

A Sad Day in Our Politics

Salam Talukdar, the just reinstated Secretary General of the ruling party was only half correct when he condemned, what he called, the 'politics of dead bodies' — referring to the attempt by the opposition Awami League to gain some political mileage from the tragic deaths of Paran and Milon. He would have been fully correct, if Mr Talukdar was looking at a mirror when he was uttering those pious words. What we have witnessed in the last two days, is politics at its morally bankrupt worst. The minimum decency of expressing grief at the death of someone has become replaced by political expediency of how to use it to blame the opponent. In our rush to fit the events to our own politically fancied explanations, some facts are buried and others invented, and the public is left at the mercy of the one with greater power to misinform.

We had expressed our supreme grief, in this column yesterday, at the untimely death of these two youngmen. But today we express our total revulsion at the vulgarity and perversity exhibited by our two leading political party, the BNP and the AL, in dealing with the bodies of the two deceased. With the news of the killing the Awami League naturally assumed the victims were either its workers, or sympathisers, or at least unknown passers-by whom it can easily claim to be its own. Thus Sheikh Hasina's and other AL leaders rushing see the victims were far from mere consequences.

But fate played tricks on AL, and BNP got wind of the fact that the deceased, could be proven to have some links with the youth wing of the ruling party. Thus began the real 'politics of dead bodies.' Mad scramble followed, to demand the bodies and a most vulgar competition ensued to out-do one another in expressing grief. Having caught the AL off-guard, BNP went the whole-hog, turning the janaza into political rally of a vicious attack on the AL.

This vulgar episode turned sordid by the minute and reached its obnoxious height when the PM herself was brought into the act. It is hardly credible that a grieving father having just lost his son would, of all the things, report to the PM about his son's political leanings. No, the meeting was orchestrated, and turned into a media event to counter the AL's propaganda offensive.

In the tragedy ridden history of our beloved country, we had seen many things, but this takes the cake in sordidness. The preference for political expediency, in place of truth and ethics, as shown by these two political parties, especially the BNP, which used the state power (like helicopter, TV, PID etc) to make its designs effective, has created a revulsion among the public. To what depths of opportunistic and mercenary abyss are we to lower ourselves just to stick to power, or on the other hand, in an attempt to seize it?

Will our politicians, please take a step back, stop for a minute, and look at what they are doing to our politics, to our society, to our values, to our religious and cultural norms, to our democratic possibilities — in one word, to our future?

Yesterday, in these columns we pleaded for a genuine and sincere dialogue between the BNP and the AL. However unrealistic it may appear on the face of it, not going for it will push the whole nation backward. When there is a chance to make Bangladesh an attractive investment venue for global business, even a hint of political instability will amount to nipping that prospect in the bud. Do we really understand the implication of such an eventuality?

We urge the BNP and the AL, and all opposition parties, to rise above their respective party interests, and give pride of place to national interest. We all will have to be flexible, with the party in power leading the way. If we fail to rise upto the occasion, then let the warning be served that public is watching and making its own assessment, and is making up its mind. Let us also be aware, and be warned, that public patience has limits.

Wish Japan a Quick Bounce-back

We take the news of the Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa's decision to resign his post both with sadness and adoration. The cheerless note is because his announcement to step down comes so closely on the heels of his having hosted a very useful visit made by Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to Japan.

As for the admiration, how could we fail to note the vindication of the self-correcting Japanese political culture at the top where men in high position quit at the drop of a hat accepting moral responsibility for any alleged financial or other forms of wrong-doing.

The happenings in Japan, both political and economic, have been traditionally followed with great interest in Dhaka. And, specially with a fresh impetus having been given by the visit to the inter-state relationship, it is only natural for our private and public sector leaders to be keenly observing the latest turn of events in Japan's mercurial politics. As things stand at the moment, Hosokawa has announced his resignation after securing approval from his loosely-knit coalition cabinet. His coalition partners are said to have had their own agenda which made his lonesome position difficult. Now, even though with him will go down his cabinet too, the coalition's existence as a live political entity as against the LDP could still endure if only it is able to find, by consensus, a successor to Hosokawa. Foreign Minister Tsutomu Hata is speculated to be that person. At any rate, Hosokawa's offer of resignation awaits approval by the Japanese parliament.

