

A Case for Local Govt

The introduction of a strong and open local government in the country, according to a report carried in a Bangla daily, now looks to be a distant prospect. The reason is plain and simple. Two key suggestions by the commission instituted by the government has been dropped. These suggestions are: a) the establishment of a permanent local government commission, and b) constitution of gram sauva (village council). Instead of going by the commission's recommendations, the government has opted for the traditional system through the passage of the Union Parishad Bill.

So, the fate of an independent local government virtually hangs in the balance. Why the government has backed out of its own promise to introduce a strong local government at the grassroots level is not known. But we know that elaborate preparation was taken to make the commission's suggestions as comprehensible as possible. And the commission did its homework not too badly. Its recommendation for the devolution of power merits considerations. But unfortunately the commission's recommendations were never made public.

The fact that laymen and experts volunteered to contribute to the process with their opinions speaks volumes of people's interest in the matter. But the way the authority has given a rebuff to their reaction can be a pointer to the fact that government can do immense harm to its own as well as the country's causes by raising people's hopes and then not doing anything substantial for their fulfilment. The impression that a government is not ready to go as far as the people would like it to is very depressing.

Since the commission had a majority representation from the government side, the authority in fact is contradicting its own principled stand. The sidetracking of the two most important recommendations has been done perhaps to serve some narrow ends. But any radical change demands a bold vision and rising above any parochial considerations. Creation of almost independent, self-supporting local governments could take the country several steps ahead. Today the wind of self-governance is sweeping most part of the globe. In the United States the Republican Party made their electoral gains on this issue. We have dabbled at it but failed to take advantage of the situation. But there is no doubt we shall have to go for such an effective bottom-upwards administrative system.

Grand Old Banyan Tree

The big and old banyan tree at Suitola-Mallikpur, Jhenidah is not a new wonder. But the latest measurements published in The Daily Star of Wednesday do charm us anew. The age is put at 300 years. There is no proving that. For all one knows, banyans can live for many more centuries. And this one while growing to cover seven acres or 20 bighas of land and sending down 1464 trunks of adventitious roots could very well have needed more than that span of time.

How does stationary life like the plant's saves itself from molestation? This one has been helped capably by a mechanism devised unwittingly by that universal human trait — fear. Stories abound of people coming to harm, including death, for hurting this venerable old soul. And local people take care not to fall foul of it. People from distant villages, even far overseas lands, come here crowding to see this wonder work of nature. The unceasing crowd includes many women who believe in certain powers that the tree has. Go to it and ask for anything, especially cure for difficult diseases — you will be helped, so runs the belief very widely.

A modern man would not take it. But this has helped the tree to survive for hundreds of years. Unfortunately for us, no similar taboo and fear helped protect the Dhamrai banyan tree from plunder and death. It is not at all a bad idea to have respect for all forms of life even if manifested through taboos and prejudices. That trees are inviolate should again come back to our society if not as an unritualised belief but of course as a moral value.

Lucky Poor

If there ever were an ordeal this was it. And 69-year old Moira Poor passed it almost with flying colours. Her parking lot elevator got stuck between two floors. And it did not move an inch for close to three days. She was alone and carrying only her hand bag. The alarm bell did not ring for its batteries had run out. And her cries for help did not help either. The space was too cramped to allow her to lie down. And it was cold. She stood out most of the 67 hours in the cage — and the unending and hopeless wait was punctured only by occasional and frustrating fall-back to desperate cries for help.

Then the machine moved, as whimsically as when it had stopped. Out stepped Ms Poor — famished by thirst and hunger and sleepless and sapped of all hope of coming out alive. The last thing could have killed her, doctors later said. Well, what was the first thing that met her? A car-park attendant who wouldn't buy her story and had to be paid penalty for three days before getting her car back.

Our ideas of cities down under do fall short of the real thing. No one thinks of Sydney as quite a backyard and the farthest outpost of civilisation, thanks largely to its opera house and cricket test matches. But towns in New Zealand do not appear to be anything near their European or American counterparts. This Auckland incident should help reform our ideas. Modern urban civilisation is not only distinguished by the pollution it wreaks on air and water and overall environment. It is blessed as well with inherent breakdowns that are possible only in modern power-driven towns. For a nation of 120 million we have practically no elevators. That elevators can play nasty tricks at times is a concomitant of high urbanisation and mechanisation. Each stage on man's march — to where we are not sure — has its own set of problems, neither better nor worse than the other sets.

Ms Poor's endurance is a testament to sheer grit. That's a great human attribute, for all stages of humanity's march.

Finnally Sheikh Hasina has made a statement that we can welcome wholeheartedly.

We in the media wait eagerly to focus on the more constructive and forward looking aspects of our two major leaders. In contrast to the acrimonious, abusive, and repeatedly negative we always want to project the harmonious and visionary aspects of our leadership. Thus when we find such an instance, it appears like a breath of fresh air, a gust of sudden rain on a scorching summer day. We rejoice at Sheikh Hasina's speech on Monday last, when she called upon her student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) to concentrate on studies, to shun politics of violence and to work for the uplift of the country. Of particular significance was her statement that no BCL student leader should use party work as an excuse to do badly in the exams. She suggested that they, the party leaders, will have to take three months off before exam and devote himself or herself on nothing but studies. As a symbolic gesture she handed over notebooks and pencils to some attending student leaders. She spoke out against crime, violence and corruption among students.

Skeptics will say it was all for public consumption. Choice of venue (Shapla Chattar, from where Begum Zia made her unfortunate comment few weeks back about using JCD to take care of the Opposition), choice of timing (so soon after PM's speech) and the choice of audience (same as of the PM, the students), all indicate that it was a planned action, not a spontaneous and sincere one. Her critics will say by delivering a radically different message, contrasting dramatically with the rather aggressive tenure of Begum Zia's, Sheikh Hasina meant to gain some point with the public. All of this indicate a political ploy, an act of propaganda and public relations.

We say, so be it. Even if all this is for show, we would rather have more of it than the usual volleys of accusations and disparaging comments that we are constantly showered with from both sides. Hasina's being usually far more uncharitable than Khaleda's.

If what Sheikh Hasina said was meant to score points with the public, all the better. It may mean, that she is beginning to understand that it is easier to score points with the public with positive statements rather than the negative. If it really should be the case, imagine how radically the rhetoric of our politics will change. But maybe all that is too much to expect.

Given the recent history of violence on campus, the rising influence of armed cadres in student politics, the penetration of criminal gangs into our student bodies, and increasing influence of money and guns in student politics, Monday's statement of Sheikh Hasina is much more significant than meets the eye at the outset. At least that is what we would like to believe. It is possible that she herself is realising what the present state of student politics is, and having done so, is attempting to rein in the delinquents, and restore some sense and responsibility in student politics. Whatever may be the reasons for her call, we think it requires to be taken very seriously, and responded to by others.

We know that all major political parties, especially the BNP and the AL, have their student wings. We also know, that because of the special history of student politics in our country, student wings of the political parties enjoy higher than normal clout. In fact one of the aberrations of our political system is that the student wings of political parties have as much clout as they do.

The reason for it is simple. Students have been in the forefront of all our democratic, cultural and political struggles. Starting with the language movement in the early fifties, followed by the anti-martial law movement of the sixties and climaxing with our Liberation War in 1971, the role of students has been magnificent. After the birth of Bangladesh, students' role has once again been a pioneering one. It was the powerful student wing of the nascent Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) that raised the most effective voice against the ex-

cesses of the all-powerful and extremely popular regime of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It is a fact that often, not always though, our politicians betray: compromise and join hands with the enemy. That is something that our students have never done. The most recent example of students' vanguard role in upholding people's rights was during the anti-autocracy struggle. It was again they, much more than our politicians, who faced much of the actual confrontation with the armed goons of autocracy. It was the students again who braved all the oppression and physical violence of the police and the mechanism of state repression and pushed forward the march of

them audience and personal attention. This in contrast to the fact that any non-partisan college Principal would not go beyond a Deputy Secretary if he were lucky. This demonstrative access to power by student politicians does two very damaging things. First, it corrodes the authority of the local school or college administration; second, it gives a totally disproportionate sense of power and importance to the young and impressionable student. We know the result of both.

Today campus violence and the corruption of the student community is the principal worry of all parents and of all serious students, who constitute the majority. It is also the concern of the people in general. If we think in terms of the future of the country, and realise that in the Information Age it will be the educated human resource which will determine the status and prospect of a country, then we will fully realise the negative long term impact of using our students to fight our political battles. Politicians will finally have to take up their responsibility, and the students will have to be left alone so that they can study and become ideal citizens of the future.

Once in many Third World countries student politics was very common and popular. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and many African countries had their own version of student politics. But that all is gone now. Nearer to home, in Pakistan and India the role of students in politics has decreased in the recent past. Think of what role Pakistani students have been playing since 1990, when the politics of Pakistan turned rather turbulent. In India the same has been the case for a longer period.

A Laudable Speech: Is it for Real?

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Our intention is not to suggest that university level students should not take part in politics. These are adult students, and they must neces-

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US Elections: Dwarfed President may Seek Bipartisanship

by MN Mustafa

THE overwhelming Republican victory in mid-term congressional polls may not push the Republicans to slit the political throat of Democrats as perhaps would have happened in our surrounding but will mollify both from positions of strength and weakness to seek a middle course in a spirit of their traditional bipartisanship. US politics in last hundred years was characterised by what they call bipartisan collaboration reflecting the broad views of both major parties. This policy significantly remained pronounced in foreign policy, differing only in approach at times, but basically with common constituent molecules. Many nations adopt and follow American Presidential form of government but hardly they observe the cooperative working relations of the Democrats and Republicans in national cause which do not make the nation suffer materially or otherwise arising out of avoidable political confrontation.

