The Baily Star

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A Misleading Lull

A sense of complacency appears to have gripped the ruling party and the government. Our reading of the situation leads us to think that there is no reason for it. In fact this lull is misleading - almost suicidally so. The Prime Minister boastfully stated after the en masse resignation of the opposition MPs, back in December, that nothing would happen if, and when the resignation comes about. Such a statement was made to counter the opposition's claim that the country would come to a standstill once they quit the parliament. Now that nothing actually has happened after the resignation, a sense of 'situation is under control' feeling has become all-pervasive in the government circles. However, seasoned political pulse readers have a totally different view. The lull, as we see it, was totally due to the intervening month of Holy Ramadan. It was also greatly helped, first by the Speaker's legitimate delay, we would put at about a week, and then by the two law suits in the High Court. This was followed by the festivities of Eid. However, now everything is over, and so also we think, will be the lull. In fact those who are in the know of things suggest that severe political turnioil is just around the corner.
The opening shots by the opposition will be

the hartals on 12-13 March. This will, most likely, be followed by other similar calls in the days to come. This paper is, on grounds of principle, opposed to the concept of hartals. This is because we think hartals or strikes have lost all moral and ethical meaning because they are no longer voluntary but imposed. However, we uphold the rights of all citizens to protest and not-cooperate with the government, which was what 'hartals' were originally supposed to stand for. We have repeatedly urged upon the opposition to go for innovative alternatives to hartals which hurt the innocent and poor citizens more than the government.

So the question is, knowing that opposition will go for more strident and provocative actions, what is the government and the ruling party planning to do? Nothing, at least that is how it appears to the public. We have written in other columns that having decided to talk to the opposition, government and the ruling party should now give a clear agenda; and their own positions on that agenda. Hesitation on BNP's part is based on its assessment that Hasina will not respond positively to whatever it does. We do not know whether this assumption is correct, and have no reason to subscribe to it. Even if it were so, government cannot hide behind that fact, and go for a 'no-action' formula, as it seems to have gone now. It must act quickly. Time is running out, if it has not already.

Eid this Time

So what was Eid like this time around. There is one thing that became very clear. Eid, especially Eid-ul-Fitr has become the biggest boost to our economy. The buying and selling that went on this time shows clear signs of how Eid shopping has evolved into the biggest marketing binge in Bangladesh. For a whole month there was a mad rush in all the shopping areas of greater Dhaka. Reports from other towns testify to the same from it? Of course there will no doubt be those who will lament the erosion of the more esoteric and spiritual aspect of the occasion and condemn the fact of its becoming such a commercial affair. Shopping habits develop from a sense of giving to others. Then there is the sentiment of sharing, which also prompts us to buy and give. There is also the feeling that on the occasion of Eid we will all look a bit better, eat a bit better and make our surroundings appear better than usual, which also works to make us go shopping and buy things. So Eid becoming a big shopping event is a bit inevitable, and welcome. It is our view that we should not only not try to prevent this from evolving further, but make arrangements so that more shopping takes place on this occasion giving a far stronger fillip to our economy.

have some sort of an estimate as to how much shopping took place this time, how many people having participated in it. Such an estimate will help us to project the future trends, which will help us to make arrangements for the future. It is our view that given a better shopping environment, and better traffic management, there would have been more shopping, and more people participating in it, each perhaps coming back to it more than once. As it was, shopping was a trial, and in most cases a harrowing experience. Those who went, suffered it under compulsion, finished it in the shortest possible time, and in most cases never went back again.

We think that a serious attempt be made to

We suggest that government should have a special body to monitor the Eid shopping, make scientific projections of its scope and nature, and help the traders prepare better for the occasion. This will help them to make greater contribution and impact on the economy. Even in more advanced countries of the West, sales during Christmas acts as a big boost to the economy. So why not in ours?

