

A Happy Eid for All

Ramadan, the holy month of abstinence past, the nation joins in a festival of bon homie cutting across the communal lines on the Eid day. Eid is for all and not for the *mumtin* alone — and who knows who is such a one in the eyes of all-knowing Allah. From the evident spurt in consumption, specially of eatables, and the resulting price-rocketing, it couldn't have been a spell of true abstinence for many in the towns and cities. And for the most of our compatriots out there in the villages, abstinence wouldn't have been adhered to more than the way it is done throughout the year.

The month of purification had a very welcome low-key zealotry about it. Dictations from the self-appointed holy of holies as to how to keep the sanctity of the month were few and attempts at enforcement still fewer — leaving the growing number of the devout ones to do their injunctions in peace. But this was anything but helped by the flourish of iftar parties thrown with intentions other than religious. There is nothing like not taking iftar without inviting to it five unknown people, preferably, destitutes. But to make of it a mini-Eid and that too with some mundane purpose — is a secular social development of debatable merit.

The Eid in Bangladesh is fast becoming a consumeristic paradise. The splendourous part of it comes from the fact that we are a free people and more people than ever, because of that, are now able to buy gifts for their dear ones. The sad part of it lies in our forgetting that an overwhelmingly major part of our people are on the wrong side of this picture of hedonism. Can a nation so poor as ourselves afford to be so unthinkingly selfish as to spend so much on unnecessary just to please our individual egos and placate the relations we prize?

We can of course take Eid in a carnival spirit. No harm in that, possibly. But bereft of any true spiritual striving and content the whole idea of the Ramadan and ending it in the festival of Fitr or giving gets a serious denting we can hardly set right with things as they are. Ostentation was never a decent way to live, it becomes a regularly foul and unhealthy social sign when it takes on religious pretensions.

These thoughts come to us lending tons of truth and sincerity to our wishing all in Bangladesh and all of the Islamic Ummah a happy and fetching Eid and many returns of the same.

Economy: More Facts Please!

Familiar as we are now with the frequent utterances of Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, repeated a few times in past months, that banks in the country have been sitting idle over surplus funds instead of investing them into productive activities, we are surprised at the statement made last week by the Bangladesh Bank that the surplus liquid assets of the state-owned commercial banks were not all that abnormal.

One wonders how this miracle — if one can call it so — came about. Does this mean that the economy has turned the corner? Or has there been a spurt in bank lending to trade and industry, leading to depletion of surplus funds accumulated earlier by the banks?

Taking the statement of the central bank at its face value, we take this as a good news. However, we would be happier if the assertion of the Bangladesh Bank can be supplemented with data as to where the surplus funds accumulated or lying idle earlier have gone into. How much of it has been used in support of industrial units and trading houses, how much in the establishment of new industries, in other income generating activities and in new housing start-ups?

In an open economy, signs of economic revival, if any, would be reflected in various fields such as the volume of retail sales of consumer durables, construction activities and, of course, in the volume of transactions and price trends in stock exchanges and bond markets.

Sadly enough, in this country, we can only grab at such snippets as "news" that mills and factories under a particular sector corporation have turned out "more goods this year than in the last" or that a particular bank has sanctioned so much of loans — without any details — for new industrial units.

We believe, free flow of information can ease the transition to an open economy. When such a flow is hindered, fragmentary knowledge relating to a situation creates confusion, raising questions without their answers. As a case in point, a reduction at the level of idle money lying unutilised with commercial banks could also have been caused by a fall in bank deposits. Then, again, instead of loans and advances to trade and industry, the banks could have bought up government treasury bills or bonds with this money. In such a situation, reduction in banks' excess liquidity would not necessarily signal an economic upturn.

In a democratic society, people deserve to be kept fully informed of the economic situation in the country, not in generalities but in specific terms. They would then be in a better position to understand the problems facing the country, appreciate the steps taken in dealing with the issues and realise what needs to be done to transform the economy into a strong market oriented one.

