

Talks Enter Critical Phase

All indications are that Sir Ninian-facilitated talks have reached a make or break stage. Proposals, counter proposals and several rounds of open and not-so open discussions have brought us to the present stage. It is true that the Opposition has not moved at all from its original demand of a neutral, caretaker government. This inflexibility on the part of the Opposition has to be understood from the point of view of its fear that no free and fair election is possible if the present government remains in a position to control the governmental machinery to influence the outcome of the elections. If one accepts this premise, the so-called inflexibility of the Opposition becomes clear. Its position is that, there can be flexibility after, and only after the fundamental point has been accepted. In this context one can say that the Opposition is showing flexibility by their willingness to accept any of the different formulae on the form and composition of a caretaker government.

From its original position that even talking about a caretaker government amounts to giving it too much importance, to the present proposal of power-sharing during the next elections, the BNP has travelled a long way.

The argument can be that the BNP has already made too many concessions. However, seen from the Opposition's angle, the ruling party's proposals do not respond to its fundamental fear. We would like to approach the debate neither from the government's, nor from the Opposition angle. But from that of the general public. From our point of view, the price of failure of the talks is much too high, for both parties not to rethink their basic positions. As in nature, so also in human and organisational relations, when something is bent too much, it can break. We think every body's patience is coming to an end — people, the two contending parties' and, we dare say, Sir Ninian and his party's. So let us all make a final effort and get a result.

By press accounts, today the Opposition is supposed to present a fresh proposal. We urge the Opposition to take the concern of its opponents, and come as far as possible towards an acceptable formula. Let us not have a reiteration of the already known positions. This flexibility they should show for the sake of the country and the dire economic and political consequences that face our people if the talks fail. On BNP's side, our suggestion is that, other than national interest, no other factors like 'ego' or 'personality' should prevent it from coming as much forward as it can.

Let our politicians turn to being statesmen, and let national interest supersede party interest. At least for this once.

Democratic Aberration

In the second incident of its kind in less than a month the member of the National Assembly of Pakistan came to blows on Monday. The picture carried in this newspaper says it all. Both the ruling Pakistan People's Party and the opposition Muslim League have been locked in a bitter rivalry for long. In recent times the bitterness has only intensified with former prime minister Nawaz Sharif mounting political campaign for unseating incumbent premier Benazir Bhutto. So intriguing is Pakistani politics that Nawaz Sharif actually succeeded in getting into power by deposing Bhutto in her first term in office through some political maneuvering.

Pakistan's first woman prime minister had to work hard to return to power. But in the process their political rivalry has turned into personal enmity. So vindictive the political leaders in Pakistan have become that they want revenge and reprisals to be exacted on their opponents even if that means bending the laws. The fist-fighting and grappling with each other in the house are the results of deep-rooted hatred between the leaders. The question however is: should people's representatives give such a deplorable account of themselves? It reflects not only on their individual behaviour but also on the political system they are supposed to strengthen.

It seems the politicians in some countries never learn from history. They continue to wallow in the same muddy political pit and bring the country back to square one, thanks to their naivety. Once again the signs are ominous. In politics such repeat performances can never be of any help to democracy. It is almost a living thing and needs to be continuously tended for its healthy growth. As has happened in Pakistan and Bangladesh the process of democratisation has time and again been halted abruptly by the intervention of the military. The politicians are mostly to blame for such setbacks. The warning should be taken seriously.

Sayestha Khan's Era!

Those who cry hoarse over the price hike of essentials might be surprised to know that on certain counts at least we still live in Sayestha Khan's era. We certainly cannot be transposed through the time barrier to that by-gone golden age of Bengal. Then has Sayestha Khan's era returned without our knowledge? There is perhaps no need to answer the question if we know how similar and yet how different the two eras are. The fact that brinjal now sells at Tk 15 to 20 a maund (40 kg) in Jaipurhat District perhaps gives us even an edge over the price tag of the same item during the famous Khan's period.

If only other items were equally cheap! Unfortunately that is not the case. If a kilogram of brinjal fetches only 40 to 50 paise, a farmer has to sell as much as 80 kg of the item for purchasing 24 sheets of writing paper for his son or daughter. Or, to return to more basic needs, the same amount of the vegetable buy him just three kilograms of rice. But in Dhaka brinjal sells at Tk 10 per kg.

