

Taming Prowling Lathials

The coastal areas in the country's south are known for their endemic bitter land feuds. In the harvesting seasons in particular the clashes of interests take the most ugly and bloody forms.

As the report goes lathials (hired musclemen wielding bamboo poles) are busy readying their deadly weapons at the onset of the harvesting season. Oblivious of the laws of the land both the lathials and their mentors - jotedars to be precise - prepare themselves every year for forcibly grabbing the crops small and real farmers cultivate by the sweat of their brow.

That the lathials have been enjoying a fresh demand of their service is certainly by default of the administrative measures. Laws are hardly said to be in the weak's favour. In the coastal areas the fact is only more manifest. The small farmers have been allotted the lands by the administration itself and the jotedars - there may be contending ones - continue to defy the government order.

The jotedars moreover have the money and muscle power to beat off any challenge by the poor peasants. It is the mighty ones that emerge victorious in an ensuing clash over the possession of land and crops. District administrations of the bordering districts make the issue further complex by issuing overlapping settlement orders. So co-operation and coordination between and among them is a must for removing needless complexities.

We Condemn

Even a simple violation of the air space over Bihac, an enclave within the UN-declared no-fly zone in Bosnia, could be held against the Serbs as an act of instantly punishable offence. Yet, they have gone two steps further than that, firing a missile and dropping the deadly pay-loads of cluster-bombs and napalm. We condemn this brutal act. The world seethes in anger at this defiance of the ban on lethal weapons. We urge the disciplinarians on the global scene to act before it is too late.

The Bosnian Serbs have made a mockery of the UN-demarcated no-flying zones and the NATO surveillance to enforce safety in those places. It is not just Bihac on the north-western flank that has come under such a lethal attack. In another equally disturbing development, a guided missile has hit the assembly building in Sarajevo, the seat of the Muslim-led Bosnian government.

The Serb-held Krajina enclave in Croatia was the launching-pad for the air attack. NATO did not patrol the area because of a loophole in the arrangement for the enforcement of the no-flying zone. Croatia and NATO are yet to negotiate an extension of the no-flying zone to cover the air space over Serb-held Krajina in Croatia. So, the no-fly cover is flawed by a dithering on the part of the NATO alliance to make it comprehensive enough.

We are keenly watching how the NATO makes good on this. A British proposal for a NATO air attack on the Serbs is under consideration at the UN Security Council. Let this be adopted without the prejudice of a split in the NATO over the US withdrawal of arms embargo on Bosnia. Mere threats won't do anymore. Actions will speak louder than words.

It should be easier now to enforce international will on the ground because in Bosnia-Herzegovina today the Croat and Muslim forces are fighting a common battle against the Serbs.

Challenge for Arafat

Yasser Arafat, the veteran of turbulent Middle East politics and a master in the art of handling dissent within the PLO ranks, is faced with a different kind of challenge today. The militant fundamentalist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad are up against him and all that he stands for at the present moment.

Since taking over as the administrator of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank he was bound to encounter some law and order problems but he had hardly expected these to be as vicious as the ones he ran into on Friday. These were absolutely riotous as violent clashes broke out between the militants and the police outside the mosque after the prayers taking toll of both civilians and policemen.

The hell-bent attitude to wreck peace was first manifested through the suicide bombings and other attacks on the Israelis which killed some Palestinians in the process. Arafat faced a test of his authority among his Palestinian compatriots who shared his dreams for peace followed by economic reconstruction and development. So, he had to try and maintain law and order to the best of his ability. His detractors on the other hand want him to go for repression so that their ranks can be increased in number by whipping up emotions on which they thrive. By one count, the extremist groups have a following of approximately 30 per cent among the Palestinians.

It is the Palestinians on both sides that were killed in the Friday's incident. They cannot afford to fight each other especially when their co-religionists throughout the world wish them to have a settled and peaceful life after years of floating from one country to another. Besides, the threat of a civil war that looms on the horizon must be averted at any cost.

Extremism on one side breeds extremism on the other. Surely, the Israeli massacre at the Hebron mosque provoked the Islamic activists into a retaliatory act. That is why precautions are also needed to be taken by the Tel Aviv government to ward off future troubles.

This is with a sense of growing concern that most of us have watched events unfold in recent weeks in Bangladesh. To begin with, it was merely embarrassing that the present political impasse could not be resolved by direct negotiation among the parties concerned and a foreign mediator had to step in but the game of proposal and counter-proposal that has been going on since has led to an alarming stalemate.

