The Baily Star

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A Long Step Forward

In a turning-point address to the nation last evening, interspersed with a summation of her government's achievements during its stormy tenure. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia informed us all that she has advised the President to dissolve the fifth Jatiya Sangsad. This makes way for the General Election to be held by the Election Commission in accordance with the Constitution.

In response to the PM's recommendations, the President has dissolved the parliament and the Prime Minister has been asked to continue in a caretaking capacity in accord with a constitutional provision applicable under such circumstances.

In such a situation, we urge all concerned to behave responsibly and with extreme prudence. Basically, one of the major demands of the opposition has been met in that the parliament stands dissolved now. This should pave the way for a substantive dialogue between the transitional government and the opposition on the much-vaunted modalities to hold the elections in a manner acceptable to both sides.

The repudiation of the by-elections is a concrete step forward in the direction of rendering the atmosphere conducive to the staging of a meaningful dialogue to ensure participation of all political parties, in the next national elections. All the good results of long-drawn brainstorming and mediation efforts on the subject of having a non-partisan caretaker government to oversee the polls are there to be utilised for holding the next elections by a national consensus. Besides, the Election Commission, too, has taken some steps to conduct the polls in a reasonably free and fair manner. Furthermore, one positive outcome of the opposition movement has been a heightened public awareness to settle for nothing less than unimpeachable elections. So, the vigil factor is there.

Building on all these positive trends, the political parties must now come to an agreement to broadbase the general elections under a mutually agreed interim arrangement.

Field-day for Tyranny

The much feared showdown, certain to take place on either Tuesday or Wednesday, did not materialise between opposing terrorist groups of Missionpara and Chashara in Narayanganj. Almost the whole city was tense till Wednesday noon and after that nerves eased and relaxed. Was that sense of relief bought without a price?

Around noon on Tuesday two microbuses went up to the local LGED office. Groups of known mastans got down and bought up 62 bundles of tender papers for some Tk 1.5 crore worth of construction job. No other buyer appeared for the papers. The next day a separate group, that of contractors, went to the same office in similar convoy-fashion and submitted the tenders. The mastans got a 'commission' of Tk 15 lakh, for their collection troubles, from the gratified contractors. All of the parties involved were so cooperating: the officers, the mastans, the contractors.

Corruption, graft and bribery mainly, have long been institutionalised in this country. But there is still something against making a public show of it. And this keeps up a hope that some social power would come and dismantle this infernal machine. In Narayanganj that hope was thrown to the four winds.

What did that highminded organisation, the LGED under a rare upright and farseeing chief, succumb to? Or the businessmen of Narayanganj? To the clout backed by the party in power, the power of treating all norms of civilised being — from decency to law, fairness to accommodation — with contempt?

But what can the officers and the businessmen do? And what even the police can do to counter this? Cannot the government and the ruling party restrain the boys from visible criminal acts? Perhaps not. If they could, campuses would long have been healed of violence. Forget democracy, in Narayanganj and much of elsewhere in Bangladesh life is dictated by criminals and there is no escaping the rule of crime.

Passing of a Diffident One

When he came to journalism he was both unprepared for the job and past the green stage when it is hard to take in unknown tricks of the trade. But Lutfor was a mettlesome one with an ever inquisitive mind. In no time he made newspapers his home and took to the profession as a duckling does to water.

With Lutfor Rahman's death on Tuesday only a few will be there in Bangladesh journalism making a mark without any academic stamp to help. Lutfor was then again very special even among that endangered and shrinking species in that — without any academic training in it — he loved mathematics to distraction. And this was no dilettante giving airs. He is said to have collaborated in the writing of texts in the subject for the university levels. And hardly anyone knew about it. That was him.

His prejournalism origins lay in mists of some populist kind of activist politics. What he learnt there he carried unto his death — diffidence, thrift, simplicity. It was a definite loss to journalism when he had to leave to join the PIB. He was even there doing his best to enrich journalism through broadening training and research needs of the profession.

Sixty-three is not a mature age to die. We mourn his death and send our condolences to the bereaved family.

If You Chew it, then Why Not Swallow?

