

# Why does it have to be a Partisan Effort?

## Public Want You to Talk

The latest hardening of positions by the ruling party and the opposition towards each other makes the nation sit up in agonizing apprehension of a menacing breakdown in the country's law and order situation.

The Prime Minister has virtually thrown a challenge to the opposition by making a take-it-or-leave-it offer of talks to them. One is struck by the strong words she has used in conveying her message to the opposition. Noteworthy are her allusions to tough measures and the BNP being no stranger to the ways of street politics.

Begum Zia has re-affirmed her party's readiness to sit for a dialogue with an open mind, which is the other way of saying that she wants no preconditions attached to the talks. Then she hastens to add that the discussions ought to be strictly within the purview of the Constitution.

To our understanding, a rigid insistence on unconditional talks amounts to attaching a precondition of sorts to the dialogue. Similarly, the opposition is overstretching its point when spurning a dialogue till such time as the government categorically accepted a *pro* their demand for a neutral, non-party caretaker government. After all, that is what the talks are going to be all about. So, why predispose it to be a non-starter by stating the obvious which nettles the BNP.

The people are absolutely eager to see an early start of the talks. We can assure both sides that their popularity rating with the electorate will not improve an iota so long as they refuse to sit for the talks.

Granted that for the sake of public posturing the BNP and the opposition have toughened up to each other but nobody really expects of them to be hardlining to a point where they find all channels of communication clogged.

The point at issue is simply this: The next parliamentary elections are knocking at the door. The ruling party, in a right frame of mind, cannot afford a boycott of these polls by some major political parties knowing it full well that it would be tantamount to the creation of a parliament devoid of legitimacy. Nothing short of a dialogue can rule out such an ominous possibility.

There is still time for a peaceful — and a mutually honourable repeat honourable — solution to the political impasse by building on the Prime Minister's proposed resignation ahead of the polls.

## Police must be Responsive

The Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) estimates that 127 people died either in police custody or in incidents involving police action over the past three and a half years. This year 28 such deaths have occurred, so far. On an average, 36 deaths a year in incidents where the police are involved, do not speak highly of the law enforcers under a democratic set-up. The three categories of deaths that account for the 127 lives — 27 deaths in police custody, 61 in jail and 39 killed in police firing — further give some insight into the lawmen's dealings with the accused and the arrested people.

This apparent repressive behaviour of the police has, needless to say, failed to make a deterrent impact on the deteriorating law and order situation of the country. A disciplined and efficient law enforcing agency hardly needs to be brutal and repressive. Rather the one that is corrupt and incompetent has every reason to resort to bullying. They can be extremely lax on the one hand and, where the victims are weak and have no political clout, tend to be inhumanly cruel and demanding on the other. Evidently, our society is bearing the legacy of the past autocratic regimes and the police seem to have little inclination to change their ways in dealing with the public.

So, a yawning gap between the police and the public is giving rise to mistrust and all sorts of tension in the conduct of social affairs. Emergence of the police as a social adversary is tremendously unhealthy for the society to evolve as a true democratic entity. What happened in Dinajpur is perhaps as much an explosion of long-held grudge against the police as it has been a public outburst against what a handful of them did to that helpless teenager girl. The primary task of the police, therefore, is to bridge the gap in its relationship with the public. They cannot do it overnight. But if they are serious, they can gradually set about restoring their image through a confidence-building programme. For democracy to flourish, this is a must.

## Save Chandpur

The erosion of Chandpur town has been in the news for quite sometime now. Half-way through the spread of information about this disquieting development we came to know that due to fund constraints the concrete slabs, available with the local WDB office, could not be used for mending the town protection embankment. It is hard to believe that the protective status of Chandpur has, instead of improving seemingly deteriorated since that point in time.

Now, some 30 thousand CC blocks are said to be lying idle with WDB there as the erosion devours fresh areas without any barrier being put to it by dumping the material. Are we to reconcile to the absurdity that the needed amount of money cannot be scraped from anywhere to save Chandpur?

Chandpur is a very important inland port of call for merchants from all over the country. It is the hub of internal commerce, linked to the Chittagong port via the railways. Goods of all descriptions are routed through this lifeline of our riverine communication network.

