

We Condemn the Attacks on Newspapers

Any attack on a newspaper office, in whatever shape and form it is engineered and carried out, is an abominable act by itself. And if the assault happens to be as direct, brazen-faced and armed as was the one perpetrated on Janakantha office day before yesterday, not sparing another vernacular daily, Banglar Bani, then the natural question to ask is how could they summon that much bravado unless they had a helping hand from behind. Actually it smacks of a deeply rooted conspiracy against certain progressive newspapers to silence the voice of reason and sanity in society. It is all the more so because such newspapers are showing the path to the 21st Century.

As if to sentimentalise the whole episode the procession was taken out after the Juma prayers with the deliberate motive of fomenting zealous on an issue for which remain several outlets to express dissenting views through without creating a riotous situation. This is exactly what is at issue: taking advantage of religion to serve political ends.

If some opinions carried or expressed by a newspaper evoked dislike of certain individuals or a group, they could meet the Editor and seek his clarifications, issue a counter-statement on the subject, or the matter could be taken to the Press Council or even to a court of law, depending on the pattern of response from the newspaper concerned. But since none of these civilised methods was adopted before going in for the mind-boggling action. During the last three years, there have been some two dozen dastardly attacks on newspaper offices, and yet the culprits managed to remain at large. It can be easily imagined with what redoubled energy they could spring into action at a time or place of their choice. The point is the heinous acts are the work of an uninformed bunch, fed at best on half-baked notions of right and wrong who are easily instigated from behind to pick on any pretext.

The implications of what are being done through them by working them up have assumed too grave a proportion to be brushed aside anymore. All attacks on newspaper offices have been chain, sequential assaults in a tell-tale fashion, but the latest one tops them all by rampaging through the public thoroughfares in Mothijheel and pouncing on hawkers of Janakantha elsewhere as well, in an unprecedented demonstration of wrath. They want all progressive newspapers banned including Janakantha, Ajker Kagoj, Bhorer Kagoj and Sangbad. Today it is one or two papers taking the brunt, tomorrow it can be the rest falling victim to opinionated terrorism. Intellectual terrorization is the worst form of impingement conceivable on free press.

We condemn the attacks on the newspaper offices with the strongest language at our command because these seek to destroy pluralism, free press and democracy and supplant them by a fascistic monopoly over the national thought-process.

It is just not an assault on a newspaper or two, but an attack on the fundamental rights of free speech and an attack on the Constitution and on everything that democracy stands for.

Ways of Sharing Ganges Water

A workshop, when titled as "Women for Water Sharing," can seldom fail to cause men — almost without exception — to knit their brows. But the list of participants can more than assure any sceptic that the meet had nothing to do with anything remotely concerned with gender bias. Nor was the workshop organised by the Task Force on Women and Environment at Sonargaon Hotel a get-together for light talks. On the contrary, the deliberations were serious, business-like and pragmatic. A critical issue such as the sharing of the Ganges water between India and Bangladesh could not perhaps be treated any differently.

From this stand-point, the workshop has done quite a good job. Although it was not one of the host of inter-governmental meets held almost routinely between the two countries, the workshop has come up with a number of suggestions that deserve the concerned countries' attention. While political considerations most of the time work as a constraint for the government delegates at various levels to press for illogical arguments and not to see the other party's genuine points, here the participants, freed from any such limitations, could ask for the reasonable and just steps possible.

It is this clear vision and conscience that have prompted renowned Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar to ask his country's government to revive the 1977 water-sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh. He did not have to mince words when he made the demand, along with other practical measures, in favour of Bangladesh. The point is to right a wrong, one that concerns as much humanitarian as legal considerations. The unilateral withdrawal of water from a common river by an upper-river country is both unacceptable and illegal.

The workshop seems to have been quite alive to the complexities involved and also to its own limitations. So it has sought to establish effective and broad-based contact between and among various interest groups in the two countries. The idea seems to be building an environment of trust and at the same time creating pressure on government through strong public opinions. The workshop has been very realistic to visualise a time frame of 10 years for the two governments to find a permanent solution to the problem. So it has advocated for giving a new lease of life to the 1977 treaty for that period only. By the time the contact groups will be carrying their multi-disciplinary studies alongside the governments and help in the negotiations for reaching an accord. There are even a few forward-looking recommendations in that the provision for basin-wise integrated development of all the common rivers in the region has been suggested.

Clearly, the suggestions have their merits. Now let the government concerned take them seriously. If they act in a spirit of neighbourliness and goodwill, the problem arising out of Farakka Barrage can surely be solved.

The Daily Star Public Debate: What do Our Readers Think?

Election under Caretaker Government Means no Confidence on Voters

by M A Heera

If to become a democrat is difficult, to remain a democrat is impossible, particularly in Bangladesh. We are possibly the only nation in the world who became independent twice but could not institutionalise democracy. We have failed to muster the necessary tolerance to practise democracy. Even after achieving independence twice, we are yet to grasp the meaning of democracy. We recognise our own freedom of movement, speech and association only and not of others. When we impose our wish on others we very easily forget there are others with similar rights. Even leaders may not be an exception. They feel that being leaders they understand better as to what would be good for the general public.

