

Cost of the Stalemate

There is more to governance than just being legal about it. And at the same time, there is more to toppling a duly elected government than boycotting and resigning from the Parliament and being able to force people to desist from doing their daily work. What is missing from our politics of today is a vision of tomorrow.

This is what the politics has been so far. Can it be changed significantly in the immediate future so that we can see some light at the end of this damning political tunnel? As hope springs eternally in the hearts of men, needless to say, it does in ours, and we hope that some moves will be forthcoming from either or both sides that will break the stalemate.

The deteriorating flood situation gives us a God-sent respite. It was sensible of BNP to postpone its so-called grand rally, and for the opposition to shorten its strike from 48 to 32 hours. Obviously, both sides realise the devastating impact of the floods on the economy, and especially on the food situation, and have, therefore, moderated their political programmes.

Well, it may not be as dramatic; but the impact of the 18-month-old political crisis on the economy has been just as devastating, especially in the area of attracting foreign investment. Compared with the two similar claimants to foreign investment — Vietnam and Myanmar — our performance has been most disappointing. Myanmar, whose international isolation was near-total just the other day, has had more than US \$ 2 billion in FDI already. As far as we are concerned, the reasons of our failure to attract FDI have been two: (a) misgovernance and the inability to create a genuinely enabling environment; and b) political uncertainty.

These two factors together have effectively shut the door for FDI, and the prospect of our rapid economic growth. The only way to change this scene is a dramatic solution of our political crisis. All sections of people are calling for a renewal of dialogue between the two sides. Monday's call by the business community is the latest of such efforts.

We urge our political leaders that, keeping the impact of the political stalemate on our economy in mind, they should take more flexible positions so that the crisis may be solved. There are several suggestions in circulation, including the one we put forward yesterday. All parties should take a serious look at them all.

Business Unusual

A damning evidence of public examinations being put on sale — perhaps, on auction, given their near-derelect condition — has come to light. One by one, the closets of sanctity and purity are getting vitiated by the intrusion of poisonous outside air.

As many as 15000 candidates were sought to be fakely registered for the last SSC examinations by school authorities under the jurisdiction of the Jessore Board. From amongst the headmasters of 383 schools, said to be involved in this massive fraud, those of 83 have already had their government grants discontinued. A similar action is underway against the remainder 300 schools.

In other words, the fate of these schools hangs in a precarious balance. Until the managing committees of the schools, now under instructions of the Board, to proceed against the heads of the institutions clear or replace them they will not be eligible for the government grant. And who knows, office-bearers of some managing committees may not themselves be above Board. So, the schools face an imminent closure.

This is exactly where one tends to ask a very pertinent question: why stop the grants, even if temporarily, to jeopardise high school teaching in certain areas when it is not the institutions but the people who run these — and can also be clearly spotted — that should be punished?

This is over-reaction betraying an effort to make up for the original sin which is that the defrauding was in collusion with some Board employees. Seven of them have been put under suspension including two as high ranking as Deputy Controller of Examinations and Deputy Inspector of Schools.

The high-powered investigation ordered into the scandal should draw the chestnut out of the fire — the fire-place obviously jutting at a corner of the Board building.

France's Good Star

The French nuclear obscurity is not a total surprise. Have the passionately crusading environmentalists cared to see that the top world powers are hardly as strident against the French nuclear testing as the non-nuclear states have been?

France's grandiose project has a tinge of the Gaullist era on it. However, this is not quite as gloriously esoteric or colourful as that. Her scientific explanations to go ahead with the tests bulldozing world public opinion need to be taken seriously; not from the wrong end of the stick though. The emphasis is on the 'safety and reliability' of the arsenal. With high kiloton atom bombs, one must not deceive oneself, the distinction between defensive anxieties and offensive accidents is practically blurred.

France is coming unfazed out of the nuclear testing primarily because the other western powers have no weighty reason to pin France down on the question. In fact, the applied nuclear philosophy gave her a handle for the bravado.

The supreme irony of our times will be a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 when the world is already saturated with nuclear warheads.