Such being the significance of Chandpur in our economic life, it is a pity how we have failed to do everything humanly possible to protect the township.

The authorities must immediately spring into action to save the IWTA Terminal at Natun Bazar which is valued at Tk 200 crore. If this slides down to erosion nothing will be left of the steamer ghat, launch terminal and railway station which are adjacent to it.

NO one can question the growing concern in the country about the over-all quality of the service rendered by the administration. Wide-spread practice of graft and kick-back, inefficiency, inordinate delay in disposing of official business and lack of motivation and discipline in the services seem to have eroded the respect and trust of the ordinary men and women. Now the BNP has added the additional dimension of ruling party's interests as a major factor in the administration. Loyalty to the ruling party brings rewards. Not only does this breed corruption but even worse, it acts as a divisive influence on the bureaucracy. The plight of the Foreign Office is, however, a matter of special concern. This Ministry is a symbol of our sovereignty. During the last two decades, people have seen how the autocratic rulers used the Foreign Ministry to dump unwanted persons—both military and civilian—in order to consolidate their power. They could not care less about the impact of such callous action on the morals of the diplomats and the image and performance of the Foreign Office. On top of this, the recent record of the Ministry is rather dismal. Its success in the recent years have been so negligible as to be almost invisible. Naturally, people are not only worried about the country's image abroad but also about its capacity to protect the country's interests. The Bangalee expatriates are especially disturbed by the poor image because often they face insult and indignity in their country of residence because of the low esteem in which their home country is held. Against this background the initiative taken by the government to set up a special committee to reform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a welcome news.

**BNP's motto that party comes before the country seems to have blinded them of the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not the exclusive preserve of any political party and that a subject of national importance demanded a national committee with a representative character.**

I must, however, admit with regret that despite my strong and life-long interest in the Foreign Office, I was unable to welcome the committee. The special committee, I was disappointed to see, was made up entirely of BNP members. No one from the opposition was included in its membership. Mr. Mursheed Khan, prime minister's special envoy, was appointed chairman of the committee. Though I was initially critical about that decision, I realize now that there may be considerable advantage in having someone as the chairman of the committee who happens to enjoy the prime minister's confidence. Besides, though he has no diplomatic experience, he is known to be an established businessman and has had enough exposure to the diplomatic circles both here and abroad. A number of retired ambassadors were very wisely included in the committee. Again, though I hold these seasoned diplomats in high personal regard, one noted with regret that only those retired ambassadors who have joined the BNP have been appointed as members of the committee. BNP's motto that party comes before the country seem to have blinded them to the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not the exclusive preserve of any political party and that a subject of national importance demanded a national committee with a representative character. A successor government may not care for the recommendations of a committee whose membership was drawn exclusively from one political party. I should add here that Mr. Mursheed Khan did invite a number of opposition leaders for a discussion with the

committee. I should thank him for deviating from the BNP practice of treating the members of opposition parties not as political opponents but as enemies with evil designs on the nation's sovereignty.

I have not yet received the full report of the special committee and therefore it is neither possible nor perhaps even desirable to comment on the all the recommendations. However, I have seen the summary in the newspaper and the present article is based on my study of the summary. I must say at the outset that I was pleased with the main thrust of the report. Some of the recommendations seemed to me to be

responsibility given to the Foreign Ministry in this basic document is neither exclusive nor clear and precise. For example, while the Foreign Ministry is supposed to be responsible for conducting the country's foreign relations, other ministries have also been given the right to directly deal with foreign governments in their respective fields. In effect, therefore, we have not one but many foreign ministries. One can see the disruptive impact of this free-for-all kind of a situation which is most visible in our missions abroad. The economic minister or counsellor represents the ERD, the commercial counsellor represents the

we have in the Bangladesh missions abroad is almost absurd. I am very pleased to learn that the special committee has recommended that the rules on the allocation of work among different ministries be amended in order to put an end to the indiscipline, lack of coordination and central direction that vitiates the work of our missions abroad and weakens the conduct of our external relations. The committee has correctly recommended that the so-called wings must be abolished forthwith and the whole Embassy unified under the administrative and functional control of the head of the mission. There is no substitute for leadership and in a foreign country the ambassador must be the leader of the team and nothing should be done to diminish or compromise his authority. In any event, he should be the one to be accountable to the government for the success or failure of the mission in fulfilling the mandate or in meeting the target given to him. I also like the idea of placing all the officers from other ministries at the disposal of the Foreign Ministry before they take up their assignment abroad. This will put an end to the unfortunate habit of having greater loyalty to one's "own" ministry than to the country.