Something somewhere has gone wrong with the economy we are following in our national life. What everyone can understand is that a commodity — specially the perishable ones — may not fetch good price even if it has great demand only because it lacks transport facilities. But that is not the full story. It is a time when the world has become smaller. Then why can't we bring all parts of the country closer to each other? One explanation is certainly our fault not to have developed a transportation mechanism for our agricultural produces. The situation becomes exacerbated as the transport owners rule the road and river. The other is the acceptance of the diktat of the middlemen and traders who get the lion's share of the profit at the cost of the producers. Their monopoly has to be broken if we want to establish a rational pricing system for our growers.

ON the night of mid-term election when a veritable armageddon was buffeting the Potomac, President Clinton must have picked up a number of Comfort literature including Alexander Hamilton. When a British visiting the US asked Alexander Hamilton 'what is the most important thing in your experience?' He replied, 'Sir, this is the right to choose'.

The mosaic of American politics has not seen anything like the present mid-term election in the past 40 years. The Democrats lost both the senate and the congress. President Clinton's serenity and composure was almost ecclesiastical: 'To everything there is a season — a time to be born and a time to die'.

His impressive performance in the press conference was, outstanding — it was statesmanlike. Oxford Union Society must have done him a lot of good. He was defeated but not broken; he was sober but not acrimonious; he lost control of the Congress but accepted defeat in grace and humility. Bleeding-heart liberals may become an endangered species, but liberalism is not dead in America. The most dynamic and liberal city, New York couldn't even manage time to say good-bye to Mario Cuomo, son of an Italian immigrant, governor Cuomo ineluctably imbibed in the ethos of 'historic nations' of Europe. For a while he was the intellectual Plimsoll line of American

Clinton Presidency and Gingrich Government: Moral Dilemma in Bosnia

by Waliur Rahman

Clinton's White House must be in the midst of many challenges; but challenge has always been faced by the American presidents. Newt Gingrich and the wave of neo-conservatism will keep him busy. But he is getting two years to consolidate his position.

liberal thought. New York was for him like a Church-spire beaconing the nation to hope and aspiration. This time he failed to inspire his own backyard: His defeat had a pulverising effect on the Democrats, but President Clinton knew that as in diplomacy there is no last word in politics. A devout reader of Teilhard de Chardin, Mario Cuomo must be reading Le Milieu Divin. 'Il ya tous chacun de nous, un temps pour croître et un temps pour diminuer' — For each of us there is a time to grow and a time to diminish.

People have chosen to go for a change in the mid-term election. The victor of the Gulf War, President Bush, lost the presidency to the governor of Arkansas — a relatively unimportant state in the country, because the American people wanted a change. The courage of political leadership to accept this change and allow voters to elect anybody they would like was perhaps foremost in the mind of Alexander Hamilton, who thought that elector's choice is the most

important element in his political belief. And this is the essence of democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville's critique on America is interesting — after the general idea of virtue, 'I know no higher principle than that of right. The idea of right is simply that of virtue introduced into the political world. It was the idea of right which enabled men to define tyranny and autocracy.' Tocqueville eulogises the beneficial effects of American democracy and the supremacy of the moral organization of society.

Money is God. We like money. We are a God-fearing nation! But even the money-god did not help Colonel Oliver North. Over twenty-five million dollars was spent. Why? Ethics and politics are mutually exclusive in the 'historic nations'. Real-politik is important but Americans have always distinguished realpolitik from the politics of America. Americans believe both in this foreign policy as well as domestic politics that, as in life, morality and ethics play of decisive role.

Colonel Oliver North, is believed to have lied to the Congress in safeguarding national interest. Americans may have forgiven him for a job-related misrepresentation, but they wouldn't elect him to the senate! It was not a momentary decision of the American people. In spite of the full backing of conservative America, Colonel North just failed to pass the examination at the altar of ballot box! He failed to rid himself of the albatross of the Iran-Contra imbroglio. This was perhaps his swan-song. This is vintage American politics.