Second White House Ceremony on Peace Agreement

Both sides and particularly the Israeli leadership should try to understand why terrorism is taking place — why young men and women are sacrificing their lives by suicide bombs? Is not life precious to any of them? Undoubtedly it is, but their homeland is even more precious — they must regain it

THE children of the same cradle finally decided to live side by side as neighbours in the same land of Palestine that now stands effectually partitioned. Israel very reluctantly gives up the idea of Greater Israel encompassing entire land of Palestine and Palestinians decide to drop from the PLO Charter the clause that calls for destruction of Israel. This is basically what comes out of the interim agreement signed in the White House on September 28, 1995 — exactly two years and two weeks after the first agreement signed in the White House south lawn. Though the signing ceremony at the White House was delayed by about 40 minutes due to last-minute hitch on the exact date on which Israeli security forces should start withdrawing, the overall atmosphere appeared more cordial than the one observed in the first signing ceremony two years ago. President Clinton led the guest delegation with all elegance and politeness to the ceremony at the eastern wing of the White House and looked immensely pleased over the achievements in which his and his country's contribution was enormous. Arafat was generally joyful though Rabin by nature appeared reserved but his handshake this time with Arafat seemed somewhat cordial. After the signatures of Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat signed the agreement. President Clinton happily helped Chairman Arafat with the pen — later he himself signed the historic document as the principal witness.

The interim agreement of 460 pages emerged after a slow, painful and protracted negotiations. Indeed, Arafat stormed out of one such negotiations apparently on an issue related to the security control of Hebron; Israelis to continue to protect the settlers. During the final week, the negotiators spent about 80 hours in wrapping up the document. Hebron was the last obstacle. In Hebron 450 Jewish settlers live among 120,000 Palestinians. This agreement is likely to have a different weight in the eyes of the international community as practically every country or groups of countries which matter in the present-day world and has interest in Middle East were represented and witnessed the interim agreement. This agreement firmly establishes a 'Palestinian Interim Self-Govt. Authority' with its Chief Executive — the Chairman, an elected legislature, own security force and a territory to be governed by this authority.

Interestingly, this interim agreement 'describes a government with powers to tax its residents, zone land, regulate commerce, control radio and television broadcasts, create courts and enforce their judgements, licence banks, issue passports, maintain foreign currency reserves and enter into limited international agreements.' These are practically the powers that a sovereign state enjoys.

Prime Minister Rabin, however, later said, 'Now I am opposed' to a state. 'I stress the word 'now', for domestic political reasons he opposes now the idea of a Palestinian state, but it is a fact that Rabin knowingly signed two documents at the White House that laid the blue print of a Palestinian state. Undoubtedly, it would take some years but certainly not another 25 or 50 years that he mentioned in his statement. Rabin slowly gave in to the US pressure which it applied rightly and had full international support.

Rabin hardly had any choice. — US pressure.

Intefada, suicide bombs and finally PLO's determination to join the 'peace of the braves' — all led Rabin and Peres to go down the road — the road to peace. While initialising the agreement at Taba, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres who spearheaded the peace process said — it is a historic choice, a free choice — an extended hand to the future — an extended hand to our neighbour Rabin himself said. 'We want you (Palestinians) as a good neighbour'. Once Rabin and Peres termed Palestinians as 'neighbour' they see them as a separate entity and not lumped with another people. Thus, Shimon Peres' later

vigorously persuaded The US has to keep up its pressure on Israel so that it implements the agreement totally and within the stipulated time. Because the enemies of peace on both sides are extremely active. They have to be fought back — fought back not by gun but by taking adequate measures that will largely meet their concerns. For decades, PLO was considered by Israel as a terrorist organisation. That paranoia has effectively been erased through regular contacts and mutual understanding. The very trend of the negotiations in Oslo down to northern Israel in 1994, then to a hotel on Dead Sea and

sacrificing their lives by suicide bombs? Is not life precious to any of them? Undoubtedly it is but their homeland is even more precious — they must regain it. Thus the whole thing boils down to one thing — the occupation of their homeland must be vacated and the Israelis must go back to their part of the land — within internationally recognised borders. Then the cry for destruction of Israel will disappear — there would probably be no more suicide bombs.