The External Publicity department has been kicked around like a football since our independence. Gen. Ershad, who cared more for his personal image than the country's image or interest, transferred it to the Information Ministry. But external publicity is an integral part of the foreign policy of the country and it must be synchronized with foreign policy. I was pleased to see

that the committee has recognized this need and has asked for this department's return to the Foreign Office.

Yet another inexplicable but destructive decision of Gen. Ershad was to shut down the Foreign Affairs Training Academy. This was set up in the late eighties and as Foreign Secretary I worked hard for it. I was happy to see that the special committee has recommended its revival. In my view there is no substitute for training to raise the operating efficiency of our diplomats to the requisite international standard.

I am sorry that I have to conclude this article on a rather unhappy note. I was disappointed to see that the special committee was silent on the induction of the killers of Bangabandhu into the Foreign Service. This unfortunate step has not only tarnished the moral image of the Foreign Office, it has also had a most deleterious effect on the morale of the foreign service officers. Most of these patriotic, well-educated and honest officers were obliged to work alongside these criminals whose very names evoke nothing but loathing and disgust. To add insult to injury, Gen. Zia forced the Ministry to accept a seniority system in favour of these killers which was patently unfair. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will not be able to regain its patriotic image as the standard bearer of the nation to the world outside unless these baggages are shed from its back. If the Ministry is to make a fresh start with dynamism and a sense of purpose, the indignities and inequities heaped on it by the autocratic military rulers must be erased. The special committee, by failing to address this question, showed its true character; it could not function as a national committee and rise above its loyalty to the BNP.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



both timely and sound and are based on a perceptive appreciation of the problems confronting the Ministry. For instance, the emphasis on economic diplomacy was most wise. For a country like ours, this shift in emphasis brooks no delay. Instead of being a mere side show, economic activities should take the central place in our plans for the operation of our missions abroad.

The committee was able to identify the root cause of many of the problems faced by the Foreign Office and the Embassies abroad. These can be traced to the document which lays down the distribution of subjects among different ministries. As the special committee noted, the

Commerce Ministry, the press attache represents the Information Ministry, the Educational Advisor (if there is one) represents the Education Ministry and they all set up their own "wings" in the Embassy who have their own staff, budget and transport. The so-called wings are virtually sub-embassies which function pretty much as they wish as long as they keep their "own" ministries happy. They do not have to inform the ambassador about their work, who is, in their eyes, a mere titular head of the Embassy. Perhaps this situation is unique in Bangladesh. Inter-ministerial jealousies or tensions are known to exist elsewhere as well but what

# Use of Bengali in Government Communications

**The wider issue that I would like to raise in connection with the use of Bengali in government offices is whether there is a need to turn Bangladesh officials into bilinguals proficient in both Bengali and English. In the closing years of this century, it has become abundantly clear that proficiency in English is not a luxury but a dire necessity.**

USE of Bengali is by now well-established in our government offices, and the progress made so far is substantial by any standard. However, certain practical problems remain and there are also some wider issues to be addressed. I would first of all like to delineate some of the more important practical problems and only then suggest solutions. A not-so-major constraint is that English versions of many laws and rules still remain the legal text. This situation needs to be corrected through suitable vetting by the Law Ministry so that there are no legal complications arising out of the use of the Bengali text. Also, all important government documents, legal or otherwise, should be identified and translated into Bengali on a priority basis.

Secondly, it is urgently felt that an English to Bengali dictionary of terms commonly used in government circles should be compiled and standardized. What we have in place is not at all adequate in either quantity or quality. The Establishment Ministry should be coordinating efforts in this direction, though the primary initiative should come from the respective Ministries and the organizations under them. Perhaps a small committee should be constituted in every Ministry for this purpose.