The recent mid-term congressional election in the USA has been equated with earthquakes by the political analysts as it tilted the American political edifice to the right. The American electorate rejected the Democrats at every level. The Republicans seized the control of the House of representatives for the first time in 40 years and the Senate for only the fourth time since Second World War. They needed 40 seats to become majority in the House of Representative — they have got 52. They needed seven more seats to control the Senate — they have gained nine. They

bagged 11 governorship — eight biggest states out of nine. The Republicans now at an advantageous stage to manipulate at will to win 1996 Presidential race.

The winners claim, the recent election was not anti-incumbent, it was anti-Democratic incumbent which repudiates all those associated with the ruling party. The wrath is not on Clinton, on his system.

In parliamentary democracy where majority leader becomes the head of the government, the loss of seats or failure to gain majority seats would have cost the leader to lose his job. But here in the US the Americans elect a King saddled with unlimited power, salted with some checks and balances. He can rule even with minority seats in both houses with a difference that he cannot bite as effectively as a majority incumbent President and will require to accept occasional beatings with smile if he wants a compromise to rule. President Clinton however will now face two stubborn opposition leaders — Senate majority leader Robert Dole and incoming House Speaker Newt Gingrich, both of whom are known for their fierce partisan conservatism. Dole may run against Clinton in 1996 Presidential run if other things remain equal. Gingrich has consistently pursued what they call a 'messianic campaign' against the liberal Democrats whom

he accuses as the embodiment of all that is evil in government. The Republicans are now in full battle array in all fronts. Of course that does not mean like ours that Americans will face roadblocks, continuous strikes, closing of factories and preference for road to congress to drive points home. In a telephone poll of 800 adult voters, 50% replied that the voters disapproved Clinton's job as a President. 24% opposed Democratic Party programmes and only 12% supported the Republican programmes. Sixtythree per cent voters did not consider that the Republican control of the Congress would bring any new era. From the opinion poll as well as the election results it became evident that electorates' swing to the Republicans was not due to its love for them rather it's their contempt for the Democrats.

In Cartoonist Lurie's eye, a ship named 'SS Clinton' whose hind part representing 'domestic standing' has gone under water and the front, representing 'foreign policy' is above. Partially it's a graphic picture of President Clinton's success or failure as seen by American voters. True, along with bad ones he has gained lot of credit points in last two years. He has reduced the budget deficit from \$290 billion to 220 billion, passed a 33 billion anticrime bill which envisaged full control on sale and use of guns, enacted and enforced

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), envisaging free trade with neighbours like Canada and Mexico, recovered economy from its moribund state, reduced inflation and dropped unemployment. His health programmes and GATT agreement await Congressional approval.

It has been accused that for nearly two years the words 'Bill Clinton' and 'foreign policy' in the same sentence have been a discordant combination, like military intelligence or media ethics. True, President Clinton has no foreign policy experience but that is hardly any excuse for the US Presidents who had led the world in global wars and peace twice in this century and held the country as unquestionable leader of the free world after the Second World War. It was the innovator of cold war from John Foster Dulles' time and successfully broke the iron curtain.

Clinton's indeterminacy, zigging and zagging for long two years made Americans wary of their leader. From a total listlessness and indolence he moved into action. His initiatives in peace-making in the Middle-East impressed friends. President Assad did not yield much but expressed his intents openly on which future negotiations could be initiated. Many call it a police action yet US-backed UN force succeeded in putting Jean-Bertrand Aristide back on his

presidency. Clinton has successfully broken Japan's trade monopoly with US after a protracted bare-knuckle negotiation over telecommunications, medical equipment and insurance. The inevitable trade war with Japan was averted and Japan's monopoly in US market is broken. Others call it bribing, still President Clinton succeeded in taking the nuclear pistol off the hand of the prodigal kid — the North Korea. He improved relations with China taking a pledge from Beijing that it would not export ground-to-ground missiles of 300 KM range. His attendance at the meeting of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) at Jakarta has removed misgivings with Kuala Lumpur and paved ways for further economic cooperation with the region.

The 33-nation summit of Americans in Miami in December which Clinton will host is likely to bring the American continents closer if not all problems removed. With US guardianship in signing the Jordan-Israeli peace treaty and the Iraqi recognition of the Kuwait regime, only three recalcitrants in the world remain for the US — Cuban Castro, Iraqi Saddam and Libyan Gaddafi. While the economic noose now hangs around Saddam whom many suspect as US creation, the others' two are lying low.

