

Hartals Again!

Once again hartals and street agitations are upon us. No newspaper has been as vocal and as persistent against hartals as ours. We have consistently written against the damaging impact of hartals on the economy, on the society, and on personal life. We can claim to have succeeded in this to some extent because over the last six months or so, there was a significant lowering of all sorts of agitation programmes including the strikes. But all that appears to be fast fading into the past. Starting with the BCL's (Bangladesh Chhatra League) strike in educational institutions, and a half-day strike on 15th August, we are about to enter into a new, and no-holds-barred, phase of agitational politics.

The opposition's position is that without agitation the government does not pay heed to any of its demands. In fact, the absence of mass agitation was taken by the ruling party to mean that the opposition has lost public support, for its cause. We feel that there is some truth in this view. There has been a rising feeling in the BNP that the opposition was losing public support, primarily based on the fact of no agitation. Thus, the opposition feels, there is no other way to realise its demands for a caretaker government to conduct the next polls, without a massive mass agitation.

The fact that absolutely no progress has been made towards a negotiated settlement of the political crisis, and the fact also that BNP actually feels that the opposition is losing public support because there has been no public agitation in the past several months, create a justification — of sorts — for the opposition to go for the type of programmes that it is threatening to go for. While we continue to think that strikes and hartals are damaging for the economy, and that agitational politics only leads to destructive activities, we cannot be blind to the reality that the opposition appears to have no other way of impacting on the thinking of the ruling party. In fact, we feel, there is a lot of substance to the argument that the current spate of agitation and unrest are something that the government is bringing upon itself.

Before the situation really goes out of hand, and the hardliners on both sides take charge, the leaderships of BNP and the AL should seriously think about what they are actually setting into motion. In public affairs it is easy to start something. But it is far from easy to stop it. Once the Pandora's box is opened, who knows what will follow.

Godspeed to BR

It was a tall-tale picture of what Bangladesh Railway has come to. In the picture frontpaged by The Daily Star on Sunday it is a first class railway compartment of the Ekota inter-city express train occupied by only three persons. Of the three two are attendants of the compartment with no one to attend on.

The photograph sits on top of a news item headlined 'Railway Authority starts operation from September 1'. Although tenuous there is a suggested connection between the two. The Railway Authority, dwelt on in the news, comes freshly into being perhaps goaded by the BR's dire situation illustrated by the photo to set things right.

First, it has to be an internal struggle against the Bangladesh Railway itself, an organisation pervaded by a sense of defeat. Its constituents have for decades been behaving like an army on retreat — beaten and frustrated and making the best of the situation by plunder and rampage in the hope of surviving as individuals.

There was, however, a greater villain in the tragic and shameful piece. The BR's original sin was not to address the government in a manner designed to change its totally ignorant, outdated and couldn't care less approach towards the railways into a positive, technocratic and perfectly businesslike and almost capitalistic one. Now it will devolve on the Authority to take on the government and convince it that railways is good investment, even in terms of political dividends.

Our economic reality calls for an efficient and modern and expanding railway system. The railway travel must be a lot cheaper both for the passenger and the goods, than charged by other modes of transport. It must be more efficient and more timely and timesaving than other transports. It must, by and by, serve more places and far more people than it is reaching now. It must help itself, something it hasn't been doing for long, in order to help the nation. And must know its target clientele correctly enough to hit the trail back to profitability.

Again into Oblivion?

It started with some good pieces of reporting on Tanbazar and subsequent raids on the area by women lawyers and police. Newspapers, particularly this journal, gave the action total support expecting this perhaps would grow into a national movement and, at the same time, spur the government to take up the issue more seriously and mount a sustained campaign to rescue the children from the brothels. And, then go on to punish those involved in organised trafficking in girl children.

The expectations haven't met with a resounding response. The government is as inactive in the matter as it ever was. The rights activists must have busied themselves with other problems and issues. The newspapers hardly can dig up things without the society being bothered by such.

These are all the more reasons why there should be a more sustained approach towards the child prostitution issue. The forces that commit themselves unflinchingly to the cause of a better and humane society must set out to launch a permanent body to fight this problem on an urgent note.

With the Beijing conference drawing closer, it will be hypocritical and downright deceitful to wax eloquent there without caring even for a moment about the child prostitute in the country.

When Howard Carter exclaimed 'Eureka' after having come face to face with one of history's greatest wonders — the tomb of Tutankhamun, his ecstatic publication at this discovery was not without reason. One of the youngest Pharaohs who died at the age of 17 allowed the world to have an aperçu at the history that was Egypt, a five-thousand-year-old civilization and the mystery commingling with the shimmering blue Nile presenting itself at the doorsteps of the modern world.