Telephone Tales

Last Thursday we carried a story on how long it takes for us to get new telephone lines, and how much we need to grease the palms of the concerned people along the way. As can be expected the higher-ups professed no knowledge of the corruption and blamed the delay in getting phones on far greater demand than there is capacity. There are many stories like the one we published of having to wait nearly a decade for a phone connection. Telephones are a must in modern business and living. If we want to become a part of the 21st century life, we will have to improve our telephone system. Today not only we have to wait years for a simple phone, we have to pay the highest rate in the world for it: Imagine being among the poorest countries in the world, we pay among the highest rates for phone calls. We also have perhaps the biggest fleet of employees for the number of total telephones. This has led to high overhead and corruption. We request our telecommunication ministry to take a serious look into this area and help modernise this sec-

Telecommunication is one field where we

can attract a lot of foreign investment. With a

clear policy of privatisation and allowing greater

number of people to avail of the facility, the mar-

ket will increase, services will become cheap;

and there will be overall rise in efficiency. All we

need is policy and aggressive implementation of

it. Will our telecom ministry take up the chal-

lenge?

Eid Shopping: Loose Strands of Stray Thoughts

ARKETS in the West take stock of consumer **↓** ▼ **↓** confidence from the tempo of Christmas shopping. in our case, the pace of Eld-ul-Fitr shopping can well be used as a foil to test how freely the consumer would spend his money. It's bound to be just an approximation at best. However, markets have yet to develop anything as accurate as the barometer, to measure consumer confidence which is illusive any way. The difference is that in the West the market has ready access to a string of economic data about retail sales, factory orders and so on In our case, it's mostly anecdotal evidence backed by

shows the trends. first, the demand side of Eid shopping. Traditionally this is the occasion to buy new clothes. Shoes and socks perhaps come next on the shopping list. And caps of course. Many families, particularly the middle class, defer such purchases till the festival. Families also don't buy attire just for themselves. It is customary to provide the domestic help with a set of clothes on this occasion. Items of attire would be bought as gifts for the members of extended family

observation Well, at least that

Women in the family would buy trinkets, glass bangles and immitation jewellery. The rich would go for the real thing, gold ornaments. There are families who postpone procurement of consumer durables till the festival - to make an occasion of it. Toys do not come that high on the Etd shopping list as it is with Christmas shoppers. Greeting cards fare much better. These are sold in millions on such an

Then there is the shopping for victuals. As a matter of fact, food items tops the Eid shopping list for some. For, it is an occasion for feasting too. especially after a month of fasting. Tradition dictates that the fare should be rich on the day of the festival. And there should be tables laden withdishes of tasty snacks and choice tidbits to entertain the visitors - all friends and relations. It takes quite a bit of

money to arrange all that. Such preparations of food smacks of conspicuous consumption. Well, it is, It is a day of celebration after all. Yet, the festival brings a gift for the poorest too. The gift comes by way of fitra. a charity obligatory under the tenets of religion. Fitra is calculated at the rate of 2.25 kilograms of wheat for each member of the families celebrating the festival. That ties in with the festival being named Eid-ul-Fitr. The idea is that not even a beggar should go hungry on this day. Usually it is the monetary equivalent of the wheat that is given out as charity. This year's fitra was fixed at Tk 22 per head. Last year, it was Tk 20. Inflation accounting is at work here, reflecting the rise in price of foodgrains. You might also wonder why for a rice-eating population. fitra is fixed in terms of wheat. It doesn't matter really and we have turned into wheat eaters anyway. What matters is the good cause.

All in all, the demand effects of Eid shopping is considerable by our standard. The total outlay would easily run to tens of billions of Taka. It's not just the producers and sellers of goods on the shoppers' lists who see money rolling in. The tailor who stitches the cloth, the barber who gives the Eid haircut or the hair-do, the florist who supplies the flowers - you name them - they all share the bonanza. Even the beggar has his portion of the pie. Of course, it could be argued that Eid shopping is a feature of urban areas only. There is truth in this. Nonetheless, it is also true that the affluent and the middle class are concentrated in urban areas. And these are the people who offer potentials as consumers. Their Eid spendings trickle down the economy

as a whole. By all accounts, Eid shopping this year was pretty brisk. Roads leading to the main shopping areas had been clogged with traffic for days on. Prices are said to have gone up by 10 to 50 per cent as compared to last year's Eid bazaar. But this hasn't dampened the buying spree. By now, nearly all towns and cities in the country have shopping