However, security is a legitimate concern for Israel. This has been duly recognised by the PLO, but their concept on security was somewhat different which was in turn understood by Israeli negotiators. Israeli negotiator Mr Savir said, 'Everything that was security for us was dignity for them'. But at political level the fear and suspicion continues to prevail. Even on the day the agreement was signed in Washington, which should have been a celebration day, the occupied territories were closed and all Palestinian workers were barred from entering into Israel. One understands that Hamas could go for some terrorist attacks which they could do anyway and anytime and for that there was no justification to impose total closure on the occupied territories. What was needed was special security precaution and extra checking and not total ban on the Palestinians.

continue to protect 450 settlers who refuse to move out of the land they call 'Biblical land - Judea and Samaria' and have been resorting to violence and unruly demonstrations against the peace agreement. The rural areas of West Bank will be policed jointly by Israeli and Palestinian security forces.

The agreement also stipulates internationally monitored election to the Palestinian Council — the Palestinian legislature. The election will take place only after the withdrawal of Israeli forces. Palestinian prisoners now in Israeli jail should be released in three phases. The first phase release of about 1,000 prisoners was to be done immediately after the signature of the agreement. This has not taken place. Israel said it would take about a week. Unfortunately the agreement they sign says something and they do something else — this is ingrained in the character of the Israelis.

The most important part of the peace process — the negotiations on the 'final status' of the occupied territories including Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees, etc — would start by May 1996. The period between now and May '96 is extremely crucial for both Israel and PLO. Utmost efforts must be made by both sides to create proper 'Confidence' not only between Israeli and Palestinian authorities but also between the two people. Ultimately the people on both sides will have to fully support the peace process to achieve real peace in the area. The comprehensive peace in the Middle East is however still long way off. Much would depend on how Israel deals with Syria. Nothing less than complete withdrawal from Golan Heights — may be in stages over a shorter period — will satisfy Hafez-Al-Assad. The US pressure on Israel must continue and this is the only thing that works on Israel. As the way things are moving at least limited peace seems to be around the corner. President Clinton's personal initiative is extremely important at this final and crucial stage of the peace process. He too needs peace in the Middle-East, an achievement that would brighten his election prospect in 1996.



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

statement that transfer of West Bank to Palestine self-rule would most likely lead to a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation and not a Palestinian state, also seems directed to domestic consumption. However, the road to statehood is really rocky and all would depend on how the interim agreement is implemented and whether both sides can really build up the 'confidence' that is needed to remove the century old hatred and suspicion against each other.

However, the agreement is an important step toward peace in the Middle East. President Clinton looked optimistic. He said, 'The message to the world is that the people of the Middle East are coming together. They are moving towards peace.' Undoubtedly, this momentum has to be kept alive and

thereafter to Eilat on Red Sea and finally in Taba in Egypt and the relationship that developed between the negotiating teams on both sides were remarkable. It was the total understanding between two teams through gradual removal of suspicion and hatred that led to the interim agreement that ceded land — the Israelis call Judea and Samaria — to the Palestinian. This was not easy. Today Israel and PLO stand on one platform to fight terrorism and achieve peace. Progress appears considerable. Rabin himself acknowledged this when he said, there was 'remarkable progress with tranquillity, stability and peace in region.'

Both sides and particularly the Israeli leadership should try to understand why terrorism is taking place — why young men and women are

Minnows in the Gallows

Pinch of Salt

by Chintito

PEOPLE'S power is an oft-used cheap slogan that politicians employ whenever they have managed to ensure that the people have no more power. It is not unusual for the powers that be to misuse the power bestowed on them; by their own admission, by the people. Titanic projects are on the table, astronomical sums of money are at stake, political high-ups and bureaucratic supremos are involved. The unsuspecting minnows may end up in the gallows but the really big fishes remain elusive forever.

And, what are we, the power-base of the political system, doing? Criticising, of course! While sipping hot cups of tea, munching paan or picking our respective noses, we spare no one; the Presidents, the Prime Ministers, the Leaders of the Opposition, the Secretaries, down to Chairmen. But, have we ever pondered for a moment that, given the same elevated position in politics or bureaucracy, what would be our own demeanour? Could I be enticed into taking a million dollar bribe? Would I also be lured into say, a Biman aeroplane purchase scandal? Or, drawn into fraudulent dealings regarding a building of the size and status of Janata Tower? Would I be charmed by my party-men to allow them to reap rich harvests via what they alleged as 'fertiliser corruption'? Would I not turn a blind eye when

so-called student's of the size of established businessmen, tote guns at each other as a pretext of protecting national sovereignty?

I am no psychiatrist. But, chances are that, barring exceptions, a good number from amongst us powerless people could be lured and drawn into such 'filthy and immoral' occupations. Most of us have the potentiality to become absolutely corrupt with the very first opportunity. No wonder then, that many of us who have had a taste of power, may be, are, up to their neck in corruption.

This inference may appear short-circuited until one delves into the matter. Every individual has been blessed with a certain measure of power, some inborn, some acquired, some earned and some thrust on us. It is up to us how we use (or misuse) that power.

A child has the power to cry and so he does, most often at the dead of night. A toddler has the power to break a vase and so he does, with a glee plastered on his face. A teenager has the power to play truant at school and so he does, often unreminded by his parents. The

innocence stops here. We all have some power, limited though it may be. A rickshawpuller has the power to take his rickshaw over the traffic island, and that's what he does. A driver has the power to violate the red light at the intersection and that's what he will do. A teacher can come late to his class and sometimes never at all, and so he takes advantage as he pleases. An officer can hold a file, and he holds on to it. The police constable has the power to shower unsavoury words on the poor rickshawpuller and so who's stopping him? The shopkeeper has the power to increase the price of an item without any qualms, the doctor has the power to ask a patient to visit a particular diagnostic lab, the engineer has the power to use less cement and lesser reinforcement, the ex-Army officer has the power to become a corporation chairman without any prior experience, the garments factory owner has the power to sell imported cloth; we are all so very powerful.

What would the rickshawpuller do if he became a garments owner? Sell more cloth in the (black) market. What would the teacher do if he ever became an MP? Bank parliament, may be. Or, instruct his disciples to come to him 'privately' as everything cannot be discussed in the House. What would the doctor do if he was responsible for buying an aeroplane? Instruct his ministry to buy it from a particular company. What would the engineer do if he became a minister? One is afraid, suck the national exchequer of its materials.

If we can misuse the minimal power vested on us, can we really blame the real powers? Some may consider breaking the law in our day-to-day affair or shrugging our responsibilities as small sins. But the fact is that we don't have the power to commit bigger sins. I am committing sins at my level and they (the powers that be) at theirs. Are we not both sinners? I couldn't buy a plane, a solimuddi could not build a tower, a rohmuddi could not fertilise his bank account with sacks of urea. We are each misusing the little power that we have.

If I cannot comply a simple traffic signal, if I cannot abide by simple norms and rules of the society, what assurance is there that, given bigger opportunities, we shall not commit bigger sins?

What would Chintito do if he ever ascended to the citadel of power? Perhaps stop writing Pinch of Salt. There would be always be someone else to write against him.

To the Editor...

English at SSC level

Sir, Mr. Asadullah Khan in his article 'Decline in the Teaching and Learning of English Language. How can this be arrested?' published in your esteemed daily on 26-8-95, did a great job informing us the trash heaped up in the English text book for the SSC classes in Bangladesh. We wonder how long this carelessness and irresponsibility of the people in charge of preparing textbooks for our children shall continue with such devastating consequences on the budding young generation who are so much keen to learn something that helps them to prepare for the vast life ahead. It hardly needs to be emphasized that model essays and poetry pieces prescribed for studies in any text book inspire the students to a large extent in achieving the objective in life and in maintaining a moral fabric badly needed at a time when the value system is fast eroding.

Looking back to the good old days when we had studied in the Matriculation Class, we saw at that time in

1950-55, English text book that we had read contained prose pieces like Hazrat Muhammad (SM) the Prophet, From Sermon on the Mount, Character, How Mush Land does a Man Require etc and poetry pieces such as 'The Solitary Reaper', 'Ode to Skylark', 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', 'The Bridge of Sighs', which are pieces not of ephemeral values. Now the question that we may put straight to our planners of education is: Why and how these standard pieces, deemed to be gems in English literature at any time, have been dropped from the English text book. These pieces transmit in the young heart a message that are badly needed now, more than every.