The riddle of Egyptian history is always unfolding to the benefit of human race. The colossal Sphinx near the great pyramid of Cheops, was ancient when the pyramid was built (circa 3000 years). Even earlier, a monster of Greek mythology fearing the face of a woman, body of a lion and the wings of a bird, became a theme of folk lore in ancient world. What walks on four legs in the morning, on two at midday, on three in the evening? When Oedipus gave the right answer — man-crawling as an infant, on all fours, walking on two legs as an adult and using a stick in old age, the Sphinx of the mythology killed herself; but the riddle of Egypt lives on.

The Egyptians excelled in every area of human endeavours. The greatest library, storing the knowledge of the entire human history in Alexandria, was the envy of the Romans. The Caesars calculated that to subdue the Egyptians they must deprive them of their source of knowledge. One of the greatest tragedies in human history occurred, the burning of the library in Alexandria by the Romans.

The ambition of Pax Romana inspired Julius Caesar to conquer rival Egypt in his bid to make Rome the most powerful empire in the world, but in the process he

The Sphinx and the Commissar

Today Bangladesh and Egypt have excellent relationship based on mutual trust and confidence. The recent confabulation between foreign minister Amre Musa and foreign minister Mostafizur Rahman in Geneva in the OIC contact group on Bosnia-Herzegovina is one such example. Kamal Elmiligy will be missed by many in Bangladesh.

himself was conquered by Egypt, by even a wiser emperor, who made him dream of the glory of the greatest empire, namely the union of Rome and Egypt — military might combined with ancient wisdom. The idealistic dream did not materialize and Egypt was eventually conquered later by Augustus Caesar, and wisdom was torched to ashes that tragic day in Alexandria. But Egypt remained ever after in the vanguard of world history.

The Ottomans, the French, and the British all had cast their eyes on the kingdom of the Nile; even Italy of Il Duce did not spare Egypt. King Farouk would boast that there were only five kings in the world — the four kings in the pack of cards — and King Farouk of Egypt!

With the monarchy being overthrown in 1952, a young colonel Nasser took charge of Egypt, the Egypt of Pharaohs and the Egypt of the Ptolemies. Anglo-French fiasco of 1956 following the nationalization of the Suez canal was a point of departure in the history of Egypt. The Egypt after 56, again occupied the centre stage of Arab politics. Much as many Arabs today would not like to brook the idea of Egypt being the 'Primus Inter Pares' it is a truism that without Egypt nobody can think seriously of the Arab world. It is not only the Al-Azhar University, nor the Egyptian 'persona' but the wisdom of ancient Egypt that still pervades the Arabs and the dynamics of Arab politics.

The Nasserite nationalism

that inspired the whole Arab nation was a creative interregnum in the Cold War period. The communist lure attracted Nasser and it played a significant role during the Arab-Israeli conflicts. But who does not remember Nasser's advice to King Hossain of Jordan to continue buying arms from the United States. "We must not let the Arab-Israeli conflict become polarised between the superpowers. This is bound to happen if the Arabs are armed exclusively by Russia and the Israelis by the

ing to the first Arab-Israeli war, prime minister Nokrashy Pasha asked the Egyptian parliament to declare war against Israel. "In defence of Arab rights and against communist atheism and nihilism!" The hasty recognition of Israel by the Soviet Union was largely responsible for this wrong impression. By the time Nasser went to Bandung in 1955, the Soviets had broken off diplomatic relationship with Tel Aviv and Egypt upgraded its legation in the Kremlin to an embassy.

novas Soviet PR in Geneva, Bernard Zagorin of the United States, Constantine Ene of Romania, P K Banerjee of India and Ignatieff of Canada to help Bangladesh admission to the UN agencies in Geneva. President Sadat made no mistake and he was listened to by many across the diverse spectrum of political orientations. Today Bangladesh and Egypt have excellent relationship based on mutual trust and confidence. The recent confabulation between foreign minister Amre Musa and foreign minister Mostafizur Rahman in Geneva in the OIC contact group on Bosnia-Herzegovina is one such example. Kamal Elmiligy will be missed by many in Bangladesh.

Boutros Ghali, the UN Secretary General couldn't do any better. He needs all our support and we have not flinched. Our troops in Bihar enclave amply underwrites our commitment.