In the standardization exercise, the services of the Bangla Academy and other experts should be employed. In compiling such a dictionary, efforts should be made to incorporate as many synonyms of a term as possible, if necessary by liberally absorbing words from other languages and regional dialects so that our vocabulary is enriched and we can tackle many complex ideas and shades of meaning. The entire project of compiling, standardizing and publishing this dictionary should be completed by a deadline, and the responsibility for it should be borne by a carefully chosen Project Director.

Thirdly, the Bengali typewriter has to be made capable of greater speed through adequate improvements of the Munir Optima keyboard. Ferdous Qureshi's version is no doubt a step forward. Similarly, the Bengali word processor has made life a lot more easy but compared to its English counterpart, it is still lagging behind in speed. This is particularly felt when long reports have to be typed. Also, in the outlying areas, we only have the ordinary typewriter but not the word processor.

Training in Bengali typewriting and shorthand has also to be geared up in order to achieve greater speed and accuracy in this regard.

However, if the speed problem ultimately lies with the Bengali spelling, then this should also be looked into, despite raised eyebrows from the "traditionalists". After all, Bengali spelling has travelled a long way over thousands of years, and this process must go on, in response to the requirements

fruitful.

Fourthly, now that the general point has been taken and use of Bengali has been firmly established, the time has come to have a fresh look at the exemption issue more closely, irrespective of what is contained in the 1987 law on use of Bengali in government offices. There are government offices and organizations or sections of them who, for practical reasons, should transact business ordinarily in English. Then

constantly produced by government organizations? Is this silence in the law deliberate to allow flexibility? I would like to think so, and plead for exemptions accordingly.

Finally, should there not be any scope for exemption for those individuals, who for no fault of their own, could not have proper schooling in Bengali, for example, the children of Bangladeshi diplomats, international civil servants and expatriates serving abroad? Their number is growing, and it would be counterproductive to ignore their difficulties and thereby exclude them from rendering their expert services to their home country. Perhaps, they should be given exemptions on condition that they learn to communicate in Bengali within a specified period of time.

The wider issue that I would like to raise in connection with the use of Bengali in government offices is whether there is a need to turn Bangladesh officials into bilinguals proficient in both Bengali and English. In the closing years of this century, it has become abundantly clear that proficiency in English is not a luxury but a

dire necessity. In an interdependent world where not much aid is available, trade (including manpower export), technology transfer and private foreign investment have emerged as the mainstay of a developing nation struggling for economic survival and growth. In all these activities, English is indispensable as the *lingua franca*. One can find confirmation of this realization quite clearly in the reversal of policy regarding use of English in Japan, China, Korea and Malaysia in the recent years. Even in continental Europe and Latin America, the wind of change is blowing and the use of English is becoming more widespread. As such, we in Bangladesh can ignore English only at our peril.

However, before we suggest practical steps in turning our officials into bilinguals, which will not be an easy task at all, we should first arrive at a national consensus on the need for it through wide-ranging discussion and dialogue. Otherwise, good intentions may be interpreted perversely and a political storm may be raised to discredit well-intentioned policy makers through fuelling cheap sentiments. Perhaps the media and citizen's groups can take the initiative in arriving at the desirable consensus.

## Making Government Work

of time. Otherwise, Bengali may perhaps find itself in the company of dead languages like Latin and Sanskrit in the not-too-distant future. Obviously, the Bangla Academy, which is also a government organization, will be required to play a key role in this effort, but the general direction will have to come from the government. Perhaps consultation with relevant authorities in West Bengal may also prove to be

there may also be circumstances when offices and organizations ordinarily conducting their business in Bengali must rise to the occasion and temporarily switch over to English. The 1987 law only emphasizes compulsory use of Bengali in official correspondence and notes in files. But government business is not confined to these alone. What about various papers, reports and booklets that have to be

## To the Editor...

### English-medium institutions

Sir, We would like to point out that there are misconceptions that students in English Medium Institutions grow up in an alienated environment devoid of knowledge of our culture. They are snobbish in approach and suffer from an identity crisis. As a result, they are not properly equipped to take part in the nation building programme as proud and today patriotic citizens of Bangladesh.

This assumption is not correct as Bangla Language, cultural and religious studies are usually taught in English Medium school. The point here may be one of emphasis in certain sectors. Courses in Bangla, culture and religious studies can definitely be improved, updated and made more comprehensive as education itself is a constant endeavour for improvement and environment of our culture and our society.

