

Rein in the Rhetoric, Please

Just about the time when there appeared to be a hint of a thaw in the frozen political situation, our leaders are shooting off comments, further complicating an already highly charged political situation. The recent statements of the Prime Minister, and of Sheikh Hasina, instead of nudging the solution forward, may have actually made the situation worse. In a recent meeting Begum Zia, referring to the opposition's sit-in programme in front of her house, remarked that instead of sitting outside, the opposition leader should come in and have a cup of tea. This, Sheikh Hasina said, amounted to trivializing the opposition movement, and making a mockery of it. Not stopping there, the AL chief said something to the effect that the BNP chief is afraid of a neutral caretaker government because she may be put behind bars when out of power, and went on to assure Begum Zia that she need not fear such an eventuality.

What sort of political rhetoric is all this? Are we going to cross all limits of courtesy, civility and propriety? And for whose benefit? Definitely not for the country's or for the people's. Sheikh Hasina is right when she said that Begum Zia was making light of a grave political situation. But was her statement of any help? How can she expect a political opponent to negotiate, in the face of such comments?

As a precondition for talks, an environment must be created which will bring the two sides together. The efforts by five leading citizens have at least kept a channel of communication open. But saying outrageous things about each other can complicate matters, and abort this effort before it really gets going.

It is a fundamental lesson of all negotiations that a softening process must precede the actual negotiations. During that time both sides undertake, what is called, confidence-building measures, which create the ground for actual negotiations on the substantive issues. It is imperative that we initiate that softening process. To start that, we must rein in the destructive and bitterness-raising rhetoric, which has been unleashed in the last few days.

Disposal of Garbage

Disposal of Dhaka City's mounting garbage is posing a serious challenge to the existing system. The Dhaka City Corporation's (DCC) manpower and logistical base are awfully inadequate. Add to this a significant portion of people's bad habit of throwing off waste materials anywhere but not into the dustbins proper, and you have the full magnitude of the problem.

The problem has to be addressed at both the ends. Yet, the DCC's part of the job calls for more investment and better management of the implements used for garbage disposal. First of all, the garbage collecting trucks must be increased in number and here the government has to make some investment. It is heartening to know that negotiations with a Japanese company for setting up an organic fertiliser plant — one that will use garbage collected from the city — are about to be finalised. This will certainly facilitate the privatisation of the service with the double benefit of better collection of garbage and its transformation into environmentally-friendly fertiliser.

However, safe disposal of garbage also calls for better management at the generating points. Apart from making a big investment, cheaper and innovative methods of collection should be introduced. In some areas, local people have introduced house-to-house trolley service for garbage collection. Such a service is very effective, convenient and, last but not least, provides some employment. The DCC can go for such localised measures to make its task easier. The emphasis should be on better coordination for an efficient management of the garbage problem.

Plot against Benazir

If the reports are correct, Pakistan has averted a military coup backed by fundamentalist groups. In a country that has long been troubled with military rule, the army is not likely to be averse to state power, especially when religious fundamentalists egg them on. It is a great relief that a plot against the elected government of Benazir Bhutto has been uncovered so early and nipped in the bud. The message, both for the fundamentalists and the disproportionately ambitious army officers, is clear.

It appears that the plotters chose quite an opportune moment to attempt a strike against Benazir. At a time when Karachi is burning and bleeding and a solution to the Mohajir problem is nowhere in sight, the fundamentalists may have had their reasons to incite a section of army officers sympathetic to radical religious ideas. Happenings in Algeria and Egypt may have given them encouragement.

What the conspirators, however, have forgotten is that the world at large abhors military rule. It is opposed to such regimes because they are a great stumbling-block in the way of democracy, free market economy etc. With no backers, the military must be content with the role they are supposed to play in elected governments. For Benazir, however, the imperative is to bring about a permanent solution to the Mohajir problem.