In the home front President Clinton ignored what his people wanted from their leaders.

They want effective crime control, specifically gun-toting kids, clean streets and cities. Despite their craze for modernism and liberal attitudes, Americans adore family values and now want to preserve them to stop growing sundering of family ties. Clinton's expressed support for 'gays' and withdrawal of restriction on them from entering the armed services has annoyed many and grinded axe at his good taste for values.

This correspondent has the fortune of watching both US Senate and the House of Representative in session. Both the US houses were full in attendance in direct contrast to what we see in our Sangsad which often looks on average one fourth empty. In the Senate where the member speaks from his seat each word spoken in each typed on stenographed by an assistant standing by the side of the member. This ensures correctness of record. In the House of representatives the members speak from a fixed podium. The debates in both the houses discuss the issues threadbare. No member is accused of lying as in done in our case in the Parliament. President Clinton, with Republicans gaining majority in both the houses, is now a minority leader — a situation which Harry Truman faced in 1946. But he fought back to win re-election in 1948.

It is yet to be seen whether President Clinton, accused of having no centre, fights back to regain the confidence of the electorate. The recent debacle in mid-term election may spur him to action to fill the void.

There are many things in the world which do happen although they should not happen at all. The tragedy lies there. The Blasphemy Act who knows, may be one such event of far-reaching consequences. The Philippines was said to be a Muslim stronghold several centuries back; why it became a Christian stronghold subsequently is perhaps fairly known to the Ulama. My fear is that with the passage of the Blasphemy Act the life of the common man may become more insecure ('to err is human') than ever before, and the masses may be inclined to seek an avenue to evade any gradual extermination.

Again, the truth is that a true believer is strong enough, within and without, to uphold his faith above everything, in spirit and deed; he doesn't require any help to protect his belief.

Md Muslim Ali
Ex-Magistrate
Dhaka

market economy is eroded by the invasion of the market by foreign goods. This does not, however, mean that there should not be legislations. Legislations are sometimes indispensable. The question is whether Blasphemy Act is indispensable for Bangladesh. If extermination of the nefarious among Muslims or others be deemed expedient, the protectors of religion and lovers of God may have recourse to any act. And they are the majority. The Imam of the National Mosque had, however, reportedly given his ruling that Ulama and Ulama along were the authorised persons to approve what was law and what was not, and what the Government should do or not do, by obtaining prior sanction of the appropriate Ulama council, etc. Well, if there has been a consensus among the Ulama, a Blasphemy Act in effect is already under operation, only sanction of the parliament is awaited!

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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.

Rohingyas

Sir, On 24 July 1994, the SLORC troops had uprooted the Rohingya village of Nalapar in Minbya township. About 2000 Muslims of the said village were brought to Nagkura village of Maungdaw, a border village on the Naf river. More Rohingyas villagers, in Mrohoung and Kyauktaw townships have been ordered to quit their homes since then. Hundreds of them are now herded into boats and carried to Maungdaw north and south almost everyday starting a fresh drive against Rohingyas from November 1994.

The unfortunate and poor souls have no alternative except to find their ways across the border to Bangladesh, where bulk of refugees have been taking shelter since 1991. It is a renewed annihilation design of the SLORC in order to exterminate the remaining Rohingya population of inner Arakan.

From May 1994, North Arakan has become a new killing field. At SLORC death camps of Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, Muslims are tortured, shot or slaughtered, with ditches to bury them dug by themselves before death. By now thousands must have been gunned down or slaughtered and many

have gone into hiding in Bangladesh to avoid whimsical arrests and torture by the SLORC troops. Unfortunately it is little known outside.

But violation of human rights can no longer be pleaded as an internal affair of a country. The Rohingya problem is having a dimension of international perspective and that must be of greater concern to the international community.

May we take the opportunity to request the world leaders to pressurise effectively the SLORC regime to stop atrocities toward Rohingyas and to restore their indigenous status and to invite them to the peace talks.

Jilani
Maungdaw, Burma

Of Blasphemy Act

Sir, The demand is for a statute on Blasphemy. It is demanded on religious ground. The considerations which have induced its pioneers to launch

the movement is to safeguard the image of Islam by legislative measures. The misgivings is that Islam is in danger in Bangladesh, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, and the danger can be averted only by a well grounded Blasphemy Act. The move seems similar to the Khilafat movement launched by the then overzealous Muslim pioneers to preserve the integrity of the Turkish Empire although the Turks themselves discarded it. Naturally the Khilafat Movement could not prevent the dissolution of the Turkish Empire.

Whatever is the exact number, the truth is that about ninety per cent of the Bangladeshis are Muslims. Yet it has become necessary to enact a statute to save them from the nefarious among them!

There are legislative enactments to protect the downtrodden, women and the internal trade and commerce, to mention a few. Yet the down-trodden are gagged, the women are assaulted and the