The voters were not even asked if they want their elections held under a caretaker government or if they would like to have a mid-term election or should their verdict of 1991 election be given a chance till the end of a specified period.

The matter was neither discussed nor settled in the parliament, as we would have liked. We elected our representatives to solve our prob-

lems, if any, in the house and not outside. Our representatives seem to have ignored us and started boycotting the parliament. They seem to forget that every five years we exercise our right to vote and elect our representatives, expecting them to do their jobs in right earnest for five years. We would judge them by their activities and choose our next set of representatives only at the expiry of the period and not before. It is however most unfortunate that some time our representatives act so recklessly that we are left with no other alternative but to act and hold mid-term elections, which are not only expensive but also at times vexatious.

In your public debate, we thought our leaders will use space of your paper with something new to say; instead they chose to spoil the debate, which otherwise could have become interesting and educative if they had avoided the same old arguments. One leader has gone to the extent of defending Bangabandhu on his formation of BAKSAL saying that he did it to unite the people of Bangladesh. He forgot that the people of this country voted for him overwhelmingly in 1970 without the benefit of

BAKSAL. His arguments to justify BAKSAL therefore only strengthens the general belief amongst the public about attempts by the party to politicise the army, navy, air force and government officials, in short all classes of the society.

In our view election can be held under any type of government provided there is constitutional provision including the details of the framework of such government. On the other hand, the political parties must have confidence in the voters' sense of judgement, which in my view never, never went wrong in any of the past elections, right from 1946 until 1991.

The proposition to hold parliamentary elections under a non-partisan government gives rise to the following questions, answers to which must be found if we are to entertain the idea seriously:

1) That the non-partisan government and caretaker government are not the same. This has been amply explained by the opposition Chief Whip in his interview with The Daily Star. He said that after the expiry of the five-year term, the BNP will remain in power, not as the elected government but as the caretaker government.

2) However it is possible

only if we consider the Election Commission as a sort of non-partisan caretaker government itself responsible for holding elections only. If the

5) It seems that we have to hold elections throughout the tenure of an elected government, be it a parliamentary by-election, a municipal or a local government poll. We cannot perhaps hold elections on every occasion under a caretaker or non-partisan government.

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Options to End Deadlock on Caretaker Government Issue

by Amir-ul Islam

To start with it is important to identify and understand the demands of the Opposition. On the basis of the interviews in The Daily Star, and statements as published, the stand of the Opposition may be summed up as follows:

(a) To have provisions in the Constitution to be introduced by way of a Bill providing for holding of general election of members of Parliament on its dissolution under a caretaker government to be headed by a neutral person.

(b) Such caretaker government will enter upon the office only after the dissolution of Parliament and will remain in office till a new Prime Minister is sworn-in after having secured a vote of confidence in the new Parliament elected through a free and fair election (which is already mandated under the Constitution to be held ordinarily within three months and can be extended by another three months only for any Act of God i.e. devastating flood, cyclone or like disaster making it impossible to hold the election within the first three months period).

Assuming that there are two core demands of the Opposition, the concerns and objection of BNP ministers, as could be gathered from their interviews, again in The Daily Star, and statements may be summarised as follows:

1. Firstly, there is no constitutional provision for a neutral interim government.

2. Secondly, the concept of a neutral caretaker government is beyond the constitutional concept which, if allowed, will be violative of fundamental structure of the Constitution, particularly when the Constitution does not contemplate any government to be headed by a non-elected person.

3. Thirdly, there is no precedence of having election under a neutral caretaker government anywhere else in a parliamentary democracy.

4. Fourthly, there is likelihood of having a deadlock in agreeing on the person for heading the caretaker government.

The first argument is redundant since the demand of the Opposition is based on this obvious realisation that there is no provision in the Constitution for an interim government. Hence is the need for change. This argument is another manifestation of the communication gap between the party in power and the Opposition.

Secondly, with regard to the question of precedence, 'Why must we look for precedence elsewhere when we have our own precedence of having the election under a neutral caretaker government of which the present government is a direct beneficiary?' Every democracy has its own growing experience which it owes to its own history and political culture. The argument as to the lack of precedence was most vigorously argued by the ministers of Ershad regime. But people of this country led by their political leadership which included the present party in power created the precedence with their own ingenuity. Bangladesh's innovation not only worked but received universal acclamation and raised interest in other countries as institutional model. It has worked in Pakistan as well. If it has worked once and in our own country there is no reason why it can not

work again and in future as a continuous and permanent institution. We are rather lucky to have a model to work on. Through a careful and critical evaluation, an institutional model can be developed for installing a neutral government without any party affiliation.

There is no single mould or model for democracy, or for that matter the method of electioneering. In South Africa, election has taken place under an arrangement for multi-ethnic society with multi-party system in order to share power in a true democracy.

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The next objection of Mr Nazmul Huda is that an elected government should not be altered. But in effect we have already in our Constitution an arrangement for a caretaker government between dissolution of Parliament and the new successor entering upon his office. Hence the interim concept is neither new nor the party characteristic of such government can be conceived as being part of any basic structure of the Constitution. The basic structure of the Constitution is like the basic structure of a building or a bridge when by removal of any pillar or a beam the entire structure is likely to collapse or lose its balance.

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