Politics is not Power Alone

by Abdul Hannan

At a time when the 25th anniversary of our hard earned independence is approaching, our leaders must engage in soul searching and ask hard questions if they are prepared to deliver the promises and live up to the expectation of the three million martyrs

THE Daily Star deserves our thanks for maintaining a sustained campaign through editorial comments, write-ups and interviews with academics, businessmen, political leaders and eminent persons of all shades of opinion and persuasion in an effort to break the continuing political impasse in the country. Reflecting the agonising concern of all sections of people in the society, it has carried a crusade of national reconciliation and rapprochement to bring about a thaw in the frightfully frozen political climate in the country, forecasting dark portents of uncertainty, instability and irreversible decline. Yet, by all indications, the voice of decency, reason and good sense is of no avail, stifled and stonewalled as it is, by stubborn and befuddled pride, and vanity, hatred, intolerance and animosity and a paralysis of will and intention bred of lethal mixture of naivete and conceits by the leaders of the contending parties.

The country has been dragged into 96 hours of national gridlock grinding to a halt normal life and activities.

It is incomprehensible that the nation should be caught in the grip of a state of euthanasia and self extinction. It may take years to make good the lost 96 hours. Yet the movement is not over an agenda, an issue, a pledge, or a manifesto to improve the quality of our lives emancipating from the vicious cycle of abysmal poverty, ignorance and ill health, from the morass of greed, envy and violence, crime, terror and insecurity and all pervasive corruption and sleaze. The end game is to hold on to power or to grab power? But power to what purpose? The welfare of the people and the good of the country is inconsequential in the pursuit. Yet, the leaders of the three major political parties know better than any body else that power is ephemeral, short-lived and illusive as all the three political parties have

had a taste and share of power at one time or another in the past. Our leaders must know that the real authority and legitimacy of power is derived from the endorsement of popular support through a democratic process.

At a time when the 25th anniversary of our hard earned independence is approaching, our leaders must engage in soul searching and ask hard questions if they are prepared to deliver the promises and live up to the expectation of the three million martyrs of our war of independence — in quest of a happy and prosperous life for the posterity. They owe it to the martyrs distant mirage. The history of last 25 years of our nation is a history of continuing betrayal and breach of contract with Bangladesh through, misgovernance by succeeding parties in power. People are tired and disillusioned.

The objectives of the political parties should not merely be to build a bridgehead to acquire power but to wield it to the benefit and wellbeing of the people. The moral imperative of the moment for the political leaders now is to eschew the path of confrontation, wrangling, recrimination and quarreling and squabbling politics; not give way to cynicism and despair but engage in dialogue, debate and discussion and go to the hustings to test the revalidation of popular verdict. If our history has offered us any lesson, there is no mistaking the belief that people do not err and their verdict will be remorselessly inflexible in future as it has always been in the past, our performance judged through acid test of honesty of purpose and sincerity of efforts. If we cannot stand the test, we will be consigned to history as relics of the past.

The objective of a political party is not merely to earn victory in election but to deserve its success, not just to get in to power but to boost its credentials as a party trusted to run the affairs of the country by furthering the opportunity to carry out radical programmes of change for the better. There is more to politics than strikes, sit-ins and anodyne speeches and slogans: A party in tune with the mood of the country, which develops key themes and policy objectives in details and holds up a vision of reform and renewal for the future in the field of jobs, education, health, housing, food, law and order, environment and economic prosperity of the country. The party of the 21st century will be a party which cares for the wellbeing of the people and shares their sufferings and aspirations. It will be a party which holds out the promise

of a new civic society, a new social order where every one has a stake to promote equality and social justice and a balancing of fairness and compassion with competition.

I am an optimist. There is honour in politics which is not power and ambition alone. The current political crisis or crises will have to be resolved through the collective genius of our leaders. The national psyche and our intelligence suffer a humiliation and affront when we seek outside intervention to solve our own problem. There is no dearth of our own local genius. And genius is a beauty which wins the heart of people. It would be appropriate to quote a message for the benefit of our political leaders from Oscar Wilde's book 'Picture of Dorian Grey' where he says, 'beauty is a form of genius — is higher indeed than genius, because it needs no explanation... it cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it.'