The other pitfall that Mr. Khan has pointed out is that the teaching capability of teachers in English language has shown fast decline. Studies would reveal that not even 5% of our students in recent times can put their thoughts and ideas correctly in English. How such a pathetic situation could come

about? The nation is already paying a heavy price for this appalling deterioration in the standard of teaching and learning English language. So long we were putting the blame on our students almost without assessing the entire gamut of the problem. The nation now learns with shock that our planners of education must also share the blame squarely for this abominable downward trend in the quality of education. But the question is how they are answerable to the nation? Manzur Murshed, Motijheel Colony, Dhaka.

Band Music

Sir, In the night of September 24, the Bangladesh Television telecast an exclusive conversation-cum-musical programme which was participated by noted artists of the country. In this programme, the compare had cross-examined the band-group artists and raised criticisms against the band music. In my opinion, Band Groups have introduced a new dimension in our traditional music culture and we

should not discourage artists associated with band music. Of course, I think, all the band group members should also learn about the heritage of our rich country and also the classical music.

Meanwhile, the programme was very entertaining. It was very charming to listen Kalim Sharafi and Nilufar Yasmin and others singing band songs. M Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute.

Stripping in Public

Sir, Since when the political party that professes to be non-secular has taken liking for and supporting stripping the people in public by the pickets. Indeed an abominable and loathsome offence. Where their ideologies have disappeared into? They do not even condemn it. A Devout Dhaka.

OPINION

Untying the Gordian Knot

Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

If things proceeded normally the Parliament would have been functioning today and the next general elections would be held in March 1996. But, in this country normalcy seems to be much too much to ask for. Hence, whenever it seems that we have got our act together, things somehow go haywire. Opportunities came in 1971 and 1991 but on both occasions the nation could not take advantage of the enthusiasm and opportunities that could have been marshalled into a force toward building the nation in such a way that all citizens could take their rightful place and play their proper roles.

All agree that the 1991 parliamentary elections were fair. Indeed, the present government did also hold elections afterwards, which were considered fair by most — for example, mayoral elections. But, unfortunately the whole edifice came unstuck in Magura. Hence, the demand for a temporary national governance other than the party in power, charged with the responsibility of holding the next parliamentary elections. By the same token, it cannot be led by anybody who belongs to any other party or, indeed, who represents the views and interests of any particular groups or powers within the country or outside.

In 1991, I wrote an article giving my views on the imperatives of nation building in this country, when, perhaps, my perceptions were rather euphoric about the continued progress of the democratic system. A few months ago, when I wrote the Dr M N Huda memorial lecture for the Bangladesh Economic Association, the environment was completely different and I had to write that all political parties must rise above narrow party interests and place the national interest in the forefront aimed at preserving the democratic process. First of all, unfortunately, the confrontational politics is even sharper now than at that time. This cannot be good for the country, although all participants in the confrontation are saying that what they are doing or want to do is for the sole

purpose of protecting the socio-economic and political rights of the people. But, people are suffering. And it is now well known from such examples as those of Somalia, Angola, Rwanda and Liberia that confrontation can be severely damaging to the nation; it may even lead to the disintegration of the nation state.

Under the circumstances, it is the historic responsibility of all political parties, particularly the BNP and the Awami League, to rise to the occasion and find a solution to the impasse. It is being suggested by many that the solution lies in a caretaker government for which, of course, there is no provision in the Constitution. But the Constitution, as I understand, is to serve the interests of the people and, if it is in the national interest, the Constitution can and should be amended. The question then arises: is there anybody non-partisan in Bangladesh who may be charged with the responsibility of holding the elections as head of a caretaker or interim government. I believe it is extremely difficult, even impossible to find such a person. Anybody who is concerned with national progress must have political views. But there are some who are more political and there are others who are less. There are those who are political activists and those who are not. Then there are those who represent group interests, national or international, although they are apparently politically non-active. Considering all these, it would seem clear that if there is to be a caretaker/interim government the only person in the country who can fit the bill is the Chief Justice of the country — if not for anything else for his official position. One other person who may be considered is the person who proved his non-partisanship. He did an enormous service to the nation as Acting President in 1991. I don't know if Justice Shahabuddin will agree to play a similar role again, but if he is the political parties may turn to him.