While one can understand and to a certain extent even sympathise with the lack of trust in the impartiality of elections under any political government which is the reason for the stand taken by the opposition parties, their strategy of street agitation, demonstrations and hartals is jeopardising the system of participatory democratic government which was welcomed by the entire country only a few short years ago. The tactics that effectively unseated an autocratic government seem to be irresponsible and petulant in the present context leading many of us to deplore the intransigence that seems apparent among the political leadership.

The lack of vision inherent in pursuing this course is apparent but what is astonishing is that even the instinct of self-interest and self-preservation seems to have deserted the politicians who have brought the country to this state.

I have always believed that democracy must be viewed as an infant - it needs to be nurtured as carefully as any human child. It goes through the pangs of childhood and adolescence with all the attendant traumas and travails until it brings about maturity responsibility and accountability among a people and their elected representatives. It seems axiomatic that an enduring political philosophy or effective system of government cannot be imposed on a nation. It has to take root within the culture and beliefs of the body politic through a lengthy process of evolution and growth. Since democratic institutions and representative government are not native to the South Asian subcontinent we could perhaps take even longer to change from our traditional form of paternalistic and despotic government, which was perpetuated by the British colonialists who bequeathed to us a centralised administrative system and controlled institutions of government.

Therefore I have been inclined to view the waves of political discontent, debate and controversy from a philosophical stance and take the long-term perspective that almost

Irreconcilable Differences?

by Yasmeen Murshed

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all the political systems in the developed world took years to evolve and in the same way we too should be able to work out the system that suits us by a process of trial and error over a period of time; however, our problem is that we may not have the luxury of time. The twin pinners of population growth and poverty that have us in their grip may not allow us the luxury of the process of evolution. Unless we can make the breakthrough to gain economic momentum and begin to attack poverty, our future will be very bleak indeed.

Our donors despair of getting any action on the reforms agreed to by the government and projects are scrapped, funds unutilised because of administrative delays and the confrontational stance taken by the groups of professionals, generalist government servants, teachers, worker, et al, contributes to the malaise that is gripping the country.

I am not the only concerned Bangladeshi who is alarmed at this state of affairs and cannot help asking what has happened to us? Is this the situation that we have come to only two decades after our

much-fought-for independence? Is this where we find ourselves only two years after bringing down a totalitarian government with a bloodless citizens revolt and the installation of a government elected in one of the most free and fair elections of our times?

What has gone wrong? This is not a rhetorical question because I genuinely do not have an answer. We seem to be going down the right path - the path of pluralist democracy, the path of free market enterprise, the path of development for all food for education, the 'dal bhat' road to prosperity - we have travelled them all. Why then do we have to still live with agitational politics, strikes and demands for redress?

In this situation it is only natural to look to our leaders for guidance and inspiration. Our elected representatives have to show us the way by lifting themselves out of the plane of party politics to the higher levels of national interest and the safeguarding of democratic practices. The impasse that has been created between the government and opposition,

because neither is prepared to concede a point to the other, is taking us very close to the danger of civil unrest. This threat worked when it was made against a military government but in the context of a working democracy it appears to be merely self-serving.

In fact, party biased politics seems to be inappropriate when it causes setbacks to the developmental process and threatens democracy itself. I am sure that many readers will agree with me that the time for unity and combined action is now while there is still a chance that the democratic process will take root in our country and a healthy political climate will eventually be established. Our politicians should be able to put aside considerations of their personal gain and short-term benefits to concentrate on building trust and confidence in the system of government which truly reflects the aspirations of a people. Their differences do not seem to be irreconcilable if both parties are equally committed to the democratic process.

The government has shown a clear willingness to be flexi-

able in its approach to compromise. Now it is the opposition which must restore confidence in its ability to govern, not merely agitate. It would be statesmanship, not mere politics, if they could take the initiative to break the deadlock by returning to the Sangsad, which is the only proper forum for debates on these issues in a working democracy. Until debates on issues of importance can be taken up in the Jatiya Sangsad where they belong, political unrest will continue to grow and the relatively minor issues of redress sought by individual pressure groups will develop out of all proportion to their importance.

Economic and fiscal policies to be effective need a receptive climate and all-out co-operation of all sectors concerned; therefore, political mistrust is a deadly setback for the reform package which is supposed to improve our situation. It cannot do so until political stability provides the incentive to the free market forces to come into effect and creates a climate which encourages investment.