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ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri



complex where you can buy almost all the things you need - under the same roof. Most of these shopping centres have arrangements for car parking to attract affluent customers. Prices are bit high but you also do your shopping in relative

comfort. Side by side with these modern shopping centres. traditional bazaars also had been doing roaring business. These looked even busier than the sleek shopping complex. All towns and cities have these bazaars. They also offer a wide variety of goods and a broad range of choices. Prices generally are lower than in the shopping centres for lookalike articles, If you are an expert bargainer, your could be sure of beating prices further down

At the low end of the markets in towns and cities, there are the pavement shops and toadside vendors. The asking price for an article in these truly mass markets could be anywhere up to 50 per cent lower than the posh shopping complex. Quality may not be the same but not that had either. Low price is the main attraction but even then, a lively haggling session would ensue. It is important that the shopper has plenty of time in hand Not just for bargaining but also for giving each article a rally close look after the deal is struck. Otherwise, the vendor could palm off defective goods.

Salespeople's job is to sell

Use of gimmicks to promote sales and attract buyers is also expected. This year, major shopping centres in Chitta gong seem to have earned bit of a distinction by offering lucky coupons to customers who bought goods worth a certain minimum value. The coupons could fetch the holders attractive prizes such as cars, refrigerators, colour television and so on. Some dubbed the sales drive unauthorised lottery. Authorities also took umbrage and sent out threats of legal action. Nothing much would probably happen. The Chittagong sales pitch reportedly was inaugurated by no less personage than a minister.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Eid sales this time were some 30 per cent more than last year. Does this indicate a corresponding rise in consumer earnings? We know for sure that it is not so. All the same, consumers did spend more. May be, they felt less inclined to hold their money back. Consumer confidence may have grown. Could it also signal an upturn in the economy? Ah, that again is another story, involving a whole raft of variables. Suffice it to say that prospects look better but not quite rosy.

OREIGN products were available aplenty for the Eid shoppers. However, all the products branded as foreign-made were not truly so. Many of the elegant dresses and other apparel labelled as having been manufactured abroad had really been made at home. Such quality products were being flaunted as foreign goods to attract buyers in the

hope of realising high prices. It was on such a day fifteen years ago that I had gone to a shop in Bangkok to buy a pair of shoes. I was then staying in Bangkok doing a consultancy job with the UN ESCAP. I liked a nice pair of shoes but not the price. Neither could I speak Thai nor the salesman English Anyhow, I made the appropriate gestures to let the salesman understand that the price was too high for me. He immediately came up with a pad and pencil - thrusting these into may hands — signalling me put down my offer Apparently he could read the numbers alright. So I jotted

Political stalemate

Sir, Leaders of the ruling and the main opposition parties will go down in history for being equally responsible for the present political stalemate. Their intransigence for the sake of the country has baffled and angered the silent majority.

Besides causing immense loss in business in foreign trade and discouraging foreign investment, the 'aborodh' and hartals called by the opposition and the laissez faire policy of inaction by the ruling party; they are also causing hardship

upon the ordinary people. Educational institutions are being prevented from functioning, sick and the ailing people are not getting medical attention and ordinary people earning their daily bread are facing serious problems due to this political anarchy. They are causing impediment to normal civilised life. All for the sake of gaining political power. One is bound to feel that the leaders don't actually care about the country and its people, but only care about their own interests. R Alam

Mohammedpur, Dhaka

down a figure and after reading it. he nodded his head sadly Then he scribbled a set of numbers which fell in between the original price and my offer.

