

As Our Readers View the Current Situation

The Test of Leadership

by A Husnain

It was refreshingly different to read about the psychological poise of the nation's two leaders, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, as studied by Professor of Psychology M R Ali (Star, Feb 2). Prof Ali deserves public thanks for broaching this interesting subject in public interest.

It is high time for the nation to take greater interest in the mental make-up of our public leaders. The initiative for such studies has to come from the non-political experts, the academics, and the intelligentsia, as the analyses require expertise at high level, beyond the analytical faculty of the average followers.

The absence of such critical and analytical mechanism in the society creates a weakness that is exploited by the political leaders, encouraged by the lack of challenge and competition from the other think tanks. The custody of the nation is meekly surrendered to the inexperienced politicians (experience comes from the number of years of freedom enjoyed, not suffered).

What is unfortunate to note is that there is a tendency on the part of the intellectuals to take political sides, marring neutral assessment at the highest level. Naturally the political players play their games morally uncontested by the

leaders in fields outside politics.

The past and current trend has been for the blind faith in its political leaders, based on charisma—a typical situation in the emerging nations. The question of what is right or wrong is set aside to support a new leader based on past links, dictated more by the heart than by the head.

Political murders and autocratic take-overs have created a vicious circle, from which the electorate cannot get out, because any alternative leadership cannot muster the backing to create the centrifugal force needed to escape from the centripetal attraction of charismatic leadership. We are the victims of the viciousness of history, starting twice from zero, followed by assassinations and purges.

Charisma has its reasons, based on the simplistic principle of supply and demand, drawn from an electorate three-fourths illiterate. In a society of have-nots, where the rich are richer and the poor are poorer, the opposing or challenging forces of dissent or restraint are limited. Charisma encourages nepotism. The next tiers are sycophancy and corruption. These three nefarious groups band together and resist dis-

bandment.

Since charisma is not transferable, the successor has a tough time proving the self. A leader must be self-contained. Depending on outside reference points is self-defeating, and unreliable. Palace intrigues levy of high price for a nation.

There is another side-effect. Statesmanship is not encouraged. In the new, weak, developing nations there is an uneven competition between statesmanship and charisma. The wrong type of leader is popular, which is not in the best interest of the nation. Outside motivated leaders step in from time to time. After a while, both the motivation and the popularity disappear.

The cycle continues. Has Bangladesh stepped out of this cycle? The current struggle is between an old charisma and a new one, the latter reinforced by the 1991 general elections.

The fight is at the top, not at the base. Our politics is like our tourism, without an infrastructure. We have been trying to create an infrastructure for half a century. The farcical situation has assumed the characteristics of the chicken-and-egg conundrum. Neither the people nor the leaders can help themselves or the other camp. Where do we go from here?

THE world may at times be divided between the leader and the led. Of course the leaders are few and the led, numerous.

History has witnessed many leaders. Some giants, others not so big. Again some great and others not so great, some fearful and others fearless, some awe inspiring and others run of the mill, some loved and others hated. Some beamed others worshipped. Some religious and others irreligious. In our part of the Terra firma we too have had our share of leaders to name a few, Titu Mir, Hazrat Shah Jalal, Nawab Sirajud Dowla, Sher-e-Bangla, Maolana Bhashani, Shaheed Shurawady, etc.

Never have we had to face the perplexing conditions we are facing today. Perhaps one of the loopholes of modern democracy to be added with such incompetent leadership. On one hand we have as a leader of the government, the lady, Mrs Khaleda Zia. The only conceivable reason for her coming to power is because of the sentimentality factor in Bangladesh psyche. She happens to be the spouse of the late President Ziaur Rahman, hero of the war of liberation, and subsequently martyred on the job. Apart from the above laurel and being a homemaker, will anyone please enlighten us as to what other credentials does she bring to the table.

Next, the lady, Sheikh Hasina, leader of the opposition of the last parliament, again a result of the sentimentality factor, she happens

Whither Leadership?

by Wasif Islam

to be one of the surviving daughters of the late Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Massacred in his home by irate and disgruntled army officers, along with his wife and children, Hasina also a housewife turned politician, similar to her counterpart, brings no other credentials to the table.

The whole nation is held ransom by these two ladies, stubborn, unbending, coupled with a complete lack of foresight as to what their intemperance and lack of tolerance is causing the nation. Even the famed diplomacy of the US which worked in bringing Israel and Palestine, Bosnia and Serbia to some acceptable platform, completely failed here.

The bone of contention? Who will rule Bangladesh next? The scapegoat? The "Constitution" of Bangladesh for the ruling party and "Free and fair election" for the Opposition. This is sheer and blatant power mongering at its worst.

Just who are these ladies trying to fool? Has not the PM in a number of occasions gone around the constitution? Why is Hasina playing so holier than thou? Has the nation forgotten how Awami League performed when they held sway. And now they are playing footsie with Jamaat at one end and JP at the other (both their avowed enemies). Frankly we as the silent majority are sick of this nightmare unfolding before us in

less loss of lives? Will Awami League return us that amount please?

They follow no ethics, no rules of conduct, as if they are answerable to no one. The opposition has no qualms in stripping a gentleman naked in the streets during their call of hartal, the government has no qualms in attempting to cover up the rape of a young girl by its police. Stories are rife about the ever rising secret bank balances of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. These are frightening tales. Are these the representatives of the people? Is this what we deserve after so much blood and suffering? Incompetent and bankrupt leadership and equally incompetent Opposition. Where do we go from here? It's like the old story of jumping from the frying pan to the fire.

Thanks to the two they have paved the way for disintegration of the state like in Somalia or Afghanistan. Have they heard of the concept that the state is above all? Who will reward them for putting back the democracy clock once again. Perhaps it's time for the silent majority to speak out. Beware, you, who want to play at being gods with our destinies, and the future of our children, beware, for history will not forgive you, remember, the people react slowly but surely. Finally a brotherly advice to both "leaders". Please go back to your homes

and live as housewives and at least be a source of love and peace for your families, which you have utterly failed to give to the nation. At least, there we hope you will achieve some measure of competence.

This is truly the nation's darkest hour. I think Shakespeare said somewhere, "When winter comes can spring be far behind." We are just coming out of our very bleak winter, can we hope for a beautiful spring?

Islam, has the answers, but their is a catch. Are we ready to live by Islam? Because Islam abhors hypocrisy, yet hypocrisy has become a way of life with us: Islam calls for love and unity, our ego allows only arrogance and strife. Islam teaches tolerance, we want to subjugate and terrorize. Islam asks for abstinence and modesty, we love hedonism and gay abandon. Islam shows the way to honour through self-reliance and following the ideals of the Holy Prophet (SM), we make servile emulation of western decadence. Are we ready to make sacrifices, to live according to the teachings of the Quran?

When Abu Bakr (RA) was unanimously selected as the Khalifa, for three consecutive days at each time of *salat* he called out in the mosque: I don't think myself capable of such a grave responsibility, any one else may please take my place. No one did.

Hazrat Umar (RA), used to roam the streets of Madinah in the dead of the night when he was Khalifa, to see for himself the condition of his people and used to offer direct help and assistance to people in need. Yet he would spend nights weeping, fearful of answering to Allah about this responsibility of leadership.

When Umar bin Abdul Aziz became Khalifa, people wanted to make a new palace for him, he refused, and took up abode in a simple dilapidated hut. He ordered his wife, who was the daughter of a king, to deposit all her jewellery and ornaments in the mosque. He wanted to live with him (RA). Khalid bin Walid (RA) continued to serve with the same zeal and ardour under Ubadah bin Jarrah, when he was reduced from being the Commander in Chief to the position of a common soldier.

These are examples of leaders in Islam, who considered leadership a sacred trust, who feared Allah, and were not power mongers. But then Sheikh Saadi has said: the Muslims are in the graves and Islam is in the books. Yes, Islam has answers, but are we ready to rise above our vanities and base desires. Is it perhaps the greatest challenge, at the turn of the century, to Muslims in particular and mankind in general. Till then, we will only get the leader we deserve.

It would mean that these parties and politicians will be forced to appeal to the people by being motivated above everything else to ensure that the people vote for them, not just because they or the opposing party is the worse of two evils, but because they want to vote for that party's policies which truly serve their needs. What a novel idea!

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Puppets on a String

by Hasina Zaman

I envy my maid, Suroti. I envy her for her ill-treatment and hence her bliss amidst the cauldron of unrest in the country that is threatening to spill over any time, any day. The education that I've always looked upon as my most precious possession, an asset to be proud of, as a tag which distinguishes me from Suroti's class, has become a case to me these days—because I can read. And what I read disturbs me and robs me of the bliss which is Suroti's overmeant for advantage.

Each morning the papers bring in news of escalating animosity between the main political rivals. Particulate in the elections and uphold the Constitution says the party-in-power. Particulate in the election and face dire consequences, says its rival group. What am I to do? Do I want the freedom to exercise my option 'to vote or not to vote'—or do I want to live? Do I dare to disagree—no or do I opt for safety? The nation, composed of millions like me, has now been put on a balance, the scales of which have freedom, with its inherent right to disagree, on one side, and life, with its essential guarantee of security, sanctity and sanity, on the other.

Which does the nation choose—that is, which does an adult, educated citizen like me, choose? Suroti, luckily enough, has been spared this dilemma. The unlettered class she represents, is oblivious of the day to day escalation of the national crises, although not of the general air of discontent. The newspapers do not rob them of sleep, nor do they send chills down their spine since they can't read the horrendous reports of shooting, killing, destruction and disruptions which are the morning fare for us, the literates.

We, as a class, have been reduced to the status of 'puppets on a string', to be pulled and tugged this way and that according to the whims and fancies of our "politically powerful" compatriots. Our little squeaks and groans of protest are stifled by the thunderous roar of

their political voices. We are covered into acquiescence and silence.

Caught up as we are in the political web of animosity between the two egomaniacs, we, the ordinary, peace-loving citizens, have no choice but to let ourselves be dragged and pulled by the stronger, more lethally potent force, i.e. the party opposing the general elections. Their strength lies not only in issuing threats of death, destruction, and the latest, of imposing curfew which is itself a dreaded word since it connotes shooting-on-sight anyone caught breaking it, but also of getting away with it, and in increasing instances, getting away with actually carrying out these threats. We have no power to disregard these venomous threats because we care about our life, honour and our property, which are now hostages in the hands of these threatener.

The nation is seen hurtling downhill, yet nothing can be done to stop it, because those who could, chose not to. By its unflinching determination to hold general elections within the time-frame prescribed by the constitution, the party-in-power has no doubt upheld the constitution, but in the process it has exposed the people who are supposed to be the power behind the constitution, to a very turbulent and scary future. We are left defenceless against the mounting tension and violence that is gripping the major cities. The invitation to participate in the elections remains unheeded by the majority of us. We dare not participate because we care not to die.

By boycotting the elections, and in addition, by threatening dire consequences on people who choose to participate, the parties opposing the elections have usurped our right to decide for ourselves and have thus reduced us into a nation of 'puppets on a string'. Those of us who may have independently and voluntarily boycotted the elections will now be seen to have stayed at home due to hartal and the threatened curfew.

We Ask for a Return to Sanity

by W Rahman

AFTER two years of battered breath, watching our political leaders posturing and power playing, the whole sordid political conflict is finally culminating in the general elections on February 15th. An acute disenchantment gnaws at our souls as, it can be safely said, whatever decisions have been taken by the parties, the benefit of the people have never been their principal concern. If the present condition of our country, our economy and our very lives have to be engineered for our advantage, the political leaders of this country need to profoundly rethink their strategy.

From constitution to interim government, boycott to resignation en masse, from non-cooperation to agitation, from demonstration to hartal, we have endured what seems like a millennia of uncertainty. Volumes have been written in the newspapers. The frustration of the people have been expressed, suggestions and advice given, and numerous pleas for an amiable resolution have been put forth so the country can focus on the glimmerings of economic progress that loomed as a possibility. But

for all the attention that the people have received, it is suspect whether policy makers are in tune with the needs of our country and whether they are, in fact, qualified to lead a nation.

With absolute disregard for any kind of accountability whatsoever, the ruling party has steam rolled themselves into a one party election. As the entire country turns into a battlefield it is positively sickening to see our Prime Minister joyfully canvassing for votes. Rather than thinking about resignation (a fact that would be imminent in any democratic nation, given the present state of violence) due to the obvious lack of support for her actions, she is single handedly plunging us into further and further depths of unnecessary despair. We, the people, did not elect this party to lead us into this degree of danger—constitutional propriety notwithstanding.