On all fronts therefore, the need for an amicable resolution to the political crisis is essential and it is time to heal the scars of dissension which threaten democracy. For the sake of Bangladesh which has suffered quite enough, I hope that the time to heal will be sooner rather than later.

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Strike: Who's Responsible, Who Bears the Brunt?

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam

What is the alternative to hartal, sit in strike, which are democratic tools and constitutional means to realise demands? This is a vexing question any way. In a really democratic society such strikes are not necessary, for there the party in power is likely to heed popular demands.

We have just passed through a spell of strikes - November 10 to 13 intervened by a Friday, weekly holiday, on 11 - which obviously caused suffering to people, loss of business and self-employment. And all this to realise a non-partisan, neutral caretaker government for holding and ensuring free and fair elections for three terms. The BNP Government, however, has reaffirmed its firm position to oppose the demand.

Meanwhile, 17th session of the parliament met on 12 November, with no opposition MPs in the midst of hartal. Since 1st of March, the opposition is boycotting the parliament. From 13th to 17th session, for more than eight months, there have been no opposition MPs in the House. We are at a loss to understand how the ruling and the opposition parties are evaluating this grim situation, vis-a-vis welfare of the country? This scenario somewhat resembles the hartal programme in September last and the steadfast attitude of ruling BNP on the issue.

However, there is a substantial difference now. Commonwealth Secretary General's envoy Sir Ninian is in Dhaka to facilitate dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition to end the stalemate. He is holding discussions, maintaining diplomatic contacts, facilitating negotiations between the Government and Opposition leaders. The government and the opposition negotiators are maintaining liaison with Sir Ninian who presented three formulas to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on 12 November. Well, let us wait to see what comes out of the Commonwealth initiative.

In the meantime, the stubborn opponent of the concept of caretaker government Barrister Nazmul Huda (then

powerful Information Minister) made out an interim government formula as published by Dhaka dailies on November 4-5. He was forced to resign on Nov. 5 and dropped from the cabinet. It is reported that in the BNP Parliamentary Party meeting under Leader of the House Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on November 9, Barrister Huda MP sought apology and expressed his desire to work on BNP line.

On the other hand, opposition MPs have handed signed resignation letters to their respective leaders, to show their stance on quitting parliament en masse to realise the demand - caretaker government. The leader of the opposition has kept the resignation letters with her to take necessary action at appropriate time.

This threat of resignation and street agitations must have exerted some psychological pressure on BNP government, who may try to settle the crisis during the current 17th session of the parliament.

Now, among the three formulas of Sir Ninian, two do not require any amendment of the Constitution by two-thirds majority in the parliament, but involves power sharing by the Opposition. The third formula, to vest the executive authority to the President to run the interim government with the help of a Council of Advisors, requires amendment of the Constitution. This is almost like the one demanded by Left Democratic Front to add new clauses to Article 123 of the Constitution.

The mainstream opposition parties have since announced their next programme, including hartal on 7-8 December.

Already all shades of opinion, including that of chambers of commerce and industry, business associations, etc, are concerned about the huge loss and suffering, emanating from the hartal programme of the political parties. During September last, good many opinions were published in the press in this regard; statements were issued by the above bodies who, in one instance, calculated loss in the range of Tk. 100 to 150 crore per hartal day. This, however, was refuted by the political parties who, in turn, alleged black money, default culture, corruption, etc as causes of all ills. The hartal programme in November, likewise, has caused losses and may cause it further. President of FBCCI has expressed his concern about the ineffectiveness of parliament and its adverse repercussion on the economy.

It would have been better if the Institute of Business Administration and Planning Commission could have undertaken a serious study to determine the hartal cost (financial, social etc) and benefit (if any, say, saving of fuel on Govt, and corporate vehicles, check on corruption and environment pollution etc.) to inform the public at large. These institutions are still respectable and dependable in the eyes of the people. They can mould public opinion in the right direction.

What is the alternative to hartal, sit in strike, which are democratic tools and constitutional means to realise demands? This is a vexing question any way. In a really democratic society such strikes are not necessary, for there the

party in power is likely to heed popular demands. But, what it is in our country? It has come to the press that the Finance Minister, who is not an MP, has said that he would not accept caretaker government even if the Prime Minister accepted! Anyway, these are the matters we must leave to the intellectuals and institutions, including NGOs to delve on and inform the public, of course, to avoid hartal, while asking for democratic rights.