In this context, it is imperative that there are regular briefing sessions for the media on the state of the economy. Held at least once a month, such sessions should be conducted by top functionaries concerned with managing the country's economy and the fiscal situation, held either at the Ministry of Finance or the central bank. Such an arrangement would introduce a strong measure of transparency in the handling of the country's economic situation, a transparency which, we feel, often gets buried today under rhetoric and contradictory statements.

Political Culture: A Clear Pattern Yet to Emerge

LOOKING through some of my recent writings I am struck by the recurrence of the expression 'political culture'. The expression has found its way in many contexts, but always in my political pieces. This can be easily explained. But why this particular idea? And exactly when and where did I pick it up from? Not surely from any learned book of politics. Well, as far as I can recollect, I first heard it being littered by one of the participants of an international seminar. The speaker was making a point about political culture of a particular people, when it is not compatible with democratic practices, often proving itself difficult to change. The conference was devoted to the issue, of democratisation in Asian countries. The opinion and the expression immediately struck a sympathetic chord in my mind. It stuck in my mind. It struck me as a profound truth simply expressed. It sent my mind back to my country, on the other side of the globe.

One of the plain truths of history is that democracy has flourished in the West. Its progress has been tardy in the East. In the East, which comprises two vast continents, the regions where Muslims are the only or the majority community are the ones farthest from democracy. Could there be a connection between the ethnic composition and/or the religion, the dominant faith of a particular people and the degree of democracy it could attain? The speaker to whom I own this expression, political culture, did not mention religion. Indeed, he did not care to explain how a particular political culture develops and what are its main sources. Take, for argument's sake, the case of Thailand and that of Afghanistan. One is Buddhist and the other is Muslim and both are Asian and both have had an uninterrupted history of freedom from alien rule. Neither has known Western colonial domination.

Measured in the scale of democracy or a movement towards democracy, Thailand is way ahead of Afghanistan. You have the monarchy and you have the military but neither appears to be an insuperable bar on the way. Afghanistan's years of communism did not give her any peace, any real chance to finally liberate her people from shackles of medievalism. Conflict of interests between US and USSR turned it into a cockpit. At the moment, it looks as if it has swung back to the primitivism from which it had a moment of release. Its position in the scale of democracy is at the very bottom.

I was going to cite the case of Burma, now Myanmar. Quite close to Thailand, and sharing the same faith, the democratic aspirations of its people have been crushed under military boots. The existence of monarchy in Thailand seems to have served as a counterpoise to military ascendancy, and this looks a very special case. This may have provided the chance, a narrow chance though, for democracy to find a footing there.

I could bring in Nepal, too, with its monarchy, its Hinduism and its Buddhism, and the way monarchy first suppressed and finally came to terms with forces of democracy.

Political culture, I can imagine, will be wholly inapplicable to a case like Afghanistan's or Myanmar's where the people were denied a period with a semblance of democracy. This the Indians enjoyed during the

last quarter century of the British rule, allowing political parties to be formed, and a considerable section of the people to participate in elections.

Political institutions and concepts introduced during those years became a common heritage for India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. They struck roots in India and Sri Lanka, but not in the other two. Why?

Between Pakistan and Bangladesh, there are two common factors: military intervention, and religion. In Pakistan, they seem to have made militarism into some sort of a creed, fed on eternal enmity with India over the is-

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

sue of Kashmir. It never crossed the minds of Pakistani rulers that with Azad Kashmir remaining a poor example of democracy, the Indian Kashmiris will have little temptation to join them and share their fate. Indian Kashmiris may have other aspirations, but that is a different story.

Military intervention in Bangladesh happened almost inadvertently, and it failed to gain acceptance of the people. Therefore it had to put on a cloak of civilian rule without ever really deceiving the people. I think here lies the basic difference between the two cases. Under the British, Bangladesh had a better orientation in democratic practice, including some experience of local self-government than the peoples now in Pakistan ever had.

Also, unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh from its beginning has been free from a pre-exist-

ing ruling elite, either military or civilian. But the absence of a capitalist class, if it could be called a vacuum, was soon filled by the emergence of one, under the direct and corrupt patronage of the one-man rule of Ershad.

Coming now finally to the question of political culture of our people, we have to keep in mind all these factors: our induction into democratic ideas under the British, years of semi-colonial existence as part of Pakistan, our social structure with Islam as the religion of the overwhelming majority of the people.

Add to this the economic factors: most importantly that about two-thirds of the popula-

tion live in abject poverty, and nearly three-fourths of our people never entered a classroom.

And yet, with all these limitations, we launched successfully a political movement for democracy; we dislodged an autocrat, a military adventurist, from his seat of power; we elected a sovereign parliament through a free and fair election — itself a marvel in our conditions — and we now have a government which can call itself a democratically elected government.

The rather short period of two years that we have seen this government functioning, the conduct of the ruling party and of the Opposition, both within the Sangsad and outside, the experience of elections held during this period, the quality of leadership with which we have had to make do, the emergence of a hitherto unsuspected force in the

political arena, fundamentalism under the name and style of Jamaat-i-Islami, the heart-warming pledges given to the people by the three alliances in a signed document when the people cleared for them the passage to power, and the failure, when one of the alliances formed the government, to honour the pledge on most counts, the resultant dismay which seems to have spread all about us, — all this and disturbing signs of a society inexorably sliding towards lawlessness, have lent urgency to the issue of political culture.

I think it is important for us, at this juncture of our national life, to form some clear idea of this thing, our political culture. Our political parties claim to have different ideologies, different visions of a future society and therefore different agenda to be acted upon when people vote them to power, show, despite all their apparent differences, a tendency to behave in the same manner, both when in power and when out of power. The voters, in their turn, are always swayed by hopes, and when their hopes are dashed to the ground, quickly swallow their bitterness, and find solace in religion. The embittered youth take to ways of violence, crime drug, and the more ambitious of them enlist themselves in the armed cadres of the political parties, with no permanent allegiance to any party. Leaders go on pouring out words words and words; some of the cleverer ones acting on the principle of making hay while the sun shines. Once an official principle under Ershad, this has, apparently and only apparently, come under discipline under an austerer regime but politicians, as a class, cannot be said to have found for them a place of trust in people's mind.

A considerable section of our people do not really expect any good coming out of politics, but, as it is evidenced at election times, they enjoy the excitement born of elections.

Election itself is quickly changing its character: almost exclusively a game of big money which is, in most cases, synonymous with black money.

A man who is politically a nonentity can emerge as a politician if he can win a Parliamentary seat with the help of his money power.

Gaining the patronage of a party is comparatively easier. As parties have no stable source of funds, they are always on the lookout for people who can fill the party coffers. Some of these donors also qualify for the party ticket. Others wait for the time when their services will bring rewards for them.

Most of the weaknesses, as far as these can be identified, can be attributed to our poverty, lack of education and the fact that the people have been denied for decades a chance to exercise their civic rights. It would not be right to put it down to the fact that they profess a particular faith, or have a particular ethnic identity. What we have witnessed during the past two years is the process, a painful process, of learning to conduct our national affairs under the Constitution. The process, if allowed an uninterrupted run of three full five-year terms, and if the integrity of elections is ensured, if necessary under special arrangements as in 1991, then and then only, a clearer pattern of our political culture will emerge. What we mean by our political culture today is at best a rough sketch of a blurred scenery.

MOSCOW: The new Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, will inherit both the advances and the failures of the economic reform programme of Yegor Gaidar.

While it is clear he will move ahead with Gaidar's program, it is important that he learn from this predecessor's mistakes. On the line is no less than newborn Russian democracy.

The radical transformation of the foundations of society — power and property — essential in a shift to a market economy was neglected by Mikhail Gorbachev, who limited his efforts in the economic arena to details.

It was Gaidar who set about effecting this transformation. He formed a united team and went to work, taking unpopular measures which, especially at the first stage, led to a decline in both production and living standards.