The biggest irony is that amidst high expectations of his people and with a popularity rating of 80 per cent to cheer him Hosokawa set about cleaning Japanese politics of corruption but he himself has now fallen victim to allegations of financial wrong-doing. The legal nuances apart, this is what has unfortunately happened. Japanese prosperity, largely attributed to the LDP's four decades of unbroken rule, has had the attendant features of corruption in politics and a high degree of sensitivity to it. Hosokawa remained a non-starter with his economic stimulus plan or his budget proposals which were lost in a parliamentary fury over his alleged financial irregularities. But Japan must find a way out of this instability trap to play its due role as one of the foremost economic powers in the world — for its own sake and that of others.

THE Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace between Bangladesh and India, signed on March 19, 1972 will expire on March 18, 1997. Though it became the focus of intense and often hostile attention during election times there was never a genuine public debate on this historic document.

As Foreign Secretary in the late seventies I was often required to explain the basic provisions of the Treaty to veteran politicians. Much to my amazement I found that these politicians had been issuing public statements attacking the Treaty without even bothering to read the text. Some of them were not at all embarrassed by their ignorance of the actual provisions of the Treaty. They did not want to find out the truth; they just needed a weapon to use against the Awami League party as part of the systematic and well-planned propaganda campaign that was launched after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Their aim was quite clear. They used the Treaty in March 1997. The policy outlined by Sheikh Hasina is based on an objective analysis of the provisions of the Treaty.

It is often overlooked that during the last 23 years the Treaty has not been invoked by either side even once. Those who breathlessly denounce the Treaty should note this point. It has not been invoked by either side because it was not considered necessary to do so. The very existence of the Treaty served its purpose.

To appreciate the rationale of the Treaty one must recall the circumstances prevailing in early 1972. Newly independent Bangladesh, its economy ravaged by a marauding occupation army, needed strong allies to withstand the efforts to undermine the state by both internal and external forces. Not only Pakistan but a number of great powers had not recognized Bangladesh as an independent state. Membership of the UN was denied by the ap-

The Bangladesh-India Friendship Treaty: The Question of Renewal

Bangladesh to Indian domination and control. The rationale of the Treaty and the benefits that it conferred on a newly independent country were skillfully concealed from public view.

The President of the Bangladesh Awami League Sheikh Hasina, in an interview published by The Daily Star on March 24, 1994, put an end to all the speculation about the position of her party on this issue. She clearly stated that she does not favour the renewal of the Treaty when it will expire in March 1997. The policy outlined by Sheikh Hasina is based on an objective analysis of the provisions of the Treaty.

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plication of veto by a great power. The Muslim states were not particularly friendly to Bangladesh. The Razakars at home were active in creating despair and panic in public mind by spreading rumours and disinformation.

It was against the backdrop of these threats to the independence and sovereignty of the state that one should look at the Treaty. It was an act of statesmanship on the part of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

Rahman that he took this timely and wise precaution to safeguard the country's independence earned at the cost of three million lives. I happened to have been an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in those days and had the opportunity to observe the impact of the Treaty on our international standing.

The fact that a big country such as India stood by the side of Bangladesh as a friend served as a warning to those who did not harbour friendly intentions towards the new state. Recognition by the Western powers as well as the Muslim states followed in quick succession and soon thereafter Bangladesh was able to take its rightful place as a proud member of the international community.

Since then twenty two years have passed. The global political situation has undergone fundamental changes. The end of the cold war has altered the basic premises on which the countries in the region view their security needs. What was an essential step in 1972 does not appear to be so in the mid-nineties. Sheikh Hasina has, in a pragmatic and unemotional way, recognized the realities of the global and regional situation prevailing today.

Foreign Minister could not find anything unacceptable in the document.

Sheikh Hasina's far-sighted step has virtually taken the Treaty off our national agenda. Perhaps the realization will now dawn that the uninformed and emotive discussions of this issue had for too long been exploited by certain quarters. Not only the fringe elements in our politics but even a supposedly responsible mainstream parties, including the BNP made use of this highly sensitive issue for short-term political gains. Regrettably this was done by resorting to deliberate misinterpretations of the Treaty. Fanning the fires of communal hatred and intolerance.

Sheikh Hasina has wisely decided to put an end to such talk, so that the nation can focus on issues of greater current relevance to our national and regional security. The Foreign Minister, Mr Mustafizur Rahman, when questioned by the journalists a few days ago about Sheikh Hasina's views on the question of renewal, said that 'She is saying this for other reasons.' The insinuation in his comment, far from being biting or amusing, merely caused bewilderment among the journalists none of whom could fathom what he was hinting at.

The simple fact of the matter is that the Treaty has served its purpose. Its renewal is not essential for our national security needs today. The BNP government may feel disappointed that a favorite weapon has fallen out of their hands but they have no sensible choice but to concur with the assessment and go along with the policy outlined by Sheikh Hasina on the question of the renewal of the Treaty.

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In an editorial, the *Nikkei* newspaper blamed Hosokawa for resorting to a high consumption tax and changing its name to a 'welfare tax'. Wrote the *Nikkei*: 'It is a cheap gimmick to cheat the people.'

The wide-circulation *Bunei Shunju* monthly magazine splashed a two-page article in a recent edition describing in detail how Hosokawa's family was allegedly paid one billion yen by head of a company accused of large payoffs to the LDP.

The article depicted Hosokawa as an uncanny wheeler-dealer who took advantage of his upper class upbringing to deals with the company.

Bunei Shunju is known for its 1974 exposure of financial scandals involving prime minister Kakuei Tanaka who eventually was forced to resign.

Japan: Golden Boy is Tarnished

Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa rode into office less than a year ago with promises of reform, but the knight of Japanese politics had more than a few chinks in his armour. *Suvendrini Kakuchi* of Inter Press Service reports from Tokyo

He might have been the first Japanese leader to tell Washington 'no' to its face, but the political fortunes of Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa were hardly brimming over these days.

While he had the support of most of his countrymen when he stood up to US President Bill Clinton during their February summit, Hosokawa was far from being viewed by the Japanese public as their knight in shining armour.

Indeed, although he had been in office for only less than a year, Japan's former golden boy of politics was now suffering from a tarnished image, largely because he failed to fulfill most of the promises he made during the campaign.

Hosokawa's unblinking stance in Washington may have been the only decisive move he had made since he became premier. For the past months, the often beleaguered Japanese leader had spent his time striking compromises with members of his own political coalition, if not saying sorry to the public.

Last December, for instance, Hosokawa apologised for his failure to keep the Japanese rice market closed as he had pledged he would do before becoming premier.

He argued that lifting the ban on rice imports was necessary to keep Japan from becoming painted as a villain in the then ongoing General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), but the move so angered even many of his traditional constituents that they had sworn never to believe him again.

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Most Japanese were pleased that for the first time they had a prime minister they did not have to feel ashamed about — a leader who scored points for tasteful clothes and noble bearings.

Hosokawa is related to the imperial family and, until recently, was a regular tennis partner of Emperor Akihito. He was Japan's first aristocrat premier since World War II.

But Hosokawa soon found that royal bloodlines can only go so far when it comes to politics. With corruption apparently too entrenched to uproot in one heave, his much-touted political reform bill was passed only after being watered down considerably to suit the still-powerful LDP kingmakers.

The bill sought to drastically alter Japan's multi-constituency electoral system that is seen as the root cause of corruption, but it is seen to be too weak to make a difference.

Points out Japan expert Robert Orr: 'The bill that was finally passed was a victory for the LDP, not for Mr Hosokawa'.

But the bigger blow to Hosokawa's popularity has been in tax measures he announced to stimulate the economy.