Govt Employees In this connection, nothing can be more preposterous than a feeling to overlook the damage and loss, arising out of work stoppages, etc by Govt employees - whether at Bangladesh Secretariat, Divisional and District offices, Directorates, autonomous bodies, universities and colleges, corporations and companies, etc. Govt. Employee means 'public officer'. In Article 152 of the Constitution, 'public officer' means a person holding or acting in any office of emolument in the service of the republic.

It is estimated that there are 11 lakh employees in the Govt/public sector to render services to the people. But, frequently, strike of various proportions and laxity in work can be seen in many a government establishment. To cite recent instances, class III and class IV employees observed a day-long work stoppage on November 6 throughout the country. They hold out threat to continue such stoppages and also launch indefinite strike. Their demands, among others, were: a 30 per cent dearness allowance, selection grade to 50 per cent of the

non-gazetted employees and upgradation of 70 per cent of their posts. Surely, the Finance Ministry is well aware of the financial implications of these demands. Strangely the government remained silent? and Labour Minister, along with others, met the leaders of striking employees on November 13 and agreed 10 per cent increase in salary (5% in January '95 and the remaining 5% in July). It is learnt that employees in the scale of Tk 900 will get benefit of Tk 217 per month. If it is extended to the officers, their benefit will be in the range of Tk 740 to Tk 1395. The total financial implications, however, have not been reported. The Secretariat Committees have called off the strike, but in the meantime, losses have already been incurred. They met the Prime Minister and expressed their gratitude. But it could not satisfy other staff in the Directorates, Divisions, Districts and Thanas, etc. They have announced of their programme on 12 and 13 December. So, the congenial working atmosphere of work is yet to set in. And the total amount of money the public will have to pay to meet the requirements is yet to be known.

The reasons are not far to seek. What the class III and class IV employees have before them? The inter-cadre rivalry between the Prokrihi-BCS 26 cadres and BCS (Administration) cadre for a long time has almost marred the discipline and order in the bureaucracy. The administration, particularly at district level, is in a stage of despondence, giving virtually no service to the people, which they are meant

for so to say. May we remember the doctors' strike and the suffering of poor patients? Ministry of Health and Family Welfare was totally irresponsible. By taking the matter to the honourable court, people could get a relief at least. On November 14, Prokrihi-BCS Action Council has observed full day work abstention. They will continue to observe such programmes, as announced.

The size of bureaucracy is increasing overtime, while it is also alleged that bureaucratic tangle is obstructing growth, investment and working culture. It appears that mass promotions, indiscriminate upgradation of posts create problems for posting, etc. Even BCS (Judicial) personnel are reportedly not getting fair treatment and they had to wear black badges, to demand upgradation of Sr. Asstt. Judges to the 6th grade, like other 14 cadres. There is apparent dissatisfaction among almost all cadre and non-cadre officers. And what about students' and teachers' strikes in the colleges and universities, apart from violence? All these strikes, and disruptions incur heavy cost too, which ultimately the poor people have to bear - who are not a party to it, in any way.

It is upto the Ministry of Establishment, with its Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre, Bangladesh Institute of Administration and Management, Management Development Centres and O & M analysts, to undertake a study to measure up the losses, arising out of the administrative structural misfeasance, and bring back the Administration on constitutional lines. It may not be incorrect to say that the losses, arising from administrative problems, are no less penetrating and crippling than that from the political problems!

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.

Investment and agitation

Sir, "Aid. Investment will be affected if talks fail (British MP)". This was the headline of The Daily Star report (Nov 15, 1994) on the press conference held by the British Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Tony Baldry, MP, on November 14 at the residence of the British High Commissioner in Dhaka. Mr Baldry had come here, leading a 27-member high powered British delegation of investors. No sooner had the delegation arrived, they were facing the hartals of the 12th and 13th November. Similar situation was faced by the high powered Japanese investors' delegation who came here some months back. Both the delegations had extensive and set programmes, and both their visits were jeopardised. The political climate instead of being conducive to creating a favourable economic climate, acted as a serious deterrent. The hartal calls could have been deferred, and things would have looked much better.

The British MP emphasised the need for the success of the ongoing dialogue, for the creation of a climate for aid and investment. The MP went on to say that long term political

peace and stability was necessary for the country. But are our efforts directed to that?

What we have observed, specially in the last decade and a half is that economic progress and development has been halted time and again due to the activities of the political parties. The stoppage of work in the industrial units brings losses to the country to the tune of billions of Taka. Unrest and closures of the universities and other educational institutions have destroyed the very fabric of our educational system, put us in a rear seat of development.

