

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 as a red flag to arouse public sentiment against India and, by implication, the Awami League party.

It may be recalled that it was an Awami League government which signed the treaty in 1972. In the process, these political elements made use of the lingering undercurrent of communal hatred and the latent fear of a big neighbour. Deliberate misinterpretation of the Treaty, coupled with hate-India propaganda, succeeded in creating panic and hysteria among certain sections of the public. Lurid tales were concocted to create the impression that the Treaty subjected

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.

It is often over-looked 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-

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

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.

Integrity of the other and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the other side." If Indian aggression was what some of these self-proclaimed patriots feared, could there be a clearer statement than this one that the source of aggression would not be India? The other articles call for cooperation between the two states in different fields. Is cooperation an act of subservience? Anyone who has the interest of the country at heart would not make that kind of an unreasonable suggestion. A key provision of the Treaty, article 9, calls for consultations between the two countries "in case either party is attacked or threatened with attack." Is it really a bad thing to consult one's neighbour if one is threatened with armed aggression? Eventually, after discussing the matter for a few weeks, Gen Zia had to abandon the idea of abrogating the Treaty. He would have found it difficult to justify such a step. His successor Gen Ershad ruled the country for nine years and enjoyed dictatorial powers but he did not use his powers to terminate or even propose a revision of the Treaty. The present BNP government has had three long years to contemplate its policy on the Treaty. They have not, as far as I am aware, considered it necessary to initiate any action to abrogate or revise the Treaty. As the President of the Awami League Sheikh Hasina pointed out in her interview, the present BNP

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 party, 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.

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.

The vocal critics of the Treaty are usually ignorant about its provisions. I had the opportunity to observe the reaction of some of the severest critics of the Treaty after its provisions were explained to them. The late Gen Ziaur Rahman, for example, was initially keen on abrogating the Treaty. He was on the same wave length on this issue as his political allies led by his prime minister, the late Shah Azizur Rahman. But when the document was read by him and his senior advisers it was quite clear to them that there was nothing in the document which even they could consider objectionable. Article 1 of the Treaty, for instance, guarantees that "each side shall respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial in-

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.

Hosokawa rode into office

on the wings of cries for political reforms less than a year ago, topping the once mighty Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that has dominated Japanese politics since the end of the Second World War.

The Japanese, fed up with 38 years of dirty politics under the LDP, voted enthusiastically for Hosokawa's vision of a 'New Japan'.

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 regal 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.

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



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

(US\$ 140 billion) economic stimulus package that cut income and residential taxes before the premier made his trip to Washington.

But to make up for the loss in revenue, Hosokawa went along with bureaucrats who pushed Japan's consumption tax to seven percent from three percent — only to withdraw the announcement and apologise the next day after facing resentment from socialists within his coalition.

"The people have been patient, very patient. They even swallowed the unpopular decision on rice imports. But the increase in consumption tax was just too much," said political commentator Manabu Shimizu.

By the time he was packing for the Feb 11 meeting with Clinton, it was clear Hosokawa's honeymoon with the public was nearing its end. From a 74 per cent approval

rating in January, his popularity plunged to 52 per cent.

The Japanese media, which once had a soft spot for Hosokawa, also began turning against the dapper prime minister.

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 *Bunrei 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 deal with the company.

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

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 dt 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 seizure of the Bangladesh Secretariat and the Election Commission and the after math? This is bound to affect the judgement of the visitors.

The Managing Director of Marubeni Corporation had stated that the economic loss to Bangladesh in January and February of 1993 (\$128 million) was greater than the total aid given by Japan (\$125 million). When only a few millions of dollars are given as aid to Bangladesh, Viet Nam is receiving aid in terms of billions. Our share of aid is only 0.2 per cent.

In the penultimate para of his news analysis, Mr Anam has suggested for providing 'incentives' to FDIs. A further point of note here. Whatever incentives are provided in paper, have to be fully implemented. Often we have very fine rules etc, but in actual practice we create bottlenecks at all stages. The government has said that the investors would get one stop service. But in actual practice there may still be a hundred stops. All investors know what hardships and botherations have to be faced when setting up a manufacturing plant.

There are several factors for non-investment in Bangladesh.

The very first hurdle relates to work-ethic. In the government as well as in the public sector corporations, people hardly work. If something has to be done, it is always alleged that "tainted money" has to be given (with exceptions). The private sector workers/officials take their cue from the government sector. We are facing a non-work situation, which can only lead us to poverty and disaster. Our industries are made to be sick because we virtually do not work. We ask for bonuses even when we produce less. There are surplus labour in most of the industrial units. We are unable to exercise any hard options because of aggressive trade unionism. We have failed to perceive that hartals and strikes frighten direct foreign investment. Before we ask for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) we have to set our own house in order.

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.

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.

Vice Chancellor

Sir, This has reference to Mr Abdus Sobhan's remarks on Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui's article (Star, 1 March) and Professor Siddiqui's reply to that (Star, 29 March). It is quite curious that Prof. Siddiqui did not attempt to demolish the main arguments of Mr Sobhan. It would have been nice if he did.

On the contrary, he picked up a peripheral issue that is 'the authentic' story of Dr Mahmud Husain's resignation as VC which he credits to Borhanuddin Ahmed's autobiography, *The Generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh* etc, a book which as he tells us is still blocked at the airport customs. Now all kinds of memories and autobiographies are coming out everyday and only an uninformed reader would rush to believe whatever is written in print with his innocent credulity. If I guess correctly, this Borhanuddin Ahmed was a civil servant in education ministry of the provincial secretariat of East Pakistan. Without making any comment on Ahmed's piece of writing it can be said that Dr Mahmud's resignation was coerced with the launching of the Ayub constitution and it was impossible for him to continue in a university that sharply re-

acted to that constitution. Mr Sobhan had also mentioned two other names including Prof. Siddiqui's, but Prof. Siddiqui did not refer to them. It would have been much more 'authentic' if Prof. Siddiqui could narrate his own experience as VC under the two generals — Gen. Zia and Gen. Ershad — as he did not resign and completed his eight-year term to the last hour.

Nurul Huda
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Flooded roads

Sir, Whenever there is a rain in the city most of our roads get flooded. Can't our authorities concerned — Dhaka City Corporation, WASA, RAJUK and Roads and Highways Department — do any thing to do away with the stagnant rain water? The durability and longevity of our roads are adversely affected due to stagnant rain water. We are required to repair and make recarpeting of our busy and important roads again and again at the cost of huge public money.

We feel that if our road authorities concerned kindly make correct assessment and measurement of the stagnated

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 'serutinised' 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 Noorjahans 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.

Syedna Zakia Ahsan
Lalmatia, 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.

Motius Samad Chowdhury,
Phulitola Tea Estate, Sylhet