I could cut a deal, so I thought. Yet, what still bothered me was the label tagged to the shoes declaring these to be of Italian make. Given the lan-

any hope of clearing up my misgivings. Just then another customer entered the shop. Obviously a Thai, he also had an English magazine in his hand. I approached him, 'taking it for granted that he knew English. The gentleman listen to me with a broad smile on his face and then talked to the salesman. After a while he turned to me and explained that the shoes were really made in Thailand but the 'Made in Italy' label has been attached to attract buyers. The salesman says shoes sell better that way," he added and then left the shop abruptly. looking rather ashamed.

guage barrier, there was hardly

Things have changed. The Thais no longer feel impelled to declare their own products as foreign-made. Will things change for us too? Well, these are loose strands of stray thoughts anyway.

Looking Back at

March towards Independence

Dhaka, after a five-day hartal, came back to normalcy with buses and vehicles reappearing on the streets.

The East Pakistan Union of Journalists (EPUJ) brought out a procession from the Press Club and held a mass rally before Baitul Mokarram. The President of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists. K.G Mustafa, addressed the rally, congratulating the heroic people of Bangladesh and urging them to unite against the then West Pakistan's oppression.

The Bangla National Awami Party (Wali Group) also held a public meeting at the New Market. The meeting was presided over by Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed, President of the Party and addressed by Mr Mohiuddin Ahmed and Begum Matiya Choudhury. Protesting against the killing of the "unarmed civilians a number of student fronts, political parties, and professional and cultural organisations including the East Pakistan Students Union, the Bangla Chhatra League, the Dacca Motor Drivers' Union, the Bangla National League, the teachers of non-government schools in Dhaka and Narayangani, the Dhaka Central Students Union, the Bangla Airways Union, Udichi. Rajabagh Tannery Workers, among others, brought out rallies, processions, etc., and organised public meetings. Women and artists were also extremely vocal and active.

President Yahya Khan delivered an address to the nation. which was broadcast over the Radio Pakistan network. He explained his reasons for postponing the inaugural session of the National Assembly and said that he hoped after tempers cooled down, fruitful dialogues would take place. He then declared that as Chief Martial Law Administrator, he had made the decision to open National Assembly on March 25.

(Compiled by Schrezad Latif)

nominated to the advisory

will step down from office

prior to the holding of these

(b) The Prime Minister

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

Some Options to Resolve the Impasse

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

ii an earlier piece in The Daily Star, I attem pted to identify the issues, as they stand today. which underline the prevailing political impasse in Bangladesh. Since I wrote that piece at the end of January. there appear to have been no moves to break the impasse. Rather the nation has been exposed to the sideshow at the law courts where we were led to hope that our judiciary would solve problems which had defied political solutions for these last 9 months. The outgoing Chief Justice had rightly warned the nation that political problems had to be solved through politics. The Supreme Court has recognised this hazard and in its landmark judgement of 23 February deftly returned the stick of political dynamite placed in their

hands back to the Speaker. The Speaker has with quite superhuman legal acumen managed to then give a multipaged ruling within hours of having the issue returned to him by the courts, where he has declared the en masse resignation of the opposition MP's to be invalid. Did this Lycurgus of Bangladesh actually write his epic ruling in 6 hours? Or had the Speaker already worked on his ruling for many days in anticipation that the courts would 'Render unto Ceaser. the things that are Ceaser's'?

I am not competent to comment on the jurisprudential ments of the Speaker's ruling. As a layman it appears to me that the pith of the ruling states that a valid resignation by an MP from the Jatiya Sangsad regaires that.

(a) It should be submitted in their own handwriting

under their signature. (b) it should, unless circumstances compel other wise, be submitted in person. (c) No reason should be

given for the resignation.

Without again commenting on the merits of these preconditions, it could be argued that if all the opposition MPs were to now present them-selves to the Speaker in person and in his presence write on a slip of paper I hereby resign from the Jatiya Sangsad as of today', sign it and hand it over to the Speaker, this would, under the terms of his ruling, be deemed a valid resgnation.