The scions of Boston tea-party responded to the Kennedy mystique and gave him another chance — to enjoy a tryst in the woods. He has promises to keep... we in Bangladesh feel reassured seeing people like Kennedy in the Capital Hill. Who can forget his inspiring role during our glorious war of Liberation, when he addressed the million refugees of Bangladesh, the whole world listened. There was no going back till the

country saw the light of freedom and liberty.

Clinton's White House must be in the midst of many challenges; but challenge has always been faced by the American presidents. Newt Gingrich and the wave of neo-conservatism will keep him busy. But he is getting two years to consolidate his position. Over six trillion dollar economy — the world's largest, is still the locomotive that keeps the world moving; and the economy is robust, and doing well. Doesn't he remember that another Democrat, Harry Truman, having lost control over the Congress, was re-elected after two years?

Gingrich-Dole Congress has been elected on the wave of less tax and less government plank. GOP honeymoon with the American people may be short-lived. It may need the wisdom of Solomon to reconcile their election slogans with the urgent need of reducing American deficit. Mr. Podhoretz or Terry Falwell may not think it so necessary, the American economy does. The

present level of deficit is untenable. Across the Atlantic, the Italian deficit, much higher in relative terms, distorts the global economy. US deficit also distorts the global economy.

President Clinton's universal medicare policy has been relegated to the back burner. So, in his other election pledges is included reduction of lobbyist influence in Washington DC! But he has certainly made a niche for himself in the foreign policy arena. Middle-East Peace Policy will continue to be corner-stone of his successful foreign policy.

On Bosnia he will get a more cooperative response from the Republican Congress. Here the Americans have again demonstrated their bipartisanship on foreign policy by deciding to lift arms embargo on Muslim Bosnian government. It is once again a shining example where the US government has held its Atlantic alliance partners that 'a democratic foreign policy has got to be idealistic'. Consideration of realpolitik alone wouldn't have taken them to the European theatre during the World Wars. Today, both in London and Paris they seem to have more realist diplomats! Otherwise it is difficult to justify their resistance to US decision on Bosnia. Is it altogether wrong to say that a realist foreign policy always tends to end at vichy?

The writer is a former ambassador.

FORMER Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda's recent return to the political stage surprised few, but his call for a new government of national unity has been rejected by the government.

'I have come back, I am back,' Kaunda told a rally in Lusaka, putting an end to months of speculation.

'I did not stand by and watch. It is incumbent on me to make my humble contribution. That is why I have accepted the call to come back,' Kaunda, 70, seems to be attempting to reverse both time and the democratic tide which has swept a number of long-standing African leaders from power, including 'President-for-Life' Hastings Banda in Malawi and President F.W. de Klerk in South Africa.

Kaunda held power from independence in 1964 until he was swept from power in 1991 in the country's first multi-party election for three decades.

His graceful handover won him many plaudits. Like United States President Jimmy Carter and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he set up a Foundation in his own name, and he seemed set on joining Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo and the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev in the band of former leaders who tour the

Kaunda Tries to Turn Time and Tide

Venarcious Mwansa writes from Lusaka

Kenneth Kaunda won praise in Zambia and outside the country for the gracious way he stepped down after defeat in the country's first multi-party elections for 30 years. But the lure of power has proved too strong, reports Gemini News Service, and he is back on the campaign trail.

An active retirement

Four former heads of government who have set up international organisations to promote their ideas



world dispensing wisdom and righting wrongs.

But he could not resist the lure of politics and felt the mistakes made by his suc-

cessor, President Frederick Chiluba, offered an opening.

'There is a crisis in Zambia. This country can break into pieces unless we do something

about it,' he told the late October rally, to roars of 'Vee Vee' (Victory).

He said he would campaign immediately for a government

of national unity.

The government's response has been swift. Foreign Affairs Minister Remmy Mushota declared that Kaunda was 'an ordinary Zambian citizen' and directed Zambian diplomatic missions not to give him special facilities or courtesies.

The order, said Mushota, was in line with internationally accepted practice.

President Chiluba has welcomed Kaunda's return to active politics, but dismissed the idea of a national unity government.

Zambia, said Chiluba, was politically stable and a government of national unity 'is suited only for those countries emerging from civil wars, such as Mozambique, Angola and South Africa, where one race was deprived of the right to participate in the governance of their country'.

The biggest upset is in Kaunda's own United National Independence Party (UNIP), which is split between supporters and opponents of a Kaunda come-back.