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See You Next Century

Pinch of Salt

by Chintito

If you approach a government official after 11 am on a working day, chances are he will say, 'It's almost the end of day, why don't you come tomorrow?'

If you seek him around Tuesdays, he is sure to respond with a 'end-of-the-week' beamer.

And, if you hover around him after August, the government servant (but your master) is likely to deter you with something like, 'The year is coming to an end. It's best that you come next year.'

Of course, they have been using the 'come next century' routine since the 1950's.

At times, the official will

make you feel like a jilted lover; the ultimate union being deferred and deferred and deferred.

All this has got many of us thinking: why don't we have a five-day week. Two days of holidays every week? Wow! Think of the long, long weekends.

There is scientific evidence that efficiency increases after some recreation. Officials will be able to do whatever amount of work they are doing now in the five days. Actually, they could do it in three days flat, but a four-day holiday per week would be embarrassing; and too good to be true.

Shutting off all offices will also be economically viable

from other points of view. Because nobody needs to go to the office, there will be saving on fuel and transportation costs. Because no one will be in the office, no one will be using the office phone to make long-distance telephone calls. There will be savings on electricity because all air-conditioners, fans and lights, lifts, etc will be shut. Think of all the tea we will save.

They will be unable to gossip, spread rumours or conspire against each other.

The nation could greatly benefit from this. There will be one more 'michhil-free' day, one more day without traffic jams.

Parents (there are many working mothers) will have more time to spend with their children and each other. I have a feeling that some couples at the moment are crossing each other under the threshold; their office timings are such that somebody's shift may follow someone else's. *Tomar holo shuru, amar holo shara.*

Frankly speaking, the two-day holiday per week has so many plus points that I wonder why nobody thought of it any earlier.

Among the poorer section of the society, there are many who live in Dhaka alone while their families are left behind in the villages. Children cut off for too long from their fathers are definitely not being given the best of childhood. Children so deprived could also be prone to psychorelated problems in their adult life. The two-day holidays would allow many fathers to go home during the long weekends to be greeted by their beaming kith and kin.

But, will the two-day weekly holiday stop our offi-

cial from saying 'come tomorrow', 'maybe next week', 'how about next month', 'actually next year would be perfect' and 'see you next century'? An uneducated guess is that officials will be officials. But, the economic and social advantages far outnumber the single disadvantage accruing from the whims of some of them.

So, how about it? If we start punching the air in demand of the two-day holiday, perhaps it will be granted tomorrow, or in the coming week, maybe next month, perhaps next year, hopefully in the next century. Because, those who will grant us this weekly holidays are also officers.

Inflation, Economic Reform and the Political Economy of India Today

Arun Ghosh writes from New Delhi

INFLATION, as every undergraduate student of economics knows, is tantamount to 'taxation of the poor', and therefore, recognised world-over as the worst form of taxation. To say that the government is short of resources, and therefore, to seek to finance development through inflation, is therefore tantamount to making only the poor pay for the cost of development.

Consider the facts: the government — and the media — keep proudly announcing that the rate of inflation is coming down. But the index chosen for the purpose is the Wholesale Price Index (WPI). For the common man, the proper index is that of the cost of living; and the Cost of Living Index (CLI) — for both urban and rural workers as published by the Labour Bureau — has increased (over the past year) at between 10.5 and 11.5 per cent.

One of the main objectives of 'economic reform' was the gradual attainment of macroeconomic balance in the economy. In fact, the IMF-World Bank insisted on the attainment of fiscal balance over a period of four to five years. That was in July 1991; and in August 1995 — after a period of four years — we are more or less where we were four years back. If the IMF-World Bank have watched bemusedly, it is because, over the years, we have surrendered all independence in the matter of economic policy-making, we have sold off the assets of public enterprises at undervalued prices, and we have allowed international finance capital to get a stranglehold on the throat of the Indian nation. 'Proven' reserves of oil and natural gas have been handed over to private foreign investors; the telecom services are to be parcelled out and handed over to multinational companies; and the story of foreign private investment in the power sector is too well known (because of the ENRON controversy) to need repetition.

To get back to the main theme, while the 'poor' are being taxed through rampant

inflation, the 'rich' are getting richer, 'evading' and avoiding all taxes. The capital gains tax has been drastically reduced particularly for foreign investors; — who pay a lower tax than Indian residents — and the wealth tax on financial assets has been totally abolished (quite apart from a significant reduction in the rate of the wealth tax). Excise taxes on items consumed by the rich and the elite have been drastically reduced, supposedly in the interest of encouraging production. Finally, black money remains rampant, and tax evaded wealth is openly flaunted by the rich, with nary a questioning eye from the authorities.

In brief, the 'economic reform' process has been used for aggrandisement by the rich of all benefits of external aid, all benefits of whatever growth has been achieved. Even the 'mid-term appraisal' of the Eight Five-Year Plan prepared by the Planning Commission — suppressed by a panic-stricken government — speaks of the increase in poverty, and the failure of the economic reform policy in terms of the total neglect of infrastructure development.

That the food stocks with the government are mounting — currently, they are 37 million tonnes despite some exports — even as he absorption of food by the people has been declining rapidly, speaks volumes. By all reports, incidence of TB is steadily increasing.

Such developments must, in the longer run, affect the political economy of the country in more ways than one. First, the impact on politics is there for all to see. The ruling party at the Centre is today a deeply divided house. The Left parties are all confused because of the collapse of the Soviet Union; their borrowed ideology is in a shambles. The 'Left of Centre' parties are wracked by factionalism, and are by and large clueless because they

have no clear vision or economic ideology. The only gainer in the process has been the party with a Rightist ideology, though even therein, there is a big divide between the 'nationalists'-cum-rigid disciplinarians and the snotsram petty bourgeois business community, whose only interest is to make money, as much of it and as quickly as possible.

There are clear indication that the next government at the Centre would have to be a coalition of groups and parties. That does not augur well either for stability or for growth, or even for an egalitarian system, because 'making a fast buck' has become the culture of the day, and those who know they may be in power only briefly are in a hurry to reap the benefits of the power they wield.

One of the dangers is that, in the process, even some of the desirable changes that have occurred over the last four years, may get reversed. Nothing is irreversibly except time; and with the lapse of time, the consequences of the deterioration in ethical, moral, economic standards may leave a deep imprint on the upcoming generations.

No matter what the persuasion or the political conviction of any observer, one cardinal fact would be accepted by all. Most of the confusion in politics arises from the steady, unrelenting inflation in the country, and the deep dissatisfaction of the people in general with the existing state of affairs.

Of course, inflation was imbedded in the policies which, in the name of 'liberalisation', gave away — through tax concessions for the rich — resources which were required for achieving macroeconomic stability with a sustained (and sustainable) growth. This, in turn went only to line the pockets of the wealthy, with 'cuts' to the

politicians. Macro stability was perhaps the most important recommendation of the IMF; and that has been a casualty, especially over the past two years. The wonderment of an outsider arises from the fact that the finance minister — who personally spearheaded all the economic policy changes — is a well-read and experienced economist who should have attached the highest priority to the attainment of macroeconomic stability. It is an ever greater wonder that he should have considered it appropriate to compensate a continuing trade deficit by an inflow of external capital (primarily of the short-term variety). And, to cap it all, the wonder of wonders is that the finance minister felt (and boldly announced) that the shortfalls in domestic savings would be made good by the inflow of external savings; that India can develop only through the inflow of foreign technology and external capital.

To brief points need to be emphasised. The finance minister neglected to note the fact that where domestic research had been promoted — in nuclear and space technology, in the exploration of oil, in the development of capacity for power generation equipment — India has succeeded, whereas in the sectors where private capital has been allowed free play, there has, in the past, been only repetitive import of second rate or even third rate technology under a highly protected regime. Secondly, innovation and entrepreneurial talent require not only freedom but also an expanding demand; and in a country where (as per the 1991 Census) there are 111 million cultivators and 85 million landless labourers out of a workforce of 286 million — i.e. around 68 per cent of the population still dependent primarily on farming and al-

lied activities — broad based rural development is of the essence for increasing demand which may in turn set in motion increased production activity. China, South Korea, Taiwan — all started with drastic land redistribution after the Second World War; that was a common feature of three countries following three widely divergent models of development, with success. The final wonderment, therefore, arises from the fact that finance minister —

who hails from a poor family in rural Punjab — yet has not realised that India's development must be based on all-round (all India based) rural development.