The circumstances and evidences, thus, lead us to live with the impression that the

government has already been chewing the ideas of the opposition but is hardly attempting to

swallow them. This might be due to the 'ego' that pervasively prevails in today's politics.

ND, at long last, bury ing all gossips and ex A pectations the Election Commission (EC) declared election schedules for 145 parliamentary seats vacated earlier by the resignations of the opposition members from the parliament. According to the EC schedule, all nomination papers are to be submitted by 25th November, and the election would be held on 15th December. To complete the task of holding election. reportedly, 54 Returning and 300 Assistant Returning Officers have already been commissioned. It may be mentioned here that in an earlier move, the EC postponed the process due to the occurrence of natural calamities (act of God). Despite improvement in flood situation afterwards, however, the EC kept waiting with a "to be or not to be" indecision allegedly on act of some other

The Prime Minister appealed to the opposition to participate in the ensuing by-elections and thus to delete some of the "mistakes/crisis baked by the opposition itself". She, further, proposed for the formation of a national government without, of course, hinting at any of its modalities. The PM also noted that a poor country like Bangladesh can hardly afford to go for expensive

elections and after few opposition months, for another general election. The PM's appeal. however, apparently failed to bag any sympathy from the corners that matter most at the moment. The opposition is seemingly poised to go for more biting programmes than the nation witnessed ever before. We, thus, foresee with grave concern the hor-

await all of us in case both the parties are bent upon to materialize their respective dreams.

We would not like to relish on presenting arguments for and against the formation

rendous consequences that

of a caretaker government for

which much blood and ink

have already been shed. It is

also not, perhaps, useful either at this moment. Seemingly, the opposition proposes a caretaker government and the government continues to oppose it. But despite all the differences, a clear consensus seems to have sprang up and that is, rigging-free fair election is hard to come by with any political party in power. The government, perhaps, accepted this notion following its willingness to work on Ninian's formula or following its eagerness to talk with the opposition on the issue. Besides the Magura and other election episodes as cited by the opposition in support of a non-political government at the helm of election affairs, some of the most recent empirical evidence also sharply point at the necessity of a non-political government. For example, it is reported by the newspapers and alleged by

budget to be channelled through ministers and MPs to feed their respective election pledges. This amount is specially meant for educational institutions and allegedly stands contrary to the precedence. By and large, there is an arsenal of reasons for which it has now become an well established fact that election under a political government is bound to be

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

the critics that the PM has already started her election campaign using public resources. As a PM, she begged votes for a particular candidate in Dimla the other day She asked people to vote for her candidate (who is incidentally her nephew) if they wanted development of that constituency. Experts tend to opine that such promises are not in consort with EC rules. Second, it is also being reported that an amount of Tk 20 crore has already been

discriminatory and fail to present a free and fair image.

Once the opposition and the position had accepted the hypothesis that a free and fair election needs a caretaker government, the most pertinent question is how to do it? The party in power has long been rejecting the notion of a caretaker government and that of PM's resignation 90 days before general election, as unconstitutional and expressed their determination to go by constitutional means.

The ruling party's concern for constitutional means deserves mention and appreciation. But a peep deep into some of the proposals that originated from their side of the fence, tends to convey us that those proposals also do not seem constitutional. For example, if a resignation before 90 days stands unfriendly to the constitution. then how come 30 days conform to the constitution? Second, the latest proposal of the PM relating to the formation of a national government, according to many. also does not appear to be in tune with any provisions of the constitution. Is the constitution opposed to 90 days and caretaker government and not to 30 days and a na-

The circumstances and evidences, thus, lead us to live with the impression that the government has already been chewing the ideas of the opposition but is hardly attempting to swallow them. This might be due to the 'ego' that pervasively prevails in today's politics. But, nevertheless, one should credit the ruling party for a crawling from its original stand of no-resignation and no-cooperation.

The nation can hardly accommodate the ramps and rampages that are being revealed or are in the offing in the days to come. The economy is already in a shambles. educational institutions are in eopardy and the overall movement onward is stalled. A full-stop to the showdown is the crying need of the hour. And to reach that stoppage both the ruling party and the opposition need to display a sense of responsibility and accountability.