The main reason for imparting education through the medium of English is that our students will be better equipped to catch up with the ever growing technological and scientific advances of

our age. It is our intention and desire that they will study, assimilate and utilise this knowledge for the benefit of their motherland and thus help bring Bangladesh into the fold of industrialised nations.

Apart from incurring loss of huge foreign exchange, this would definitely not be conducive towards all round development of the individual and hence, of the entire nation.

H K Khan  
Dhanmondi International School, Dhaka

### A fouled tender

Sir, There are two theories among political thinkers or among the people who remain busy in politics, regardless where they belong: opposition or the ruling party. One theory is that the ruling party must make enough money to finance the next general election to continue in power. This money, un-earned so to say, obviously has to come from irregular

sources/ways. Surely enough fund will be required to spend in the election for victory. The last setback in the efforts was in fertilizer and rice, that jolted the ruling party.

Second theory is that the ruling party will carefully avoid all questionable practices before the election since the voters are very conscious. As a very keen observer and conscious citizen, I have, however, noticed that the ruling party seems to have concluded that fund collection for the election and before the election, is far more desirable than being without it. Every collection of fund, however, means plundering people's money and rendering them poorer. This is a recent example, regarding import of 200,000 MT wheat from the USA.

According to the tender published in the newspaper on 20/7/95, import will be from the following listed sources — Australia, Canada, EC, USA (under EEP). The tender was opened as scheduled on 31.7.95. There were 10 bidders, three of whom were found to be technically disqualified. The remaining seven bidders offered import from USA, and therefore,

their quotations were under EEP. Through its Fax dt. 3/8/95, addressed to all the seven bidders, the Food Ministry, Govt. of Bangladesh, asked them to submit counter-bid to USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) at USD216.00 per MT C&F Chittagong and Mongla for 200,000 MT Wheat. The Ministry asked for acceptance alongwith approval of USDA by 2200 hrs. BST Aug 4/95. Based of this, several bidders made offer but it was learnt that USDA has withdrawn their subsidy.

Then the Ministry of Food, GOB completely stopped communication with the bidders in general. Suddenly on 8/8/95 a party was awarded the business at USD213.39, in a very irregular way, since there were offers far below than this, like USD210.69 and 209.50. Neutral enquiry will reveal that Bangladesh has lost nearly 3.20 crore Taka because of this.

It is a common sense view that the tender for 200,000 MT under EEP should have been replaced by a fresh tender soon after the subsidy by USDA was withdrawn. It is more so because Food Ministry did not communicate with the bidders after

EEP became in operative, rendering the whole tender completely invalid.

A Ahad  
Jikatola, Dhaka

### Miss Bangladesh

Sir, I am deeply puzzled and upset by a news item in your esteemed daily on the resolution taken by the Standing Committee on Cultural Affairs on the recently held contest to select Miss Bangladesh. It is puzzling because the minister who presided over the meeting was a woman. The beauty contest is neither against our culture nor it is against the respect and dignity of women. Miss Bangladesh contest bestows women to exercise their right in a modern society without, in any way, losing dignity.

Secondly, Miss Bangladesh will act as an ambassador of Bangladesh abroad and make the country known to the millions all over the world. Every patriotic Bangladeshi ought to feel a pride in that. Even when a Bengali girl from India became the Miss Universe last year it was a matter of rejoice for us because we share the same language and culture with her.

Thirdly, the contest which

was held in Dhaka did in no way cross the border of decency. Modern dresses and fashions all over the world are changing so fast and are coming so close to each other that it would be naive to identify something as not conforming to our culture which is going through continuous transformation as we move into the 21st century.

It would be appropriate for the Standing Committee on Culture to say sorry to the nation for condemning the Miss Bangladesh contest held in Dhaka. It is rather a pity that it did not take place before. The people of Bangladesh did not authorise the Committee to take such an atrocious decision.

We want Bangladesh to be known to the world as a prosperous and modern country where all religions and thoughts will find happy abode. Let us not forget that the people of Bengal were the ones who showed the path of modernism in British India. We cannot be dragged back to the Middle Ages by a few who believe very little in the true Bengali spirit of intellectual, cultural and religious tolerance.

Kausalya  
Dhaka University, Dhaka