His announcement came at the end of a nationwide tour which the government and the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) criticised as a campaign trip.

They were right, Kaunda

said the depending poverty he saw in the provinces showed that the MMD's misconceived policies were bringing economic deterioration and that he was therefore compelled to cut short his retirement.

He hit out at the government's privatisation programme, stressing the importance of retaining shares in strategic companies, such as Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines and the Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation.

'You should not make privatisation an ideological problem, because the country needs pragmatism,' he said.

Kaunda accused the Chiluba government of failing 'lamentably' to fulfil its election promise of creating more jobs; instead, he said, its policies had caused the loss of 120,000 jobs. The changes, he charged, had left the poorest worse off.

In addition, Kaunda claimed that Chiluba's tolerance of tribalism had made some areas, such as Western Province, into no-go areas for MMD leaders.

Kaunda, who boasts of uniting Zambia's 73 tribes during his rule, says tribalism can best be dealt with by forming a government of national unity.

'I shall go around making consultations with religious leaders, politicians, businessmen, farmers and of course students on how best to achieve this,' he said.

Despite divisions in his own party, Kaunda seems to have the support of several other opposition leaders, 10 of whom attended his Lusaka ally.

— GEMINI NEWS
VENARCIOUS MWANSA is a freelance Zambian journalist.

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.

Bhairab bridge

Sir, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has recently requested the Japanese government to help Bangladesh in constructing a number of bridges like Rupsa bridge, Padma bridge, Bhairab bridge and many other bridges. It is not likely that Japanese aid will be forthcoming for construction of so many bridges.

Bhairab bridge on Dhaka-Sylhet highway will benefit a number of districts like Narsinghdi, Brahmanbaria, Habigonj, Moulvibazar, Sylhet and Sunamgonj. Flow of traffic on this road is extremely heavy. Hence, I request the Ministry of Communication and Ministry of Finance to take up construction of this vital bridge from the country's own resources in the next financial year. Voters of so many districts will highly appreciate this act on the part of the government.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

Freedom of speech

Sir, As man is a talking animal, he has thus the freedom of speech. The freedom to speak his mind is guaranteed by the State. The state desires that he should have full liberty to express his opinion on matters — social, political and the like. But he is not allowed to say anything against the State or anything that may affect the normal life of the citizens. That is why when a person speaks against the State, he is held for treason and is taken to task. The excess of this liberty of speech is licence. If this is not regulated and checked, man will go on talking ominously of things and make a mess of everything. If a man is not restricted in his speech he is likely to upset

national life and take it to the verge of ruin.

No house, society or state can go on smoothly and follow the path of progress and prosperity unless all its members contribute to its well-being. Therefore, if incoherent and harmful speeches are allowed to be delivered, those are sure to damage the very foundation on which society stands.

Freedom of speech should accordingly mean regulated speech and certainly not its excesses or licence to say whatever one pleases. Person with real education will do such things which will not infringe the rights of others; not to speak of speaking against one's own country. Such a man will always be conscious to the extent that he will enjoy that much right of saying or doing a thing which he would himself feel that if done anything beyond would encroach upon other's right.

In fact, no one can make excesses in his deeds or sayings when he keeps the idea in his mind that if anyone else had done the same, it would not have been liked by him.

N Rahman
Lalbag, Dhaka

Well done DESA

Sir, This is to put on record our deep appreciation for the service that we got in B Block Lalmatia from the Dhaka Electricity. On the night between the 14th and 15th October, 1994 around 12 the electricity went off. It was a very humid night. I went out and saw that only the 2nd and 3rd floors of a few houses on our left including our own were dark and without electricity. Immediately I rang up 318990 and lodged my complaint. The gentleman, Mr Mashuk Bhuiyan at the receiv-

ing end, told me very politely that probably the phases were out and he would send the man concerned as soon as he would return from work.

Within 15 minutes the DESA vehicle stopped in front of our door and in 20 minutes the electricity was restored. Indeed, an efficient service that deserved reward and incentives. It should be a lesson to the rest of the service oriented agencies.

A M F Quadir
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Bengali character

Sir, We may not agree to the following sayings of Macaulay and Rudyard Kipling but may still find some food for thought in these.