On this score alone, we could evaluate an in-between proposal. The PM should resign before 90 days of the election and the President should form an interim government comprising representatives from different parties. This should incorporate the provisions for strengthening the EC. Well. the proposal might sound unconstitutional. But which of the proposals presented so far are constitutional? After all, a nation cannot be left in a vacuum, someone has to take its charge. Under the current crisis, the President might be the probable option. There is anarchy being groomed for constitutional means and the so- called constitutional means being groomed for anarchy. Which way should we move? Another acid test for our learned politicians is larking

Testing the Legendary Patience of Bangladeshi People?

ROBABLY a lot that needed to be said has already been said. here and there, by various commentators. The Awami League (AL), perhaps desperately short of any ideas or well considered positions on issues, finally hit upon one which the equally desperate (though for entirely different reasons) Jatiya Party (JP) and Jamaat could latch onto. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), caught in their usual indecision, missed the chance of grandly agreeing in the first place (after all, BNP won under a caretaker government, while AL cried foul) - which would have rendered this to the status of a non-issue, avoided the cur-

rent opposition coalition, al-

lowed the BNP to run its full

course peacefully and pre-

pare systematically for the

election on schedule. In fact, I have never understood why the AL did not challenge the BNP government to take the caretaker issue to the people through a referendum. Surely, given the strong possibility that a majority of people would support the idea of neutral administration conducting elections, the BNP would not dare to hold such a referendum and would be put on the defensive. The AL would not have to resort to withdrawal from Parliament or vote-losing hartals, while the BNP would find its "constitutional" high ground untenable, thereby forcing a solution out of the incumbent administration. As it is, the current shuttling between the two ladies of paper (the "letters"). humans (G-5), flowers and sweets (Tariq Rahman's baby)

proud people with a considerable pedigree of civilization. As if the entire Ninian

episode was not enough! The leading ladies are testing the legendary patience of the Bangladeshi people, on the quite flawed premise of a God-given right to power without the commensurate responsibility. The patience is not endless...The politicians and political parties are only a small section of the community, albeit the group entrusted with the maximum state power in a system of representative government(more specifically, parliamentary democracy). This representative government in the British mould is based on a deeprooted consensus. In the current situation, that consensus

power and its abuse would be the oppounder control, and the people's voice would genuinely paign the

earmarked from the revenue

carry more weight. The BNP government often refers to the post liberation AL regime as having destroyed democracy. Right. But Bangabandhu was very much within the Constitution when he amended it with a two-thirds majority to usher in his version of an authoritarian one-party state. The problem was he violated the spirit of the Constitution and ignored the wishes of the people in the process (which happens very rarely in a mature democracy) and paid the price for trying to shut out not only other political parties but, more importantly, larger sections of society.

the opposition starts planning its next election campaign the day after losing the general election. The whole focus is on identifying the reason for losing, rectifying the same and building up a more credible platform and campaign towards the next election. The AL chose instead to dwell on the past, and accordingly made no headway. Having developed no electoral campaign strategy, the AL easily slipped into doing what they are familiar with - protest and agitational politics (the brief 1972-1975 interregnum seems almost an aberration) when the Magura overkill cropped up. The great pity is that the Mayoral election success of the AL almost

threatening to resign, resigning and then on to the streets for endless hartals is seen by the AL leadership as a very potent election campaign strategy. Nothing could be further from the truth. As some recent polls have indicated, the AL is merrily losing votes, while congratulating itself on the "success" of its own hartals.

The BNP meanwhile is betting that the AL is digging itself into a hole too deep to come out of. But having made the mistake of treating this challenge as being similar to the other failed and largely irrelevant AL initiatives, it is now compounding that mistake by abdicating its responsibility as the Administration, the Government of the country, and instead reacting purely as a political

civil service all jostling for access to power, constitutionally sanctioned or otherwise, from which position they get a window of opportunity to lord it over and otherwise, as it is, oppress the voters. The concept of the popular opinion, i.e. the opinions of the represented. the original font of power. constraining the actions of those entrusted with the office and responsibilities of government, appears to have been marginalised. The people's representatives are voted into office to manage the task of governance to the best of their abilities i.e. to perform a job at the expense and direction of their bosses - the taxpayers and the people at large. Can we the people at least expect that the rhetoric of power politics be moderated so that politicians strive "for office" rather

The politicians would do well to heed the dangers of pushing the people beyond breaking point.

as one of the major sources of legitimacy is being ignored, and the BNP's parliamentary majority is being touted instead. Even this "majority" is based on the indirectly elected women's seats. The BNP has no simple majority on the basis of directly elected seats, while in terms of votes cast, BNP polled less than one third of the total potential votes.

If in fact, BNP is convinced about its legal, moral, popular and constitutional position, why not put it to the test through a referendum? I am quite convinced that the outcome would overwhelmingly support some kind of non-partisan government to supervise elections, so that any jockeying and usurpation of state

The extreme concentration of power in single political party, as in fascist and communist structures, has not stood the test of time. Similarly BNP's avowed dogma of it. sticking to the Constitution or upholding it does not hold water where a majority of political representatives and the people themselves are known to hold different views. No body in his right mind, after observing the current events in Bangladesh. would suggest that the political system is anything but immature, lending greater credibility to the need for at least a few successive elections to be held under neu-

The much larger political mistake is, however, the AL's In a mature political system,

overnight created an image of a party which could conceivable comably be an alternative administration. As with the 1991 general election, the AL blew it.

As far as anyone could see, all that the AL had to do was to make the right noises about corruption, misman-

about corruption, mismanagement and other failures of the BNP government, while presenting some policies of its own; the AL could conceivably coast in on the BNP's failures and its own credibility as a superior alternative government. Instead the AL has managed to reinforce a chaotic rudderless image of itself in the process making the BNP look good by comparison. It seems obvious that the whole sequence of boycotting the parliament,

party. The government must govern or step aside. It cannot play this game of "let the AL play themselves out and lose votes" at such a huge cost to the country. Such irresponsibility will bring into question the legitimacy of the entire political system, forcing the people, maybe, to reconsider some earlier discredited alternatives in a new light.

In fact, it is very revealing that our politicians bland-facedly use the words "coming to power" when the more democratic (and demure) approach should be one of "coming into office" or "taking office". The whole concept of representative government in our country still remains medieval — the politicians, the military, the

than strive "for power"? The politicians would do well to heed the dangers of pushing the people beyond breaking point. Their livelihoods would be more seriously affected than the general populace's if the current political system breaks down and people have to turn to other alternatives. After all, the periods of genuine politician dominated government have not been particularly successful or longlived. The two major parties must have more to say for themselves than simply that they are better than the other, when both are doing so miserably. Surely the hapless Bangladeshis deserve

The writer is Associate Professor, IBA, Dhaka University.

something better after 25

years of being let down by the

leadership of the country!

Dubbed serials

and vitriolic speeches have

assumed farcical proportions.

and ridicules an entire na-

Sir, Would you believe that Larry Hagman (famous J R Ewing of Dallas) speaks fluent Hindi! If you are not convinced, please watch I Dream of Jeannie on Sony ET channel.

The epic movie Brave Heart, which had its world premier in September, is being dubbed in Hindi in India.

These are done to cater to a wider range of viewers who do not read, write, speak or understand English. The primary consideration is to sell a product to the maximum consumers watching TV. Those who spend millions for marketing and manufacturing of targeted for ordinary consumers, are not supposed to be responsible for teaching English to the already English-knowing viewers. Those who want to learn English by TV or enjoy the original flavour may do so by watching other English language movies regularly telecast from BTV. One or two films, occasionally dubbed in our mother tongue hardly makes any difference in this regard but certainly serves a greater number of viewers. Why deprived them?

Bairam Khan « Baridhara, Dhaka

Hartals and schools

Sir, For the past ten years or so the people of this country have experienced enough hartals. The most affected by

these activities are the students. A few years ago, there were one-day or half-day hartals and these caused severe interruptions in the academic life of the students. Now-a-days, we have threeday, four-day and week-long hartals. Later on, there might be month-long hartals!

The politicians speak of welfare of the country. I am no Einstein but I have the common sense to understand that disruption of education is not going to help build a better nation. I have no idea how much commonsense the politicians have, but I am sure that they were taught in school that education is the backbone of a nation. (They seem to have forgotten their school lessons!)

Another thing I like to point out is that the frequency of hartals increases during the end of the year. Although the politicians may find the weather pleasing and favourable for their hartal activities, they shouldn't forget that students have final examinations during this time. Last year, O' and A' Level candidates had to sit for their exams at 2 am!

Tamzid Farhat Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Distorted history

Sir, I like to draw the attention of Ms Shrabonti Ali and also numerous readers to her article under the caption. "Independence War of

Bangladesh" published in your daily on November 10. 1995. In the article there are several wrong information and lapses which should not have occurred in such a topic which is historical in nature. At one place Ms Ali stated, "Mr Jinnah was initially a member of the Congress Party, main force behind India's struggle for independence. Due to differences with the other members of the Congress, Mr Jinnah resigned and formed his own party called Muslim League. This is not true. Mr Jinnah neither formed the Muslim League nor he was associated with it at the time of its formation.

He joined the Muslim League much after its formation in Dhaka in 1906. Rather, Sher-e-Bangla A, K Fazlul Haque was one of the founder-members of Muslim League. There has been no mention of some other important events like Lahore Resolution of 1940 in which there was initially provisions of sovereign states for the Muslims of India. The said resolution was moved by Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque and passed by All India Muslim League Conference held in Lahore in March.

I have pointed out these only with the intention of informing the people who are not well aware of the facts and for correct information of younger generation. Finally, I shall request the writers as well as others to

kindly see that wrong information is not furnished where historical events are related, particularly in case of Independence War of Bangla-

S A Baker 16/A, Dilu Road, Dhaka '

Revamping agriculture

Sir, Recently in a seminar organised jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture and the World Bank it has been revealed that the country's agriculture sector is presently performing not very well. According to the World Bank Mission Chief Pierre Landell-Mills - 'the experts are apprehending famines and if the present trend in agricultural productivity does not change for the better, food situation in the country in the future will be

Identifying fund scarcity as one of the reasons for the lower productivity, the Finance Minister admitted that the agriculture sector is not receiving sufficient fund as budgetary allocations or

Being a professional in agriculture, I think the main reason for the poor performance in our agri-sector is the withdrawal of subsidy from there. The question is, whether Bangladesh has arrived at that stage of privatising her agriculture sector by withdrawing subsidy ignoring

the poor economic conditions of the majority of the people behind the plough!

I would better suggest the World Bank to please review their previous suggestions to withdraw subsidy from the agri-sector. There are enough reasons to believe that re-introduction of subsidy in the agri-sector will increase pro-

M Zahidul Haque , Assistant Professor, BAI, Dhaka-1207

ductivity.

Politics and development

Sir. Our country has not progressed appreciably in the past twenty-four years. Political instability is one of the main reasons why we are lagging behind the other South Asian countries. Although we are not the best of the nations, yet our political leaders seem to be famous and often make headlines in international news, even if not for any exemplary achievement in the development of the country, rather for their exemplary capacity

for chaos.

One thing I wish to ask our political leaders is how are they going to develop our country if they spend most of their time vying for power? Can any of these leaders who create political crisis say for sure that if he or she comes to power our country would achieve an appreciable progress? And can they guar-

antee that this type of political impasse will not occur

History seems to repeat too often in our country. The leaders have already spent all these years in this power-play. They should remember that if they really want to build a prosperous nation then only goodsense and pa-

Tamzid Farhat Mohammadpur, Dhaka

triotism are sufficient

Dhaka varsity BBA course Sir. At the moment Dhak

Sir. At the moment Dhaka University admits only sixty students in the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) course every year. This is pitifully inadequate to meet the demand for the course. Although North-South University and another private University in Dhaka is running BBA course, this is beyond the reach of common students because of excessive cost.

Hence it is felt that the number of seats should be doubled from this academic session by opening another section. BBA degree-holders have high demand not only at home but also abroad. Hence I request the government and the Dhaka University authorities to consider the matter seriously and sympathetically.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment