

Violence and Lawlessness: Time to Call a Halt

The ID Card Assurance

Dispelling all doubts and confusions, the Election Commission has made it clear that voters will get identity cards by December 16.

The EC's elaborate preparations include the opening of 86,000 camps for providing the whole electorate with ID cards.

The presence of such a huge number of people is not easily ensured even at pre-terminated venues. Some are likely to miss the chance that has come for the first time in the country.

Earlier, complaints were heard about people failing to register themselves as voters. Whatever lacunae remain in the voters' list can and must still be removed with the benefit of handling the matter at the locality or community level.

There should be no scope for manipulation and any sloppy performance by the camp operators since the basic papers are with them and what they have to essentially guard against is sneaking mismatches between the particulars of voters and their photographs.

In their own interest, all our political parties should make it a point to extend their wholehearted cooperation to the EC in its onerous task of providing every single voter of the country with an identity card — his or her passport to so many things.

Inflation Control

The increases in the bank and deposit rates are evidently designed to bring monetary stabilisation and credit discipline in the economy.

The cost of funds goes further up. Lending rates having increased, not only is the banking system discouraged to borrow from the central bank, the private sector is also dampened not to take loans from the scheduled banks on the previous scale.

It is only logical for Bangladesh Bank to call a halt to credit expansion in a bid to contain inflationary pressure on the economy. Certainly the central bank should not be pushed to a point where it has to mint money without productivity or supply back-ups.

So, the containment of the inflationary pressure had better begin in the state sector. Yes, the private sector has to account for poor loan recoveries in certain categories of credit distribution. Even there too, one needs to be reassured that loans were not given on political or other uneconomic considerations.

Hence, for all practical purposes, the answer to inflationary pressure should have lain not in a credit squeeze but in the present public expenditure pattern itself. And if the central bank has any self-doubts that it would be difficult to stem the tide of overspending across the board in an election year, then what it should perhaps do is to advise the government on the wisdom of expenditure control and make itself heard on the overall question of putting limits on election-related expenses.

It makes robust economic sense that we try and control prices, especially against the back-drop of floods, to hold the inflation rate down instead of applying a contractionary measure, far less continuing with it well into the future.

A Flicker of Hope

The US-mediated ceasefire in Bosnia-Herzegovina has some ifs and but's about it; but all the same it represents a break-through in more senses than one. First of all, hardly has there been a three-party agreement on ceasefire and none at all for the whole country since the conflict, regarded as the bloodiest in Europe since the last Great War, began more than three years ago.

Furthermore, the cessation of hostilities will be followed by proximity talks among the governments of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia in Washington around October 25 and an international conference in Paris on a date to be settled later on.

The whole programme will be on course after the ceasefire takes effect from October 10, contingent upon a full restoration of gas and electrical supplies to the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. Basically though, it is the complete silencing of the gun that will matter most during the run-up to the talks.

US President Bill Clinton's timely intercession and his mediator Richard Holbrooke's shuttle diplomacy has brought the contending parties closer to each other. A list of common agenda has also emerged for the upcoming talks. Russia may be persuaded at this crucial stage to play a positive role. We suggest that a complement of OIC participation be considered for the upcoming international conference in Paris without making it into an exclusive affair of the five-nation contact group.

I was startled but also pleased to read a report in the weekly newspapers published from Habiganj — the district my family comes from. The local merchants, having reached the end of their tether, stood up to the terrorists who have been fleecing them mercilessly.

What are the underlying causes for such a situation? Who are these mastaans? How could they carry on such extortions month after month with impunity? Where was the district's police force? Sociologists and criminologists will no doubt eventually find the correct answers to these questions but that may be too late.

CONCEPTUALLY, the word 'hartal' or 'bandh' or strike originate from trade-unionism, related to a particular trade or industrial concern. Of course, the phrase 'general strike' has a larger or wider spectrum, sometimes covering an entire region or nation.

In these days, however, the word hartal or bandh has taken a political colour. But there is no doubt that originally, 'hartal' or 'bandh' in the sense of 'darmaghat' was resorted to by trade unionists for a collective bargaining purpose. But to use this practice as a political weapon is more common in our country than anywhere else in the world.

To the Editor...

Next election

Sir, All responsible persons in the politics of Bangladesh whatever party he or she might belong to, must learn to act with grace, dignity and moderation. There are, however, not too many persons in any political party who possess these qualities.

I am glad that Lord Weatherill visited Bangladesh at this critical political juncture. I have seen him conducting his business at the House of Commons with great political skill and impartiality.

In the UK the Cabinet, through an informal arrangement, virtually ceases to work for a period before the election, although its members do not go out of office, if

The nation must call a halt to the slide to lawlessness. All our effort to build democracy and develop the economy will be in vain if the most basic task of a state, namely, maintenance of law and order, is not properly done. All the political parties, social and cultural organisations and local bodies must join in the effort.

but here there is a catch. While the temptation to make quick buck by extortion seems to be present in every student group, it is the protection given by the ruling party to its student wing which makes all the difference in giving it a special advantage.

It is spreading rapidly like cancer because the police protection to the Chhatra Dal armed cadres gives them a free run on the businessmen. Perhaps these young men are themselves surprised that such large sums can be collected so easily and virtually at no risk.

Let me illustrate the point by referring to a press report from Chittagong about a day-long armed battle between two Chhatra Dal factions. At about 9 am members of one faction armed with hand guns, sawed off rifles, bombs etc took up position in the Bayajid Bostami area, while the rival group, equipped with equally deadly weapons, assembled in the Sher Shah colony area.

man was killed while trying to flee the battle front. The sharing of the spoils of toll collection in different areas of the city was the cause of the fight. As usual the police arrived late. They did make some arrests but they did not or could not stop the fighting.

In a round table discussion recently organized by The Daily Star on 'Priority Agenda

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



for 1996: Options and Challenges', the participants were asked by the moderator to identify the most serious and pressing problem which impede economic growth.

The World Bank resident mission chief also gave the same answer. One often hears lamentations by ministers that although the macro-economic conditions are so favourable, they don't understand why the rate of investment is still so low. For this

the Finance Minister is blaming, by turn, the opposition, government officials, bankers, workers and the businessmen. In his eagerness to find scapegoats, he refuses to look at the real cause of the economy's malaise.

Why should any one set up an industry when he knows for certain that toll collection will begin from day one? Not only shopkeepers who have learned to live with toll payments as a part of the taxation system, any businessman with an office is vulnerable to threats and intimidation.

The director of a clinic, in my presence, was asked over the phone to contribute a large 'donation' for celebrating some national event. I could see the anguish on the director's face when he had to agree to make the 'voluntary' contribution.

Hartal as a Political Weapon: Who is the Target?

by T Hussain

Hartal is a Bengali word, of which the dictionary meaning is dharmaghat (riot) or more explicitly, 'বিক্রম-প্রকাশ' (Sangsad Bangla Abhidhan, First Bangladesh edition, 1989). The synonymous word 'ব' also means the same thing i.e. 'বর্ষা, হুজু'.

and Yahya Khan and more recently of Ershad. Democracy was absent and people had no legitimate platform to express their grievances, if any. It was natural that an autocratic regime would have to be faced through demonstrations and general strike or nationwide hartal.

Obviously, the target of such hartals are now the political opponents in power. In

a democratic system, political adversaries are faced in the Parliament, and there are a hundred and one ways of routing them within the house. If this process alone does not serve the purpose, public meetings are there to address the people or voters directly and expose the activities of the ruling party as viewed by the other side.

Excesses of the extreme nature, some of which can be branded as acts of barbarism of the middle ages, did recently take place at the hands of political activists. There were three or four incidents of stripping innocent office-goers, much to the

not purely imaginary and anything but true. Shops are shut down to avoid looting attempts, cars and other vehicles are not brought out to escape serious damages to them. Very few people turn out in the streets, if they are not forced to out of fear of manhandling and falling in crossfire and in trouble areas.

So, in the last analysis, the real victims of a hartal and particularly, continuous (lagatar) hartal are the poor day-labourers, rickshaw-pullers, pushcartwallas, footpath hawkers and shopowners, low paid govt. employees and undoubtedly, the industrial enterprises, specially the export-oriented

shame of the nation as a whole. It is very unfortunate that these shameful acts were brushed off by political stalwarts of a pro-hartal party as 'expressions of wrath or anger', while outright condemnation should have been their proper attitude.

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ones. Even the parties who call the hartal suffer in image and popularity, while the really intended target (the political opponent) can afford to lie low and avoid any real harm. Thus, the actual beneficiaries are not the parties who give the hartal call, but their political adversaries, who reap the harvest by gaining sympathy and support of the directly affected people, who never believe in the spontaneity of any hartal called these days when the country is going through a democratic system.

OPINION

Our Decadence Has Never Been So Pronounced

by Kamol Siddiqi, BU

Congratulations to Mr Mahfuz Anam on his wonderful commentary in The Daily Star on September 20, 1995. It is indeed a shame that politicians, expected to steer the statecraft, have to be taught dos and don'ts (like errant school kids) by innocent voters.

Notwithstanding the courageous commentary by Mahfuz Anam, there is another angle of concern. Total decadence of a society has never been so pronounced as in last two decades. Erosion of virtues is ubiquitous and values drained down the loos. This is amply manifest in frequently used slogans of these-days that 'there is no last word in politics or politics makes strange bed-fellows' indicating total disregard to idealism of ideology and preference for convenience capture the throne.