We are virtually putting ourselves in a bottomless situation of economic development. In the other south and south-east Asian countries the industrial activities, and the educational institutions are kept out of the purview of political agitations. In the backdrop of hartal and unrest, while the share market of the Dhaka Stock Exchange is adversely affected, billions of dollars are invested in Vietnam, and so far we have not been able to draw an investment of one billion dollar. Cambodia will perhaps be the next country, that will draw foreign investment, and not Bangladesh. The shyness of the foreign investors, if you wish to

call it so, is of our own making. We ourselves are causing us the utmost harm.

The FBCCI President has clearly stated that the industrial stoppages and hartals are deterrents to industrial production. And a layman also knows the truth.

All political parties have to develop a culture, wherein the economic needs of the country will be kept in view while undertaking political programmes and activities. Political agitations often take the form of large scale vandalism causing immense economic losses to the country. All such things need to be tackled by all our political parties, now. The recent burning of a UN vehicle near the Mahakhali rail gate was a sad pointer. We have much to learn from the city state of Singapore where even the minor forms of vandalism are 'severely dealt with'. The necessary laws we already have; it is only in its application that we are failing. But why? Don't we have the will? Shahabuddin Mahtab 51 Siddheswari Road, Dhaka

Erratic electric supply

Sir, There is no regular supply of electricity at Gour Sundar Roy lane area in the metropolises. These are the days of school and college final examinations and examinees have to go without light at the night time. Besides, when it is dark all around anti-social elements feel encouraged to be on their pursuit when occurrences of theft and robberies

have increased even during the day time.

The work comes to a standstill in workshops and factories and hospitals also suffer. Various complaints have been made to the authorities, but they seem to sit on them. I request the honorable minister concerned to kindly take interest. Nayeem 22, Gour Sundar Roy Lane Lalbagh, Dhaka

Nursery education

Sir, 'Children are not vessels to be filled, but fires to be set alight,' said an American study. Headstart which recently investigated pre-school activities. The greatest advantage of this level schooling, according to the study, is to provide the child the things/facilities that are lacking in his/her home.

Children have a natural inquisitiveness for things around and that from birth to six years old they can learn perhaps more than at any time in their lives. And from our own experience it seems that we remember the most what we learned in the early stage of our lives. Almost from the moment the children start talking, they begin to question: why? what? how? These are the words they very frequently use to satisfy their urge to know things around. Therefore, the principal aim of nursery education must be to nurture this natural urge/enthusiasm and to instill a love of learning.

Nursery education, in fact, is preparation for school but the programme must not be

over-prescriptive. Too often parents expect too much and are found over-anxious, especially disheartened when their child is unable to read or do something while their neighbour's/relative's child is considered to be more able. At the pre-school stage the rate of child's development varies in each case and we must not demand unreasonably from the children so that the very urge/enthusiasm on which it is based, is destroyed.

There are two vital ingredients for a successful nursery class: the strength of students must be manageable, and there must be adequate ancillary support for teachers to care for each pupil in the class.

And the classroom must be well-equipped with playing and learning aids, these should be appropriately used and utilised for the children to learn from their usage.

In the nursery classes, children have to be taught basic classroom behaviour; traditional values like respect for others, good manners, and self-discipline etc. Here children must develop certain social habits e.g., must learn to play together, interact and integrate with other students' skills that may not develop in the isolation of home life. They also must learn to listen as part of a group, give time to others and respond to the guidance and direction of the teacher. Ultimately, the skills the child has acquired in the nursery class will help to develop her/his powers of concentration, and other essential qualities for the more disciplined school life to follow.

Nursery classes should be tailored and structured with ample opportunities for creative and imaginative plays; acquiring a good sight vocabulary; a general understanding of the basics of reading; developing the basic concepts of numbers.

A careful, ordered curriculum is necessary, therefore, to enhance each child's intellectual, social and physical performance in order to promote real self-confidence and it becomes part of his/her daily life. And finally, a good nursery education ensures a better start for children when formal schooling begins.

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Diplomatic recognition

Sir, It is learnt that Bangladesh Government has lately decided to open diplomatic mission in South Africa. What about Israel? Bangladesh did not accord diplomatic recognition to Israel due to its sympathies for the Palestinian and Arab Muslims. Now the Palestinians and Arabs are making peace with their arch enemy Israel. But while there are peace treaties and handshakes between Israel and the Arab world, Bangladesh is maintaining a silence. Of all the ME countries perhaps only Israel has the economic power to invest abroad. We should not lose sight of this.

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