The juridical significance of

the long harangue of the Speaker in the course of his ruling on the constitutional improprieties of the opposition resigning, en masse, remains unclear. People may agree or disagree with the Speaker's observations on the merits of the resignation. But in practice does the ruling itself, in any way, invalidate a MP's decision to resign, provided it is done in the format prescribed by the Speaker? If no reason is given by the MPs for their resignation, is not the Speaker bound to accept it? Or does the Speaker's ruling now lay down a new parliamentary jurisprudence that en masse resignations are unacceptable even if submitted in an appropriate form? The Speaker thus needs to clarify his ruling, i the reigning confusion is not to be further compounded.

Depending on the interpretation of the Speaker's ruling, the opposition is presented with the following options:

(f) The opposition may ignore the ruling of the Speaker and continue to remain outside Parliament. This seems to have been the decision of the Awami League Working Committee in its recent meeting as well as by the other opposition parties.

(ii) The opposition MP's may re-submit their resignaprescribed by the Speaker.

position will, perforce, legally

tions in person in the format (iii) If (i) is to be the course of the action, then the op-



remain Members of Parliament, can draw their allowan ces, but may remain free to continue to boycott Parliament Furthermore, now that the MP's are involuntarily bound to the Parliament by the Speaker's ruling, their only recourse appears to be to make the Parliament redundant so that the Prime Minister feels obliged to dissolve the Parliament as early as possible. This by-product of the Speaker's ruling promises a long hot Falgoon and even Summer for Bangladesh after the Eid.

(iv) The opposition may, in theory, still return to Parliament and see it through to its conclusion by the end of 1995. within which time they can negotiate with the government for a constitutional amendment to permit the holding of elections under a caretaker government run by an advisory council. This prospect, at the moment, seems rather remote, if not actually nonment perhaps believed that an opposition which had resig-

ned had played out its trump card long before the game was over. The resultant tenancy of the opposition on the streets was thereby deemed an advantage to the government with votes to be won from the incendiary behaviour of an opposition on the rampage. Now that the Speaker has legally rehabilitated the opposition, the government will have to decide whether they will negotiate a solution acceptable to the opposition to get them off the streets and into the Sangsad or they will continue to live with nine months of agitation led by the sitting members of Parliament. A Parliament with nearly half of its members in the streets. agitating to seek the dissolution of this same parliament, is no longer a credible institution of democracy, no matter how solid the democratic man date of the ruling party. Such a rump parliament will expose the country to the worst of all possible worlds. It will compel the country to live with a parliament without any opposition for close to a year and a half. This is, if anything, even longer than Ershad's 1988 parliamentary charade, with its comical opposition led by its resident clown prince. Such a dysfunctional parliament, sans opposition, can only serve to bring the institution of parliamentary democracy into public contempt and undermine the credibility of the government as a legislator. Since this is an elected government with a bonafide electoral mandate it

is needlessly politically hazar-

dous for them to bring their

own democratic credentials

into controversy by perpetua-

ting the life of a parliament

which has clearly outlived its

ment do? It has in the present

circumstances three clear op-

led by its restored MPs, inten-

sify their agitation on the

streets. The government can

hope to brazen it out till

December, in the hope that

the disruption of civic life will

be politically costly to the op-

position. However permitting a

civil agitation to continue un-

abated, with the resultant dis-

ruption of daily life, commerce

and industry is no less risky to

an incumbent government. It

is the job of a government to

ensure the normaley of civic

life and thet will be held as

accountable by the voters as

will be the opposition, for

their failure to find a political

solution which restores nor

maley in public life. No Finance

Minister, let alone one who

has heavy agenda of reforms to

fortable with an open-ended

agitation which can subvert

productivity gains, frustrate

new investments and, as a re-

sult, leave him with little to

plicit offer of 28/29 December

(ii) It can revert to its im-

show for his reforms.

carry through, can feel com-

So what can the govern-

(i) It can let the opposition,

The solutions suggested are far from ideal. Compromise solutions, designed to avert an imminent political conflagration, rarely are. It is however hoped that lessons will be learnt from the fate of this parliament which, just four years ago, held out so much hope for a democratic renewal in Bangladesh.