Alas, it is a little late in the day now, for 'The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on'. The politics, the political economy of the country is in disarray; and only two people can be held to be primarily responsible, the finance minister and the prime minister. For that is where the buck stops.

— Mandira
The writer is a former member of the Planning Commission of India.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Best-dressed Athlete

WHEN people ask me who is the best-dressed man in America, I tell them that there's really no contest.

It's Andre Agassi — the sharp-looking, always immaculately groomed tennis star.

I first noticed Agassi's love for fashion when I watched him play at the US Open. My eyes were drawn to his unerring taste for style by the beautiful gold earring he was wearing. It dangled delicately from his ear except when he was hitting the ball, and then it bounced around, causing it to sparkle in the sun.

The earring complemented the gorgeous tennis outfit that Andre had on. His tennis shirt was a classic cotton stripe that hung loosely down over a pair of black pants, which made his legs appear extremely sexy. His black socks and black tennis shoes set off the whole outfit in a glorious rainbow of colors.

Agassi's manager informed me that the tennis star insists on selecting his own clothes.

He's on the conservative side and is aware that many young people are watching to see what he wears. That's why he resorts to stripes and a waistband that almost falls down whenever he goes for an overhead shot.

"Are the outfits custom-designed for him, or does he buy his clothes off the rack?"

"Everything comes from England. He has his own tailor on Savile Row with all his measurements, and every time Agassi needs a striped polo shirt they cut one for him."

"Where do the ideas for his tennis outfits come from?"

Andre reads all the men's fashion magazines, and when he sees something that the Prince of Wales is wearing, he clips it out and sends it to London. He prefers clothes that don't require him to shave for four days. Sometimes he has second thoughts about an ensemble. For example, he was going to wear a double-breasted warm-up jacket to go with his striped shirt at Wimbledon, but his coach talked him out of it. He told him that the fans might think he was showing off.

"Does Andre have a foot fetish?"

"Well, let's say that he is very particular that his sneakers match the rest of his outfit. People judge your tennis by your shoes, and Agassi would rather put his money into sneakers than a new tennis racket."

In my opinion, Agassi is the best-dressed person in the game because he looks just as sharp off the court as on it. That's why he always uses the same barber from Parris Island boot camp. He is full of confidence, and everything he wears drapes elegantly over his frame like a Saudi Arabian tent. The minute I saw him with a kerchief on his head, I understood perfectly what Brooke Shields sees in him.

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To the Editor...

Make hay while the sun shines

Sir, It has been proved time and again that the opposition parties can paralyse the entire country inflicting huge national and individual losses. It is not necessary to elaborate the magnitude of these losses and the damages done to the image of our country in international forum.

The general people have

no say or control in such decision imposed upon them. It is foolish to see the success of hartal as 'verdict of people'. Again, it is also foolish to expect that the general people shall resist such call of strikes and hartal by risking their lives and property. We the general people have to surrender to such actions as meek on-looker.

It is useless to speak of law and constitution of the country. The situation defies all such limitations imposed

by constitutional law. There is no authority which can stop the opposition from their modus operandi. The government cannot go for those drastic actions in the name of law and order and opposition. In our country it is not the people but the parties concerned who should respect and follow the principles of democracy. Then comes the question of trust and understanding keeping national interest as the highest consideration.

But that is not to be.

If the government with its power to govern the country finds it as a 'fun' to be meek on-looker and follow the policy of 'wait and see', then the situation may go beyond its control. It will not be wise to wait for bursting point, rather, better it is to 'make hay while the sun shines'. General people are conscious and they will judge the leaders when they vote for them. *Vox Populi Dhaka.*