It is no wonder today that it is Egypt again which is leading the peace effort in the ancient land of Palestine — land of Gudea and Sumeria: it is Egypt again which made possible the handshake of the 13th September 1993, in the foreground of the White House between Yasser Arafat and Rabin with President Clinton standing by. Today the homeland for Palestinians is not a distant dream any more. It is in the pale of realization. Jerusalem is not far off — the meeting point of the three great monotheistic religions is again going to be opened to all: the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims. The Egypt of Hosni Mubarak, Ismet Meguid and Amre Musa is

doing it again. In their numerous contacts with the Soviet Commissars, the Egyptians were very often given the example of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as a supreme example of the art of compromise in the short term for a long term gain. If diplomacy is the art of creating convenience in another country, the Egyptians have mastered it well. This supreme knowledge almost makes them the 'Omphalos' of the Arab Empire of the day. And this allows them to play the historic role of the catalyst. President Arafat knows only too well: his relentless effort to continue the dialogue with his erstwhile adversaries demonstrates his trust in his friends. He cannot but succeed.

Dark Clouds of Fundamentalism

The recrudescence of fundamentalism in Egypt is a negative element in its march towards a modern vibrant Egypt. We should note that phenomenal success of Islam was always largely predicated on its tolerant and conciliatory approach to its subjects — regardless of their beliefs. In India the Moghuls, especially the great Moghul Akbar ruled over a variegated ethnic groups, so successfully because the golden mean of his rule was tolerance.

The Ottomans, not too distant cousins of the Moghuls of India, greatly depended on the finest Christian soldiers, the Janissaries, in their six-hundred-year rule.

Muslims throughout centuries demonstrated their best qualities when they eschewed fundamentalism and chose the path of benevolence and tolerance.

The Muslim fundamentalists in Egypt would do well to heed the lessons of history, not only for their own benefit but for the world at large.

ENCHIRIDION

by Waliur Rahman



Bangladesh and Egypt

United States." When Khrushchev refused to shake hands with president Aref of Iraq, Nasser chided the Soviet leader — "but remember that people used to say that Neguib was the top man in Egypt and I was just his number two. The same with Farhat Abbas and Ben Bella in Algeria. You get along well with Ben Bella and me now. Why not with Aref?" Khrushchev, always fond of telling anecdotes related an incident of the war between Russia and Japan in 1905, and concluded, "gold sinks, but shit floats!"

Clarity of purpose has always been a great quality in the Egyptian perception: mistakes were made but they were quickly rectified. When the British withdrew from Palestine in May 1948, lead-

The War of Liberation of Bangladesh cannot be thought of without the Egyptian support. The doyen of modern Egyptian diplomacy, professor Khafiq, whom I had the privilege of knowing personally during those fateful days of 1971-72 in Geneva, was yet another example of the steadfastness of Egypt and its diplomacy in support of principles. I had the honour of using the Egyptian mission in Geneva as a political refuge holding a Swiss document and working for the country fighting for independence. Ambassador Khafiq used to say, "My dear son Wali, a right cause always wins, and yours will be no exception either." Khafiq later on joined hands with friends like Madame Mira-

On Combating Corruption in Government

Every change of government, no doubt, brought down the corruption level somewhat, but perhaps within six months to a year, matters tended to slide back to the past levels and even surpass these.

A most crucial prerequisite of good governance anywhere in the world is the minimisation of corruption in the government machinery. Otherwise, the very moral basis of a government as leader and final arbiter in the affairs of a country would quickly disappear. Indeed, at times people turn so desperate that they are even prepared to trade democracy for a clean government under a benevolent dictator. If of course such a choice exists in real life. Unfortunately, over the years, we have witnessed only a continuous increase in corruption in our country in a situation where the size of the "National cake," in relation to population, has grown, if at all, only modestly. Another depressing aspect of our corruption is that wealth acquired through corruption has generally found its way out, buttressing perhaps the economies of countries other than that of Bangladesh; and whatever remained here went into anti-productive channels following the principle of "easy come, easy go." Every change of government, no doubt, brought down the corruption level somewhat, but perhaps within six months to a year, matters tended to slide back to the past levels and even surpass these. During the Ershad regime, corruption in government spread deep and wide, and demoralized the entire society.

Obviously, this situation cannot go on for long if our nation is to survive and prosper in freedom. In other words, "political will" has to be exercised to minimise corruption in government. In this regard, the people's voting rights and constant vigilance will play an important role. Assuming that we shall soon have this as political

democracy takes root in the country and education spreads among the people, let us attempt to delineate the steps required next.

However, before suggesting any specific recommendations, I would first of all like to disagree with those who advocate a change in the existing law on corruption, and the definition of corruption contained in it. In my opinion, it is not the existing law which is lax or inadequate. On the contrary, I believe that it is in the sphere of implementation that much remains to be accomplished. At the present stage of our social development, a change in the existing law based on a finer definition of corruption will not only lead us nowhere, but will also add to the confusion. Indeed, only when the existing law on corruption is more effectively implemented can we justify its further improvement. I would also contradict those who hold that privatization will automatically solve most of the corruption problems currently faced by the government machinery. It is true that with greater privatization, government officials will lose direct control over industrial and commercial concerns, and their ability to indulge in corruption will correspondingly diminish. However, even in a highly privatized economy, government will always be required to carry out powerful regulatory measures, and so its responsibilities for raising taxes, maintaining law and order, administering justice, providing primary health care and basic education, implementing environmental code, etc. will remain, if not increase. In discharging all these fun-

ctions, government officials will continue to have ample opportunities to indulge in corrupt practices unless these are tackled through direct practical measures.

I have six suggestions for improving the implementation record of the Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC), which is charged with the task of combating corruption in our country. Firstly, it is not enough only to strengthen its anti-corruption investigation mechanism though this has an overriding importance. We must also follow the old and tested principle that "Prevention is always better than cure," and accordingly devote our efforts to two related

format); and (b) suggest suitable modifications of existing rules and procedures which allow corruption to take place in governmental operations. In particular, government procedures relating to purchase and procurement bank loan administration, and the disposal, sale and allotment of government property, need to be carefully analyzed on a priority basis and remedial changes brought about.

Secondly, the BAC has to be reorganized on a completely different basis. No doubt, this organization should continue to remain directly under the Chief Executive of the government,

would be provided with positive incentives in the form of higher salaries and perks, in order to boost their morale for the difficult and sensitive tasks they are required to perform under trying circumstances.

Thirdly, in both recruitment and training of anti-corruption officials, knowledge of law and finance should be strongly emphasized. Without such a background, there will always be a tendency to oversimplify things and jump to conclusions. For example, a government officer may commit an irregularity but this does not automatically mean that he/she has indulged in corruption. Unfortunately, many BAC investigating officials cannot or do not distinguish between corruption and irregularity. Similarly, anti-corruption cases filed in the courts of law are more likely to lead to conviction if the legal loopholes have been plugged and the financial transactions in question have been properly analyzed and identified by the investigating officer. An anti-corruption officer with an adequate knowledge of law and finance will also think twice before bringing up a corruption charge in the first place.

Fourthly, an Anti-Corruption council consisting of the Principal Secretary, Cabinet Secretary, Law Secretary and Home Secretary should be constituted so that false and frivolous complaints are screened and greater scrutiny is ensured before taking decisive action against a senior official. However, the power of this committee should be strictly recommendatory, and it should be made to act in a

time bound manner, so that the PM can always act swiftly and without any hindrance. Fifthly, in order to deal with the large number of pending anti-corruption cases in different courts of law, measures such as increase in the number of prosecuting staff, making greater use of BAC investigators as prosecutors, appointment of more special judges at different levels, etc. need to be taken.

Finally, both as a strategy and on moral grounds, the BAC should be asked to concentrate its efforts on catching "big fish," leaving "small fry" to be dealt departmentally. "Big fish" here refers to those involved in large deals, generally involving high officials and VIPs. Otherwise, there will be too many cases, misdirection and wastage of effort, harassment of the innocent, and above all lack of effectiveness. Everytime a "big fish" is caught and punished through the due process of law, the BAC should mount a wide publicity of the case in order to strike terror in the hearts of officers and VIPs prone to corruption.

The PM can easily ensure that the BAC Director-General follows the suggested line of action delineated above, through appointment of the right kind of person to that highly sensitive position, and then providing him/her with the necessary operational autonomy and protection. This means that if such a person is not available in the mainstream civil bureaucracy, he/she should be brought in from elsewhere, including the judiciary, the armed forces, the police, academia or even the private sector, as long as his/her political neutrality, moral and financial integrity and above all the ability to deliver the goods are beyond question.