Nagged by the public and other politicians for being too slow to act in correcting the

slide of the Japanese economy, Hosokawa's government passed a 15.25 trillion yen

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OPINION

Attracting Japanese Investment

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Mr Mahfuz Anam has hit the nail on the head, when he says that the ball is now in our court (DS 10 April 5th). Whether we can attract Japanese direct foreign investment depends on ourselves. In the closing part of his news analysis Mr Anam has succinctly observed that the lack of our infrastructure, labour unrest and bureaucratic attitude to the problems are the stumbling blocks for our development.

What are we doing really? We profess and sermonise something and in actual practice we do something else. Are these not noted by our expatriate residents? At this very moment (DS 7th April) a Japanese business delegation is visiting Bangladesh. They have arrived here to assess the investment climate. What repercussions will they have when they see or hear of the seize of the Bangladesh Secretariat and the Election Commission and the after math? This is bound to affect the judgement of the visitors.

Kickbacks and corruptions have unfortunately become an accepted norm in our business and industrial culture. This makes the investors shy. FDI is competitive so far a country is concerned, and therefore it will move to another place where it gets the highest return. Special Envoy Morshed Khan admitted that he was not going to invest, unless he was sure of a suitable return.

Bangladesh has resources constraint, so it has to train its manpower and make it highly productive. As of now three-fourth of our population is illiterate. A country cannot reach an industrial take off stage unless its literacy rate is at least 40%. At present the labour in Bangladesh is generally cheap, but in terms of productivity it is not that cheap.

If a country has to move ahead, there must be some minimum economic consensus, and political understanding. The politicians must place the interests of the country above that of their parties. And this we are sadly lacking. We are miles behind India and Pakistan in changing the lot of our people. This is a tragic situation that we all are now facing.

There are several factors for non-investment in Bangladesh.

rain waters on the portions of the roads and level, raise, dig, fix up asbestos pipe or construct underground drain on those affected portions, the stagnated water would easily pass away from one side to another, and ultimately out of the roads.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203.

Status of women

Sir, I did not mean to shock or puzzle anyone when I expressed in the letter column of your esteemed daily, that I was against the idea of Bengali women participating in a beauty contest abroad. However, Mr Tawheed Feroze's puzzle or shocked state of mind has left me bewildered.

Our women have been subjected to circumstances of dominance by parents, husband and sons. Folklores and anecdotes speak amply of the anomaly that exists between men and women. But then Mr Tawheed's argument based on the fact that Bengali women are embarrassed during 'matchmaking', and they are 'scrutinised' by selectors in the match thus their participation in a beauty contest abroad is laudable, does not satisfy me. He further delves into the area of advertising and then throws light on women's behavioral changes, which has no relevance to the subject in my letter. Then he mentioned Noorjahan's case, because such incidents and the frequency of such incidents, would stop, and we must all put in concerted effort (NGOs, govern-

ment) so that no more Noorjahan face the plight, that she once did.

I believe strongly in the proper status of women in society and this why I have expressed my views concerning a woman-specific event. I feel that when beauty is on display, it is demeaning for a society that we call civilized! However, I am glad that Mr Tawheed is concerned about the status of women and at least admits the plight of women in Bangladesh.

Syeda Zakia Ahsan
Lalmata, Dhaka

Bio-gas from wastes

Sir, A huge bio-gas plant can be set up in Dhaka at the site where wastes are dumped by the authority of Dhaka City Corporation. The whole area has become very nasty and unhygienic. Such a way of dumping wastes reflects our poor civic sense.

I would like to draw the attention of the newly elected Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation to set up at least one bio-gas plant in that area. The scientists of the fuel department of the Science Laboratory can be asked to provide with a complete plan of the plant. The high volume of the deposited gas can surely be an additional source of income and its by-product can be used as manure.

This is probably how we can make the best utilization of the wastes and help our people in the neighbourhood to live in better hygienic condition.

Motilal Samad Chowdhury
Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet