

Question of Mandate

The ruling party leaders knew if anybody did, that they were going to hold the polls by February '96 at the very latest. What was the mandate they were seeking from the electorate? They were, till ten days before the polling, seeking only the vote and perhaps not much else. They wanted power but wouldn't commit themselves to anything. Well, that is how it looks from the fact that till today BNP has not prepared its election manifesto.

Suddenly, surely as a belated afterthought, came this piece of news, heralding the coming of the BNP election manifesto — the most important document for a party seeking election. And this valuable paper on which the citizens theoretically are to vote can now only be a sheaf of paper if it at all reaches the electorate in the week that will be left before the polls. There will be no manifestoes from any other party. And BNP now reduces its own to little better than nothing.

And the government has by another fatal blow struck at the very democratic essence of the election. To do this they have drawn into the game the President who had been so long spared by all to remain as a last way-out from the current impasse. Empowered by an ordinance decreed by him, the LGRD ministry has instructed all Union Parishads and Pourashavas to cooperate sufficiently with the conduct of the polls — on pain of being dissolved and taken over by the government.

This is the silliest of governmental antics we have got used to over the decades. But coming only ten days before the polls it reads sinister. How can you dissolve elected bodies and run them by nominated persons without grievously injuring democracy — to which end this election is being said to be held. And for no other fault than exercising their choices on the election.

The manifesto affair is BNP's pleasure. But the second act we condemn and reject as being undemocratic in the essence. The opposition is trying to make a hollow thing of this election. Who ever knew the government and BNP would preempt them making it into a farce?

Put the Scandal Behind

The Sonargaon Hotel scandal of January 30 which pulled the rug out of a festering wound in the hotel's management anatomy, should not be put under any fresh wraps. Facts would have to be brought to light and faced fairly and squarely for three very cogent reasons.

Firstly, misgivings have to be removed that we are unable to let even an establishment like a five-star hotel run smoothly. Secondly, we cannot have it messed up especially when it started from a vantage point of being the only one in that category with Japanese finance which bears the name of a country that is the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh. The collaborative arrangements between the government-owned Hotels International Limited (HIL), the parent company of the hotel, and the Pan Pacific Hotel, affiliated to Tokyo Hotels International, were far too serious to be determined by internal squabbles. Thirdly, the hotel has to come on top of the backlash if it were to stay in business as the country's premier hotel.

With these in mind we welcome the proposed formation of a 4-member probe committee with two members each from the Japanese and Bangladesh sides to go into January 30 incident and bring about an amicable settlement of the problems arising out of it. We demand in the interest of our country's goodwill with Japan that all factors, both internal and extraneous, if any, contributing to the row, be revealed not only before the parties concerned but also to the public at large. We have a right to know where it went wrong that we are having to worry about our relationship with Japan, an otherwise trusted friend of Bangladesh.

We want the report made public when it is ready, and not just put away on the shelves. Meanwhile, could we expect that the public would be kept informed of the progress in the inquiry?

Far too Noble for It

Six days into the Ekushey Book Fair the lively build-up to the month-long event is sadly but not inexplicably missing. It has had a less-than-an-ideal start with the PM's determined opening of it and the backlash on its heels. These evidently cast a shadow on the proceedings as expected and hinted at by us in this column earlier on.

Attendance at the book stalls is still very poor and sales dull. The important discussion meets on topics of great relevance to the Ekushey legacy and the evolution of Bangla language and literature are virtually nowhere to be seen. In fact, a good number of university teachers and cultural activists have cancelled their participation in such a programme under notification to the director general of Bangla Academy in protest against police atrocities on the students.

Events dedicated to the memory of Ekushey February are far too sacrosanct, noble and dear to us to be allowed to be spoilt by the impudent act of a few, regardless of the provocation it gave. We must live down the initial setback and try our best to invigorate the book fair and other related functions so that they can be a standard tribute to Ekushey. Let the surroundings look inspiring for that to happen — in the first place.

RECENTLY the donor countries held a meeting with the government for a mid-year review of the state of the economy and the utilization of aid funds. In particular, they examined the progress of the reform agenda. They believe that the future of the economy depends on the successful implementation of this agenda. According to press reports the donor countries are deeply concerned. Some of them have even raised questions about the commitment of the BNP government to the reform agenda. One does not know to what extent the donors were satisfied with the government's response but if one were to judge progress by the actual state of the economy, they could not have been very pleased.

Reform of the administration, for instance, is a vital element of the entire reform agenda but it has not even taken off. Instead of reforming the administration, the BNP government has politicised it. Inefficiency and corruption has increased. Inter-caste squabbling among the services has intensified. Financial sector reform is another area in which progress has been most disappointing. They power sector is yet another area which is in urgent need of reform but the BNP government has been dithering. In five long years there has been, to the best of my knowledge, no improvement. The loss-making industries continue to drain the national exchequer of vital resources needed to stimulate the growth and expansion of the economy. The BNP government's record, in all these areas is a dismal one.

What is really the cause of

this failure? After all, the BNP government started off with a clear mandate. One may recall the big fanfare with which these programmes were launched. The finance minister is not known to be publicity-shy. He grabbed headlines with all kind of reform programmes which, in retrospect, seem to have been so utopian. The donors, I believe, have put their finger on the real cause of the failure which is a lack of commitment. The prime minister failed to give the necessary leadership in carrying out the reforms. The government was not willing to take the essential but tough and seemingly unpopular decisions to implement the programmes of reform. It is no secret that some of the ministers were positively hostile to these programmes. When the vested interests blocked progress in some fields, the government chose of appease them, and failed to demonstrate responsible political leadership to carry out policies in the broader national interest.

The question has assumed an urgency because of the coming one-party election. What is going to happen to the reform agenda? No one knows for certain what is going to happen between now and the 15th February. However if, for the sake of argument, one assumes that a government will be formed after the sham election, will that weak, legally flawed and

controversial government be able to implement the reform agenda? There can be no doubt that in such a situation — with an embattled government without an accepted electoral mandate, lacking in any moral authority — the reform agenda will be effectively dead. This is the reality that the nation as well as the donors must reflect upon. A

agenda. Despite the party's preoccupation with urgent political issues concerning the basic voting rights of the people as well as the question of free and fair elections, it has given a lot of time and thought to economic issues. The policy statement made by the President of Awami League, Sheikh Hasina, at the last special session of the

completed." Here is a public commitment which leaves no uncertainty about the party's stand on economic issues. Let us take the question of reforming the local government system. The BNP government has really destroyed whatever local government institutions we had in the country. Today there is no local government at the thana and the district level. In contrast in explaining the objectives of the party's policy in this field, Sheikh Hasina said, "The purpose of strong local government is to involve the people in all the local development activities. Bangladesh Awami League is determined to build a strong and democratic local government system at the union, thana and district level."

The government's record in the area of financial sector reform has not been particularly good, and during the last four years the problems afflicting many state-owned and private banks have deepened. Modernizing and improving the efficiency of the banking sector is essential if we are to make it a dynamic factor in the growth process. Financial sector reform cannot be fully implemented unless the administrative reform programme also gets underway. Both these areas will require firm political commitment. Several studies have been already made in the field of administrative reform but these reports are just gathering dust. The BNP

government has had little time for these reports. Deregulation is another important area but one does not know the exact status of these reforms. However, it cannot be left half-finished. The export-import regime must be scrutinized and clear decisions taken so as to permit our businessmen to plan their business activities with confidence.

One of the most important items of the reform agenda — improving the performance of the government machinery — is jeopardized by the current regime's attempt to subvert the electoral process and remove the mechanisms needed to ensure that the government is ultimately accountable to the people for its actions. There is clearly a need to gear up the public sector to perform at the level which will permit accelerated economic growth in this country. No less importantly, perhaps, there is a need to reorient the machinery of government to more effectively meet the needs of the common citizen and to avoid waste in the use of public funds, whether the source of these funds is external aid or our taxpayers' money. The Awami League is firmly committed to ensuring that the efficiency of the public sector is improved, and that the entire government is made more accountable and responsive to the people. The accountability that is called for must be rooted in the people's ability to freely elect their government and in their choice of this country rightly recognize the vital importance of the opposition's current campaign to ensure free and fair elections.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



The unpublished column of Sunday

government with questionable legal status will not be able to govern effectively. It will be unable to take the tough decisions necessary to carry forward the programme of reform. Indeed, the government will be fighting for its life most of the time and the country will be entering a period of extreme political instability. It is a frightening prospect but given our experience with the events of the last two years it is a realistic one. The one-party election now in prospect is likely to heighten economic uncertainty and will spell disaster for the reform programme.

Many of my friends have asked me about the Awami League's policy on the reform

party held in September last year dealt with the economic and social issues at some length and outlined the party's programme in different fields. While discussing industrial policy she emphasized the need to improve the environment for business activity, noting that "Bangladesh Awami League will give high priority to improving the law and order situation and terrorism, toll-taking and the high-handedness of the musclemen will be firmly suppressed. Realistic steps will be taken to simplify administrative procedures and eliminate corruption. Infrastructure will be improved and the financial sector reform will be firmly

Sanity in Political Leadership Need of the Hour

by Md Asadullah Khan

Hopes for progress and prosperity can still be resuscitated, if without further delay, the country is brought back on track, and this can only be done by a fair display of sanity in the political leadership. As it appears, the system crafted in the days just after the liberation of the country has exhausted its capacity to deal with the varied problems that have, over the years, grown more complex.

SELDOM in the past few decades has this country so desperately needed a leadership to steer the country clear of crises, doldrums and chaos as it is now. Political intrigue, bickering, in-fighting and bankruptcy have almost become norms in Bangladesh. Believing all expectations of a settlement, our politics is headed towards a chaotic situation that spells disaster for the country already threatened by production cut in the mills and factories and crop-losses in the agricultural sector. Food shortage, according to WFP estimates, is likely to reach 50 lakh tons mark this year. Food prices are soaring, adding to the daily misery of millions of Bangladeshis who live in total poverty. People in the country do not know how long they will have to wait for the kind of leadership the country needs.

Because of poverty and non-governance, the last few years witnessed a disastrous upsurge of violence that cost hundreds of lives, a steady worsening of the economy and an unprecedented polarisation of the society on extremist lines. The message of all these ominous developments in clear democratic norm is rapidly losing its grip over the society at large. Unable to withstand the surge of crimes and the responsibility for the present crises, the

grandiose structure of the reform measures of the administration have proved to be a futile effort. It will not take long for the country to collapse altogether burying under its ashes most of the development projects that are so much needed for the country. Liberal minded people are wary of the dangerous consequences of the societal breakdown marking a growing ideological void. At present, this void is often filled with the destructive ideas of militant nationalism, religious intolerance, violent greed, and cynicism. The result is partisan clashes, social alienation, and rise of crime that has let loose a terrible wave of lawlessness and civil turmoil in all parts of the country.

To check all this malady to take the shape of a catastrophe a new leadership is needed. This must be backed by a massive educational campaign that can fill the minds of millions of disillusioned Bangladeshis with the values and ideals that helped our forefathers to survive and prosper through their days of turmoil. These ideals — the primacy of hu-

man rights, the rule of law and ideological tolerance — must be enshrined in the society.

To be sure, in the state of affairs as it is these days in the country, efforts to make these pristine philosophies acceptable in a society torn apart by economic, political and national crisis is not an easy task. But the bulk of the remoulding and renovation necessary for the revival of the society will definitely have to come from within the society itself, from its new leaders and intelligentsia who are till now at logger heads with each other.

The most prominent casualty of the present political crisis is the country's badly needed economic expansion programme. As it appears, foreign investors and donors grow wary of venturing into an inflammable area, a conflict-ridden site that has largely been made so by the politicians themselves, to the utter disregard of people's torments and sufferings. Don't they (politicians) think that the turbulence as apparent will surely hasten the disintegration of the coun-

try's already fragile political and economic structure and inflict irreparable damage to the survival of democracy? In their quest for public office and the payoffs of power, they have inflamed passions and used trick to promote personal gain. They have exploited and manipulated all the weaknesses inherent in a developing society. Social fissures which statesmen would normally attempt to bridge have been deepened by the same of us seeking short-term advantages.

Since most of the people in the country are mute spectators, politics, perhaps in its worst form has gained a free ground for many whose vision does not extend beyond their personal gains. The great potential for progress that was envisaged to be present here is fading out giving in to a spirit of chaos and violence every where. More than ever, now the country from Teknaf to Tetulia remains mired in political unrest, with repression and deception masquerading as democracy.

Leaders of the political parties and the administration seem hardly aware that

the country faces a severe employment crisis and also an increasing social dilemma created by a large cohort of educated but jobless youths. Over and above this, most of our people working in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Emirates, Malaysia and some western countries are suddenly facing a very tough situation as regards job prospects in those countries. Recently, Saudi Arabia repatriated some 20,000 Bangladeshis working there for a long time. On the other hand the unemployment rate in the country has shot up to 80%. This comes at a time when the western countries and the US are poised for an unprecedented economic slump that is certain to shrink global demand for third world exports. The country's external debt is also shooting up with each passing year while its export earnings on two principal sectors, namely, garments and frozen foods are showing gradual decline. Reportedly the country is losing almost 1200 crore Taka annually in the garments export alone.

With prospects so bleak, it would be irresponsible to continue the politics of ag-

grandisement. Once buoyant hopes for progress and prosperity can still be resuscitated, if without further delay, the country is brought back on track, and this can only be done by a fair display of sanity in the political leadership. As it appears, the system crafted in the days just after the liberation of the country has exhausted its capacity to deal with the varied problems that have, over the years, grown more complex.

Now, even if the parliamentary polls take place and the party in power emerges victorious, it will take office at a time of unprecedented danger for the country's turbulent democracy. The conflict and tension brewing in threaten to escalate into a protracted strife. The country throughout this time since liberation has hardly faced such daunting problems.

Over the years, the country's ruling party bosses have paid lip service to improving the lot of the vast populace. Opponents claim that the success claimed by the administration so far amounts to no more than an illusion. Popular feeling runs that those running the statecraft have almost turned the country into something akin to a snow-capped volcano. So it is political sanity that is most needed now.

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

BAI problems

Sir, At present, one of the major problems of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI) is that we do not have adequate number of teachers and supporting manpower. Although BAI is the country's oldest agricultural education institution (60-year-old), still the number of teachers is less than other two newly established agri-colleges. Moreover, as per the authorities' decision, from this session the number of seats has been increased, from 100 to 150 at BAI, Dhaka and 80 to 100 at other two agri-colleges.

To overcome the difficulties, a few new teaching and other posts were proposed in the PCP of BAI which was also endorsed by the IMED. But due to some reasons, the proposal could not get approval of the inter-ministerial meeting.

Meanwhile, we recently met the Planning Minister, who gave a patient hearing to our grievances and assured us that he would do what is necessary for solving our problems.

It is now sincerely expected that the authorities concerned will consider our problems and take appropriate step for solving the same.

M Zahidul Haque  
General Secretary  
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May the Almighty save us

Sir, Light has shed upon the current political situation of Bangladesh in the article 'The Duelling Doyennes' which was published on January

15, 1996 in the Newsweek. It said that 'Bangladesh has recently been growing enough rice to feed itself and building an industrial base, attracting manufacturers away from other more expensive Asian countries. It is thought that present political crisis will have a negative effect on its economy.'

Oh, what an unlucky lot we are! When we were looking forward to a prosperous future, trying to stand on our feet, something blunt hits on our head, as if we are not entitled to stand up. What evil force is working behind it and how long will it remain active? Only the Almighty knows!

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Need for a good opposition

Sir, Appointment of persons to govern the country beyond the purview of the Constitution must not be encouraged. It is the failure of the politicians that the Constitution could not be amended adequately to accommodate their desire. Demands will have to be sorted out as per the law. The rule of the game must be followed.

The present government, well in my opinion, is not a good government. If right now it is ousted unlawfully, the opposition may sigh a relief seeing it gone, exactly the way 'opposition' was happy in 1982 when the power from president Sattar was taken away by General Ershad, violating the Constitution. But the ultimate result of that unlawful action was not good. That we all know

very well: it is better to continue democratically with a bad government rather than having an autocracy as replacement.

The way Sheikh Hasina prescribes to oust the government is not a correct one. A bad government always creates positive momentum for the opposition to come in power. If people want Awami League to be in power, hundreds of opponents simply cannot resist. Why does Sheikh Hasina fail to keep faith in the people? Why such lack of confidence in the people who fought for language, liberation and democracy? Keeping faith in people, Sheikh Hasina should have participated in the election and we all would have seen what Khaleda Zia does and that would have given tremendous credibility to Sheikh Hasina's leadership.

But Sheikh Hasina seems anchored with JP and Jamaat. Who are they, anyway? People know these parties better than anybody else. Bad or good, let the change be in accordance with law. There is still time to avoid confrontation and anarchy in going ahead with this one-party election.

Now is the time that Awami League comes up as a good opposition. As the leader of the good opposition, Sheikh Hasina can give us sensible, positive and statesman-like guidelines so that the present problem relating to holding a fair election to change the government lawfully can be solved. A bad government can lawfully be replaced by only a good opposition. Calling hartals and advocating unlawful measures are to be shunned and also thundering the slogan to oust the government is not needed.

People want to live in peace in lawful society. Let a good opposition help to achieve that.

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UN sanctions against Iraq

Sir, Who committed crime and who are expiating crime and undergoing punishment? President Saddam Hussain of Iraq continues to hold power, Emir Sheikh al-Jabir as-Sabah of Kuwait has retained his throne, US President George Bush was defeated in the presidential election, British Prime Minister Thatcher has resigned and the French President Mitterrand has retired and passed away. But the untold sufferings of the millions of people in Iraq who have no direct or indirect involvement in the invasion of Kuwait continue unabated due to treacherous international politics.

The UN Security Council has recently renewed its 63-month-old economic sanctions against Iraq. There seems no prospect of lifting UN sanctions. Has not the UN economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in 1990 taken the shape of violation of human rights in 1996?

Billions of dollars of arms and ammunition bought by Iraq from former Soviet Union, now Russia, have been destroyed in the Gulf War. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states spent billions of dollars to finance the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi invasion. In addition to that they purchased arms of latest models worth billions of dollars from the western countries to defend themselves from fellow Arab countries.

Who loses, who gains? The wealth of the Arab world is being drained out to western countries. Some G-7 countries flourish at the cost of blood and sweat of the Muslim world.

Iraq has fulfilled all its obligations under the UN Resolution 678. Is not the continuation of UN economic sanctions for indefinite period a mockery of UN Declaration of Human Rights?

We urge Iraq and other Gulf nations to forget their past differences and build up peace, friendship and unity anew in their own interest in particular and the Muslim world in general. Simultaneously we also call upon the United Nations to lift the economic sanctions against Iraq immediately on humanitarian grounds.

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Test-tube outdates mating

Sir, A US zoo has delivered the world's first test-tube baby of an African gorilla recently, brightening the possibility of expanding endangered species.

The first-ever test-tube baby born to human about a couple of decades ago brought about revolutionary advances in genetic manipulation relating to human reproduction, and thereby fertilized hopes for offspring to parents with conception defects.

It looks like that period is not too long away when the heterosexual intercourse will be viewed as an unnecessary time-wasting play due to economically accessible test-tube impregnation.

If this test-tube procedure is commercially practised, the population size of both man and animal races will increase manifold in a short span until a justifiable restriction is applied to such artificially manufactured baby productions before it over-takes Malthus Theory.

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A clarification

Sir, There have been articles in some Dhaka dailies recently which stated that I have advocated, at a seminar in Ireland, boycotting Bangladesh garment factories which use child labour. Reuters is said to have issued a news release to this effect several weeks ago. AAFLI (Asian-American Free Labour Institute) has been blamed for sponsoring myself and Nazma Akhter in this work.

In the first place, I did not attend any seminar in Ireland and was not sent there by AAFLI. I went there with Nazma to meet labour groups and NGOs interested in child rights and child labour. At the time I was no longer working as a consultant for AAFLI. My work for them extended only from November 1992 to 16 December 1994 and consisted in helping to organise a free trade union among garment workers. I did not speak on behalf of AAFLI in Ireland.

Secondly, neither I nor Nazma advocated boycotting of the garment industry. I gave the example of the Child Labour Coalition of 40 Organisations in the USA which had threatened a boycott of Bangladesh garments in order to show what could happen if there is lack of compliance with the MOC signed between ILO, UNICEF and the BGMEA. I have strongly opposed to boycott because of the great harm it would bring to the economy and the workers. My only concern is that the child workers will get the education which has been promised them since 1991 by the government and the rehabilitation which has been promised them since the MOC was signed.

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