Making Government Work

areas, namely educating the community at large on corruption and plugging loopholes within the existing governmental rules and procedures. Unfortunately, we have so far done precious little on these two fronts. This means that the BAC, in collaboration with relevant organizations, should be able to (a) produce appropriate written and audio-visual materials in order to educate and motivate government servants, NGO and local government functionaries, secondary and post-secondary students, teachers, journalists, community leaders and other advanced segments in the society (the first step in this direction would be to print and widely distribute the Bengali version of anti-corruption laws and rules in a precise and easily readable

that is the PM, so that it can be insulated from pressures exerted by politicians in general and the ruling party in particular, and at the same time enjoy a high status within the administrative hierarchy in order to be effective. But this is not enough. The BAC must also follow the principle of "Hire and fire," just like the armed forces. In other words, in the event of a prima facie case against the integrity of an anti-corruption officer, there should be provision for summary powers within the hierarchy to deal with the situation. Otherwise, it will never be possible to stamp out corruption among anti-corruption officials, despite the political "will" of the Chief Executive of the government. However, at the same time, anti-corruption officials sho-

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.

Pakistan's foreign policy

Sir, One of the easiest forms of writing is criticism of the foreign policy of a country. All that is required is to argue why a certain course of choices or policies was or was not followed in the past. Mr Ikrum Sehgal's article 'Pakistan Foreign Policy: A Passage to Nowhere' printed in your esteemed daily on August 10 is a perfect example of this type. He has given the impression that Pakistan's foreign policy makers have been silent spectators of regional developments doing nothing to take advantage of the rapidly changing scenario. His thesis is built on the assumption that successive lost opportu-

nities since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have made Pakistan's foreign policy a "passage to nowhere". Nothing could be far from facts. Countries like Pakistan, placed in a geo-political-strategic environment as they are, have no choice but to pursue an active and alert foreign policy. Our contribution to the evolving thinking on disarmament and nonproliferation, strengthening of the UN and international peace-keeping, pursuit of a fair deal in global economic and trade issues and developing closer relations with the Islamic and other countries is a matter of record. I am gratified to learn that Mr Sehgal does acknowledge the need for and the existence of good relations with

Bangladesh; but surprisingly he finds fault with those areas where Pakistan's foreign policy has been most accurate and precise in the recent years, i.e. the Gulf War, the post-Soviet Afghanistan and Cyprus.

Diplomacy is not the game of stuffing the shopping bag of wish lists on the credit card of strategy and tactics in the international arena; it is in reality only the art of the possible. The writer's claim that Mohtrama Benazir Bhutto has "shown no proclivity to take full control over the running of foreign policy" is not borne out by the record. There is a widespread recognition of her personal contribution to the pursuit of a pragmatic and successful foreign policy. One has to only look at her recent visits to the US, Singapore and Malaysia, among many others, as well as her brilliant performance at the World Summit on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the Commonwealth Summit at

Lima (1993). Muhammad Hussain Malik Minister (Press) Pakistan High Commission, Dhaka

Training of stock dealers/brokers

Sir, The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) of Bangladesh needs to be specially commended for holding an Introductory Training on Stock Market operations including its legal, operational and accounting aspects. The participants of the programme constituted twenty-five senior members of the Dhaka Stock Exchange. After a short inaugural speech by the Chairman of the SEC explaining the exigency and purpose of the programme, presentations were made by the learned members of the SEC elucidating the wide-ranging legal, operational and accounting aspects of stock market operation very competently and transparently. The programme commenced on

22nd July and concluded on 27th July. The legal aspects were presented in three much-needed agenda on (i) Stock Market-related laws (ii) Market and Financial Intermediary-related laws and (iii) Issue-related laws. The operations aspects covered (i) Trading-related rules (ii) Insider trading regulations and (iii) Stock pricing. Lastly, the accounting aspects dealt with (i) Disclosure in Prospectus and Accounts and (ii) Stock Dealers/Brokers accounts and Auditing/Inspection etc. The presentations by the learned speakers were extremely exhaustive, effective and informative. The participants took keen interest in the programme and seldom spared the speakers with volleys of questions arising from their varied experiences in actual market practice and operations. They seemed to be well satisfied with the illustrative answers of the wise speakers. The programme, which was the first ever of its kind,

dispelled many misgivings about the role of SEC as a regulatory body in the Stock Market operations and to a great extent created and build up an extremely co-operative relationship between the SEC and Stock Brokers/Dealers.

I am particularly, highly impressed by the metamorphosis in the SEC-DSE relations brought about by the well-managed programme and hope that the benefits gained by the participants will remove whatever misconceptions they so long nurtured, rather unjustifiably, about their role in the development of Capital Market in Bangladesh.

I recommend occasional review of such programme whenever circumstances change with the phase-wise modernisation of Stock Market operations.

A B S Siddiq Former Vice Chairman and Member, DSE, and Chairman, Corporate Securities Management Ltd