Today, however, the grave economic situation makes it far more difficult to take such steps than it was three or four years ago.

For the most part, Gaidar's programme was in keeping with the free market spirit. He started by liberalizing prices, setting up a new and rigorous tax system, and reinforcing the rouble and the whole monetary system.

The consumer market was running a huge deficit. Stores were empty. There was a vast gap between supply and demand, money resources and commodity deliveries. The rouble was foundering and bartering proliferated.

Price increases, liberalization and tax hikes were implemented to balance the budget and consolidate the rouble. State-controlled distribution of funds and production was stopped, which made businesses search for partners and establish direct ties.

To the Editor...

"By the year 2000 AD"

Sir, We often come across, through the news media, conferences and seminars, of a popular slogans like "Education for all by 2000 AD",

"Health for all by 2000 AD" and "Food for all by 2000 AD".

We have not yet seen any tangible and meaningful step being taken to, achieve the success of the slogan. We are yet to know what measures have been, or are being taken to that end. Year 2000 is not year off, not even full seven years is left. Judging the life of a nation the period is not long and will be over soon.

If we want a successful implementation of the slogans, it is very much necessary to give up lethargy, to sort out problems and ensure effective measures and that should be done right now without losing any time.

Whether it's education or health or food the matter is vital from public point of view.

Like many other government Departments, these departments also have ample instances of 'Inaction' and 'Wastage' and it is strongly felt

No Turning Back for Russian Reforms

Moscow State Lomonosov University professor Alexei Yemelyanov writes that new Russian Premier Victor Chernomyrdin has no choice but to continue his predecessor's unpopular economic programme set by his predecessor.

While not all of Gaidar's initial steps were well thought out — the policy regarding and low-income families was an admitted mistake — in general, even today's most trying measures have a positive effect.

Sharp and often unjustifiable drops in living standards force people to revise their philosophies and learn the fundamentals of entrepreneurship that were eradicated by the Bolsheviks.

Renunciation of state management of production, tight credit, rigorous taxation, price chaos, and the subsequent breakup of economic networks have put many enterprises in a difficult situation.

But now economic executives are changing their thinking. Formerly the state allotted huge funds for raw and other materials and paid for all manufactured goods even if they were obviously unfit for sale.

Today businesses have to establish their own connections and search for consumers and suppliers — in other words, they have to establish normal market relations. This is a definite breakthrough, and there is no going back.

But Gaidar's reforms have proved technocratic and inadequately reflect socio-political conditions. While any shift to a market economy entails radical economic restructuring and the consequent drop in both production and living standards, the situation in Russia seems to be out of control.

The plummeting standard of living throughout the republic is paralysing the economy and threatening a socio-political explosion. Newborn Russian democracy is in danger.

While some mistakes are inevitable in a shift from totalitarian economic management to a market economy, these mistakes derive from the very ideology of the main reformers.

Gaidar and his colleagues are competent and gifted economists, perfectly versed in Russian and foreign economic theory. They are honest people, not in government for the power, sticking to their positions without giving into populism or other pressures. Not a single promise was ever squeezed out of Gaidar.

But almost all of them are inadequately acquainted with economic practice and day-to-day life. Even their studies were at a macro level and not at the level of the worker or body of workers.

This is why they mapped out reforms academically, from top to bottom, in an attempt to transform the economy as quickly and radically as possible. Cut off from real life, the reform has inevitably produced negative results.

One mistake was the rejection of state control before a market infrastructure was created.

Sudden state withdrawal has only accelerated the breakup of economic networks and aggravated the economic crisis. High taxation rates have undermined investment incen-

tives.

Tight credit and monetary policy has led to a cash crisis and widespread non-payment, aggravated social tension, all of which further destabilized the economy, seriously undermining the basis for the rouble's stabilization.

Overestimation of Western

assistance and non-critical borrowing of Western experience have also had their negative consequences.

Much needs to be revised in order to correct the mistakes. President Yeltsin and other Russian leaders have begun to outline plans to do so. While retaining the essence of re-

forms, it is essential that the new Prime Minister take into account the socio-political conditions so that his decisions dovetail with rather than ignite Russian society.

Gaidar was beginning to work towards that end, and it is believed the present government will continue to do so. Yemelyanov has a good understanding of economic affairs, and has left in place the backbone of Gaidar's team. These are grounds for optimism.

(ALEXEI YEMELIANOV is member of the Russian Presidential Consultative Council.)

OPINION

"A Third Force in Politics"

Muhammad Abdul Haque

Nazis of the current century, and of the marauding armies of the mediaeval times? There is only one answer to these questions. In nearly two years of democratic rule, the overall situation has been steadily going from bad to worse, as days, weeks and months pass by. Even granting their sincerity, the political Government in power, have dismally failed to halt the deteriorating situation in all sectors all over the country.

And what has the Parliament done? They have created a record of the time used in debates, making truth the biggest casualty inside the grand hall, with its regal, cosy sanctum with the build — in security from the cries and wails of the dying and maimed humanity, only yards away.

Apart from improving their own financial benefits, the majority in the Parliament have gloated over the Anti-terrorist Law passed by them, with the avowed objective of curbing terrorism. But the hard fact of life is that terrorism, violent crimes, chaos, anarchy and indiscipline have engulfed the nation in firmer grip than ever before.

What a tragedy that the leadership of the country is so unperturbed about the cruel, dastardly crimes that have struck down all norms of civilized life? What a tragedy that in the nation's parliament many honourable members have made a mockery of democracy, while many others have made truth, fairness and justice the biggest casualties.

In my mid-seventies, still working ceaselessly from dawn to midnight at the desk and out in distant slums for alleviation of poverty, it is farthest from my mind to meddle in party-politics, which is fast establishing itself as the prime factor for all the evils that have destroyed the nation, which emerged through the limitless 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' of millions, as well as the chastity of the womanhood in thousands.

But even in my pursuit of the humble, innocent task of research and planning at the desk from 7 to 9 in the morning, the telephone does not spare me the agony of rising blood pressure on hearing of atrocities committed during the previous night, affecting relations, friends and acquaintances. The newspaper reading is another agonising experi-

ence. Cruel, hellish atrocities fill the pages. But newspapers get hardly 10% of the sordid crimes that are being committed all over the country. Thousands of cases of extortion, looting and beating are never reported to police.

In my weekly road journey to distant slums for Guided Action to Alleviate Poverty, more of my time is wasted in traffic jams in almost every business centre only a few miles apart, on the highways and roads. Here and there, a traffic police man makes a fool of himself by blowing whistle, which nobody bothers about. Drivers of trucks and buses coming from different directions block the road so that from their own seats they can exchange pleasantries, and even take tea and snacks, while the total traffic stands still.

With my experience gained in this very land and across the world for over half a century in responsible assignments, I firmly believe that it is not yet too late to halt the process of decay within weeks, and show positive improvement within months, through a series of well calculated steps. The need of the hour is *Innovative Strategy and Techniques* to enkindle a ray of hope in the frustrated populace and to seek their co-operation in setting things right in their own interest. The beginning should be made from the urban areas, highways, waterways, railways and airways. How can I believe that there is no one in the entire Government machinery capable of drawing up a blueprint for this not-too-difficult task? The time, however, is fast running out.

The unfortunate failure of the Government and of the Parliament to rise to the occasion would inevitably lead to the emergence of a Third Force in the politics of the country. The Third Force with some wise leadership, even when not in power, might contribute towards halting the process of decay. On the contrary, a Third Force of combined money-power, muscle-power and fire-power will only hasten the total disaster. In this context, I welcome a Third Force with known, capable and dependable persons. Such a Third Force may wake up the slumbering political leaders, and the stage may then be set for a Second Tripartite Unity to regain what the first Tripartite Unity had achieved in 1990.

Shaf Rahman, Chor Komlapur, Faridpur.