'What the horns are to the buffalo, what the sting is to the bee, what beauty according to Greek song is to women, deceit is to the Bengali. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissue of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery are the weapons, offensive and defensive of the people of lower Ganges'; Lord Babington Macaulay.

Rudyard Kipling 'in similar vein says, "When a Bengali criminal is working a fraud of the sort he loves, he is about the cleverest soul you could wish for".

It is for us to disprove, every word of Macaulay and Kipling.

Shahabuddin Mahtab
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King Hussain of Jordan

Sir, King Hussain of Jordan is one of the most experienced and capable statesmen of the Middle East.

On assassination of his grandfather who headed Jordan since 1921 King Hussain succeeded him in 1951 and ever since he underwent innumerable trials and tribulations but never lost his confidence and courage to help solve

multiple socio-economic and political problems of his country and also do it for the welfare of the people.

One of the greatest achievements of King Hussain was his signing of historic peace accord with Israel on October 26, 1994 ending 46 years of hostility, after the PLO Leader Yasser Arafat had signed a peace agreement with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Washington on September 13, 1993.

But, unfortunately, the PLO Leader was not happy over Jordan-Israel accord signed on October 26, 1994 in the presence of the US President Bill Clinton On Jordan-Israel border.

King Hussain of Jordan has once again proved his statesmanship and sincerity by declaring that Jordan has given a formal promise to handover to the Palestinians its trusteeship of Muslim holy places in Jerusalem once the Palestinians and Israel reached agreement on the final status of the city.

We heartily congratulate King Hussain on his statesmanship for Arab unity and peace in the Middle East, and wish him all success.

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Bangla Academy dictionaries

Sir, We are really happy that the Bangla Academy has compiled two dictionaries — Bangla Academy English-Bengali dictionary and Bangla Academy Bengali-English dictionary.

In spite of having some printing mistakes, these two dictionaries are of reasonably high standard. In my opinion, these dictionaries are for better than the ones coming from our neighbouring country often found in our local markets.

Hoping that the Bangla Academy will correct the few mistakes that there are in its next edition of the dictionary.

MD Monir Uddin
MC College Hostel, Sylhet.

OPINION Suggestions for a Caretaker Government

It is reported that Sir Ninian Stephen has submitted three plans to the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition and urged them to consider them. The reactions of the ruling party and the opposition to these plans are not yet known but can be guessed, knowing the uncompromising public stands both parties have taken so far. The first two plans as reported in the Daily Star of November 13th, 1994, are likely to be rejected by the Opposition as they envisage the formation of a partisan government and the third plan with the President as the Chief Executive is likely to be rejected by the ruling party because it will require amendment of the Constitution.

Without being an expert either in politics or on Constitution, I am suggesting an outline of a plan for a caretaker non-partisan government which will not require any amendment of the Constitution and as such should be broadly acceptable to both the parties. The plan, briefly, is as follows:

1. The present BNP government should be allowed to stay in power for a full 5-year term if it so desires.

2. Six months before dissolution of the Parliament, 6 Members of the Parliament from the ruling party and 5 from the combined Opposition will resign and the vacant constituencies will elect, uncontested, a total of 11 new non-partisan Members of Parliament, six nominated by the ruling party and five by the combined Opposition, who will form a new caretaker non-partisan government immediately after dissolution of the Parliament.

3. The Prime Minister will be from among the six members nominated by the ruling party.

4. The term of these ministries will be three months during which the elections will be held in an impartial manner under the supervision of a more powerful Election Commission.

5. None of the ministers of the caretaker government will be allowed to contest in the next general elections and the caretaker government will resign as soon as the elections are over and a new elected government will then take over.

6. On acceptance of this plan in principle, the Opposition will immediately join the Parliament to enact the following important laws which are relevant to the holding of impartial elections: (a) A new law further strengthening the Election Commission to enable it to hold all elections fairly and impartially, (b) a new law making the judiciary completely separate and independent of the executive, (c) a new law converting the electronic media (Bangladesh Radio & Television) into independent and impartial corporations like the BBC, (d) a new law governing the code of conduct of all political parties both during and after the elections.

This plan, if accepted in principle, can be amended or modified by political and legal experts and can form the basis for at least three consecutive general elections in Bangladesh.

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