Within the above range of options, the choices of the opposition will be influenced by their capacity to intensify and sustain an agitation over the next several months. How far they are able and, more to the point, willing to go, will require careful calculation within the opposition. Here the arithmetic of each opposition party may not yield the same results. A party which hopes to win an election may deem the price of civia disruption to be rather higher than a party with less elevated expectations.

The Speaker's ruling poses the following equally serious dilemmas for the government which will need urgent ad-

dress (i) Is the government in a position to now make an offer to the opposition, which they cannot refuse, as an inducement to return to Parliament? Obviously the Speaker's juridical rhetoric is not going to bring the opposition back to the Sangsad. Indeed he has, perhaps without realising it. done the opposition a great favour by his ruling. He has let them resume their MP's status, which carries many advantages in dealing with the affairs of their constituents and the administration. The fact that the MP's could risk 9 months on the streets without cover of their MP status undoubtedly made many opposition MPs uncomfortable over the issue of resignation. Now that the Speaker's ruling has legally restored the MP status of the opposition but has freed them of any obligation to attend Parliament, the restored MPs can agitate to their heart's

content, in part at government

expense, to bring about the

dissolution of the parliament.

If there is now no scope for

the opposition to resubmit

their resignations, then they

should each certainly send the

Speaker a bouquet of roses for

(ii) Some in the govern-

doing them a great favour.

on the caretaker government This, to gain credibility with the opposition, will have to be presented in the form of a written proposal, which spells out the following points of agreement : (a) The general elections will be held under a caretaker government presided over by a ten-member advisory council

with live members nominated from each side. This council

may be headed by the

President or by an interim

Prime Minister who would be

nominated by the ruling party

from amongst the five persons

council

elections (c) A team from both sides should sit together and work out a constitutional amendment which would vest executive powers with the Advisory Council to preside over the caretaker government. This team may also agree on the period when the Prime Minister would step down and hand over authority to the caretaker government, review the need for further legislation to enhance the powers of the Election Commission and also work out a code of conduct for the political parties in the election which addresses, inter alia. such issues as excessive expenditure, the use of violence and other malpractices deployed to influence the election results. This team should also decide on a date for the dissolution of the parliament and for the general

elections. (d) This draft agreement should be discussed and finalised on a person to person basis by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition. The consensus agreement emerging from this dialogue should be announced jointly before the nation by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition so that the people of Bangladesh would be made political guarantors of the sanctity of the agreement

negotiated at (c) above. (e) The opposition should return to the Sangsad to pass the constitutional amendment as worked out in (c) above. Following the passage of the amendment, the Parliament should be dissolved and the election campaign for the new parliament should be formally

(iii) An alternative offer to

the opposition could be based on a modification of the Ninian Steven proposal. Here 5 members of parliament would be nominated by each side to constitute the caretaker government. The Prime Minister would step down as the caretaker government takes over and one of the members of the caretaker government would be, by agreement of both sides, nominated as caretaker Prime Minister. As an inducement to the opposition to accept this proposal the government would agree to dissolve the Parliament immediately and go for an early election. This move would require no constitutional amendment and would spare the country the need to live with a dysfunctional parliament as well as the tension and uncertainty of civil strife. All other issues covering the modalities of the transfer and the holding of elections would remain common to alternative [(ii) c-e] as spelt out

The solutions suggested above are far from ideal. Compromise solutions, designed to avert an imminent political conflagration, rarely are. It is however hoped that lessons will be learnt from the fate of this parliament which, just lour years ago, held out so much hope for a democratic renewal in Bangladesh. These lessons may be assimilated by all parties expecting to be represented in the next parliament and a code of conduct for the new Parliament negotiated in advance when the outcome of the next election is still indeterminate. Failure to agree to such ground rules in advance could make the life of the next Parliament even less secure than that of the present one. Two successive dysfunctional Parliaments, following in the wake of long years of presidential autocracy, may dissipate whatever faith that remains in the institutions of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh