suggest, too, that the decision to wage the Gulf War under United Nations auspices may eventually be seen as a precedent that established the need for the US to obtain multilateral backing for its military actions.

And no one denies that Bush and Baker made history by persuading Israel and the Arabs to begin face-to-face negotiations.

Supporters of Democratic candidate Bill Clinton, as well

As the US presidential campaign heats up, foreign policy postures of the two candidates are coming under scrutiny. The Republicans take pride in the international performance of George Bush. Bill Clinton wants a more activist diplomacy with the US leading a global alliance for democracy and capitalism. Experts call for 'new thinking' in the post-Cold War world.

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

as some non-partisan members of the foreign-policy establishment, are nonetheless forcefully attacking the President's statesmanship.

Gush is accused of mishandling policy toward Iraq before and after the Gulf War. First, he encouraged Saddam Hussein's aggression, critics charge, and then failed to help forces inside Iraq fighting to overthrow the Ba'athist regime.

Along with a few leading business executives, the Democrats further fault Bush for aggravating US-Japan relations. After cancelling a summit session in Tokyo, the President embarrassed even some supporters by turning the rescheduled meeting into a confrontation over car sales.

In general, detractors say Bush carried out a mainly reactive foreign policy, utterly lacking in strategic vision. And in many cases he was slow even to react.

The White House re-

sponded with protracted indifference to bloody chaos in Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia, for example.

Bush's basic disdain for the Third World was also evident, some observers argue, in his refusal to participate meaningfully in the UN-sponsored Earth Summit in Brazil.

Failure to develop a strategic framework for the post-Cold War era is highlighted in a report by an unofficial commission of 21 foreign policy experts. Entitled Changing Our Ways: America and the New World, it asserts that the US approach to the rest of the world is now dangerously anachronistic.

It argues that the US must learn to live within 'new limits,' and says: 'We need to act more as catalyst than commander, resorting more often to persuasion and compromise than to flat and rigid blueprint.'

The US should gradually pull back from all its overseas

military commitments, the study says. Economic assistance to the developing world and to the countries of the former Soviet bloc should be doubled by the year 2000, the report adds.

The commission, chaired by Winston Lord, a former US ambassador to China, also urges that Washington take the lead in an effort to halve global military expenditure.

It says the US should focus its energies on rebuilding its economic might. Such supremacy is seen as the linchpin of a successful foreign policy. The report urges the US to do what is necessary to maintain its status as the world's sole military superpower.

It follows from this that Washington's attention will be primarily directed toward the European Community and Japan. In a recent essay, commission member C. Fred Bergsten calls for creation of a Group of Three (G3) to consist of the US, Japan and the EC

(led by Germany).

And the report itself proposes that Japan and Germany be given permanent seats on the UN Security Council, ignoring suggestions that major Third World nations also deserve to be admitted to this inner circle.

Aid to the developing nations should be made contingent, the report recommends, on their progress in implementing 'economic reforms' and in establishing democratic institutions. Changing Our Ways closely resembles many other current foreign policy prescriptions in urging the US to launch a worldwide crusade for democracy.

While containing communism can no longer be the guiding principle of US foreign policy, the same underlying premise of an activist, interventionist role for Washington is evident in almost all the proposals for a 'new' approach to international affairs.

Bill Clinton ardently embraces this belief. In a foreign policy address last April, he criticised Bush for not displaying enough willingness to take military action in what was Yugoslavia. He also said the President had failed to come to the aid of the Kurds battling for autonomy from Baghdad.

Clinton likewise chided Bush for 'coddling' the repressive regime in Beijing and for not doing more to help Russia and other former Soviet republics.

He said: 'It is time for America to lead a global alliance for democracy as united and as steadfast as the global alliance that defeated communism.' To show his seriousness about this new crusade,

Clinton has called for major funding increases for certain weapons systems and rapid-development units for use in 'areas of crisis.'

In this respect his thinking is consistent with that of Pentagon policy specialists, who, in a leaked planning document, have suggested that the US be prepared to fight two major regional wars at the same time.

Clinton has at least implied agreement with another tenet of this planning study - that the US actively discourage the emergence of rival powers in the Third World and among its industrialised allies.

He seeks to distinguish their foreign policy positions from those of 'isolationists' and practitioners of realpolitik.

Like President Woodrow Wilson's activism serving globalist ideals following World War One, Clinton clearly wishes to 'make the world safe for democracy,' and appears prepared to fight to guarantee this outcome.

But even the proselytisers are not prepared to intervene everywhere and anywhere to spread the US version of democratic governance. Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states should be the top priorities, suggests commentator Larry Diamond in a foreign affairs journal.

The Caribbean, Mexico and Central America should receive considerable attention because of their physical proximity, Diamond writes. And nations like China, Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan ought also to be actively encouraged to move toward democracy. Small countries in the developing world - and all of sub-Saharan Africa and South America - are omitted from this list.

These grand schemes may well prove mere dreams. Regardless of who wins in November, budgetary problems will sharply constrain the US from carrying out a globalist crusade on behalf of democracy and capitalism.

— GEMINI NEWS  
KEVIN J KELLEY is Editor of the International Affairs Journal Toward Freedom.

Last weeks of the battle. Election day. Voters choose president, vice-president, a third of senators, a quarter of governors, and all 435 members of House of Representatives, plus mayors, sheriffs, district attorneys, etc. Jan 6. Electoral College ballots formally. Votes tied to Nov 3 results. Jan 20 1993. President inaugurated. Bill Clinton and George Bush.

Rethinking the Concept of Human Rights—II

by Chandra Muzaffar

It is a matter of some regret that the idea of freedom so important to the South has not been accorded any emphasis in the West's concept of human rights. Here again, if the inherent rights of communities were given prominence, human rights movements would become more complete and comprehensive in their outlook.

For the South, however, asserting the rights of the collectivity is not just a matter of developing a more complete perspective on human right. It is a question of survival. In a situation where a handful of powerful nations in the North dominate and control the political, cultural, intellectual, economic, scientific and technological resources of the world for their own benefit, it becomes imperative for the people of the South to insist upon their right of access to justice.

It is seldom realised that this control and dominance by a clique in the North has a direct bearing upon a whole range of human rights in the South.

Economic control, for instance, exercised through bilateral ties, regional economic groupings, international trade pacts and international financial institutions, has in a number of cases forced countries in the South to adjust their economic policies to the interests of the North to such an

extent that they have no choice but to neglect the basic needs of their poor.

This is one of the reasons why in various parts of Latin America and Africa, in particular, food production, health care and low-cost housing needs which are related to fundamental economic and social rights - have been subordinated to export crops, tourism and hotels.

Likewise, the North's suffocating control over the production and dissemination of news and information has, in a sense, curbed and curtailed authentic voices in the South capable of articulating its joys and sorrows. Its hopes and fears.

What is the meaning of freedom of expression, of free flow of information in such a situation? How can we talk of the right to practise and propagate one's culture when the overwhelming power of values and attitudes, tastes and symbols, associated with the North threatens to thwart the growth of indigenous art and literature, dance and music?

Even the right to life - the most fundamental of all human rights - is repudiated by the perpetual danger of death in various parts of the South where proxy wars manipulated by the North have in the last 45 years killed at least 22 million men, women and children.

There is no denying that

what has emerged in the course of the decades is an international system in which the poor and powerless who constitute the overwhelming majority of the human race have very little say over their own destiny. A system which virtually disenfranchises the majority cannot be democratic. It cannot claim to protect human rights or human dignity.

The disenfranchisement of the poor and powerless majority is most vividly illustrated in the concentration of effective power in the hands of a few nation-states through the United Nations Security Council.

Some would even argue that with the end of the Cold War and the demise of bipolar politics, it is just one military superpower which controls the Security Council and the UN. The dominance of that superpower over global political process implies a form of authoritarianism in international relations which has no precedence in history.

While most human rights groups are concerned about authoritarianism at the national level, they seldom react to the control and dominance of world politics by a clique from the North. And yet authoritarianism at the international level, as we have shown, displays striking similarities to

authoritarianism in national politics. At both levels, for instance, there is media manipulation and the abuse of political institutions and legal processes to serve the interests of those at the levers of power.

In both national and international politics, elite control and dominance has resulted in the decline and denial of human rights. One wonders, therefore, why authoritarianism at the international level has escaped censure from conventional human rights groups in both the North and the South.

In the case of certain human rights groups like Amnesty, their mandate may dissuade them from examining the impact of authoritarian trends in international politics upon various types of human rights. There may also be human rights groups which are ideologically disinclined to scrutinise the dominance of the North since they are committed to the preservation of the status quo. Others may be just ignorant of how the present international system oppresses and exploits the overwhelming majority of humanity.

But sooner or later human rights groups in the North as well as the South will have to come to grips with the question of the international system and its impact upon hu-

man rights. For the oneness of humanity is becoming a reality in all sorts of ways. The environmental crisis, more than perhaps any other challenge confronting contemporary Man, compels us to seek remedies from a global perspective. There is no national solution to the environmental crisis. We have to think, feel and act universal in the truest sense of the word.

The environmental crisis, it seems to me, is just the first of a series of global crises which will demand genuinely global remedies. There is increasing realisation now that issues such as AIDS, drugs, migration and refugees require international solutions. It is just a question of time before we concede that the eradication of poverty, disease and illiteracy is not possible unless there are massive efforts at the global level.

By the same token, it is unlikely that we will be able to curb ethnic discrimination or racial violence or check political oppression or authoritarian trends through the instrument of the nation-state - which is sometimes the real culprit. Some sort of global endeavour would be necessary.

Once the importance of such an endeavour is understood, we will have to learn to view the whole of humanity as one single family. This is quite different from seeing human

rights as citizens of different states in the international system. This is the approach adopted by human rights groups today.

When we begin to appreciate the real meaning of this idea of 'humanity as a single family' we will find in intolerable that such a huge segment of the same human family does not enjoy basic economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights. We will want to find out what the underlying causes are of this terrible injustice done to our own brothers and sisters, to our own flesh and blood.

We will seek to change social relationships, transform social structures in such a way that a more just and equal world emerges in which each and every human being exercises her rights and executes her responsibilities in consonance with her inherent human dignity.

That world awaits us. That world beckons to us. It is a world that we will not live to see. But it is a world that we must work to achieve. For it is a duty that we who live in the present owe to those who will inherit the future.

Concluded

—Third World Network

Features  
The writer, Dr Chandra Muzaffar, is a well-known Malaysian political scientist and president of the social organisation Altan.

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.

Rajshahi: past and present

Sir, A small news-item late last month took me back 35 years to the few months, that was my good fortune to spend in and around Rajshahi. Ever since then I have had a soft corner for this picturesque district town, as it then was. Memories dim with age and time but some always retain their dimensions.

So how could I forget the bouquet, the taste or the fragrance of what was popularly called Mian Saheb's Dinajpur Langra, grown near Churnanawabganj. Why it was called Dinajpur, I do not know, unless Mian Saheb came from there, but there was no doubting its pedigree or its size. Skin, as yellow as spungold, which would put an onion to shame, juice piped straight from heaven and a seed the size of a cashew-nut. It was brought to Rajshahi's

main mango market as if it was the king's ransom (as well they deservedly might have been) and kept separately for the connoisseurs. The Aratdar critically viewed each prospective buyer to assess and satisfy himself that Mian Saheb's pride would go to an appreciative home before quoting the day's prices and would brook no haggling. Fortunately, he decided very early, that where appreciation of class mangoes was concerned, he couldn't do better than me and thereafter, I received regularly the big regulation basket (120 pieces) by rickshaw. The price, and here I would like to swear to my readers, that, God's truth, it NEVER exceeded Rs. 8/- for the WHOLE BASKET plus annas two rickshaw fair.

The fish market was a gourmet's dream with a variety of Padma species, I have never seen since. Prices, believe it or not, ranged from one anna to 8, 10 or 12 annas per seer

(Tk. 0.06 to Tk. 0.50, Tk. 0.62, 0.75)!

The mouth watering sweets and milk products too were displayed in an endless array and none cost more than Rs. 1.50 per seer! Adulteration? Forget it, there was no such thing. And then there was the ... but here the Begum butts in and insists that nothing about Rajshahi could be more eloquent than the pure silk saree, I gave her on our 25th anniversary and which she still cherishes and wears on special occasions. I got it for her from Saheb Bazar for the then princely sum of Rs. 18.50, though she insists it cost Rs. 23.50 and came from Ghoramara.

Anyway, Rajshahi has always played an important part in the economic, social, cultural and intellectual arena and so it is very distasteful for me to read how handicapped, neglected and violent it has become.

The news-item, which was certainly worth a few thousand crore Taka to the National Exchequer, dealt with the drastic and revolutionary change which Rajshahi has also brought to our main national pastime - the observance of hantals.

Quazi Akhlaque-uz-Azmem, Anderkilla, Chittagong

Environment

Sir, We fully support the call recently made by the Group of Seven (G-7) leaders for rapid international action on the environment. In the final communique after their Munich summit, it is said - 'Rapid and concrete action is required to follow through on our commitment on climate change, to protect forests and oceans, to preserve marine resources, and to maintain biodiversity.'

We sincerely hope that the G-7 leaders will keep their promises toward conservation of the global environment and will provide necessary financial assistance to the developing countries for materializing various environmental conservation projects.

M Zahidul Haque, Asst. Prof. BAI, Dhaka

Idiosyncrasy

Sir, Everyone has been more or less influenced by the idiosyncratic variables. Worsely, there has always been a group of people who are highly guided by those in disbursing their responsibilities. These people very often disregard all other variables around them to adjudge things.

Its influence in the academic institutions in adjudging the performances of the students has been the worst dimension. Recently, a notion has gained currency in our society that the teacher-student relation has not been in desired level of satisfaction. I feel that two major variables have contributed to this undesirability: first, allowance of idiosyncratic variables of the teachers to adjudge the academic performances of the students and second, irrational academic and non-academic demands of some so-called students.

One may disagree with me since he might also have his arguments refuting my allegation. But whatever I have experienced in my seventeen years student-life makes room for accommodating such concept. For instance, when I was a student of class VII, the English teacher, after the half-yearly examination, once told in our class that only two students had passed. Mentionably, there were more than one hundred students in our class. I was to an extent, surprised but was expecting to be one of those two. The teacher, one after another told the marks obtained by us putting me in utter bewilderment. The highest mark, 60, was obtained by a student who really deserved.

The second highest mark, 54, was given to a student who in nobody's perception deserved so. It was widely debated among the students, but all in silence, because that was not the age and there was no climate to go on rampage against the teachers. I was the third boy in order of marks scoring 32.5; mentionably, 33 was the pass mark. I could very well comprehend that, the very teacher, who is no more alive today (may God rest his soul in peace), only wanted to say in the class that I did not pass in the examination. He was angry upon me. This idiosyncrasy influenced him highly while examining my script leading to reducing my score to 32.5. Again, in some of the occasions, the reverse occurred, i.e., I scored much higher than expectation. There had also been no other cause of these successes other than the role of idiosyncrasy of the concerned teachers.

Idiosyncrasy has rather been a ubiquitous phenomenon, prevailing in all spheres of life, exerting tremendous influence on all concerned - brushing aside rationality in adjudging things. Can we not brush aside the vice itself?

Md Abdur Rouf, Sergeant Zahurul Haque Hall, DU