In the past few years Dhaka city has turned into a den of terrorism. Almost every family has a member who has either been a victim of some form of crime or have suf-

fered from fear of it. Hijacking, extortion, kidnapping, death threats etc are rampant and most often carried out by politically sheltered hoodlums, drug, corruption, a severely corrupt bureaucracy, an ineffective traffic system, lack of water, lack of electricity, lack of gas has further contributed to destroying the quality of life of Dhaka city dwellers and almost every citizen of Bangladesh. These days it is also the plight of every vehicle owner to venture into the streets not knowing when their vehicle will be damaged or destroyed by paid mobs.

Bangladesh's international image is tarnished to the point where the entire outside world pictures it as a nation in civil war, a nation watches us through their media almost as one would watch caged jackals clambering at each others throats. Select visions of torch processions, teargassing, street fighting are almost daily screened in the news abroad. Most governments are advis-

We Demand the 'Unvote'

by Rashida Ahmad

truly democratic choice. Try and imagine, if you can, a country that exists with two major parties, neither of them representing or considering what the people really want. In fact their whole reason for existence is for the leaders of these two parties to oppose each other and any statement made by either of them is wholly irrelevant to reality and the needs of the country (hard to imagine, I know, in the peaceful democratic climate of our own nation currently enjoyed).

So what choice do the people have when it comes to voting in an election? Party A or party B (or perhaps extremist fringe parties C, D and E with small followings who will never win the 'majority vote' or have mainstream appeal because there is still some sanity left in the country, and in any case these parties don't have the backing or funding to coerce that many people).

Well, it's just not good enough, is it? What if you say you don't want to vote be-

cause there's no real choice when it comes to choosing the 'lesser of two evils' (and what, as in most cases, if the two evils are equally evil)? Your voice goes unheard, my friend. The simple fact of the matter is: No vote, No voice. No choice.

But there should be a choice. We should as a people demand the 'unvote', or 'divote'. Call it what you will, I don't want to vote any of these people in vote should be an option that is regarded with all seriousness as an electoral right.

It would mean that no government could be elected to power without the true and real majority of a nation behind them. Because if you fail to vote, then you non-vote is automatically counted as an 'unvote'.

So that if 60 per cent of the voting population in a country do not vote because they are too disillusioned by the choice of possible governments, then no party can be elected on the flimsy premise that the majority of

people that did vote, voted for them (as appears to be quite common for example in British elections).

This would, in all probability, result in more people being motivated to vote. These people who hitherto had no choice but to remain voiceless would stand up and be counted!

Yes, we demand power to the people through the 'unvote'! Just imagine, if by some fantastic leap of absurdity a ruling party were 'forced' to hold a one-party election under a so-called democratic constitution they would still lose, if no-one turned out to vote.

And if by any chance, 80 per cent of the population is forcibly stopped from exercising their electoral rights through 'threats' of violence (say, for example, by an opposition that believes the election to be 'unconstitutional') then the election results would be an 'overwhelming majority' of unvotes resulting in neither party being elected (perhaps

When Shall We Learn the Hard Lesson?

by Hybat J Chowdhury

reached the end of our patience yet? Is there any further slide to be made to reach the limit of our endurance? After all people are human beings and would obviously wake up at some point, out of sheer frustration, to the stark reality of how they are being played with by their leaders for their (leaders') self-interest and benefit. And believe it or not that will be the day when the leaders and not their followers would find themselves at the receiving end of the consequences and would be hardpressed to look for the escape route for them. In any eventuality, such a thing is inevitable and one destined to face it. However, much people become heroship-mongers one has to face the reality. Our memory is always short and can neither be stretched for too long nor too far backwards, especially when we get engulfed with new situation and emerging events affecting adversely our lives.

We, the people, have so far preferred to remain somewhat quiet and silent observers to the painful drama

being played on the national stage in the name of democratic exercise for close to two years now. I am one of those majority who usually cannot help but keep patience to the extreme and do not easily get perturbed by some wrong turn of events. Of course there are many who have already shown their limit of patience by displaying their exasperation through the unending stream of write-ups on the subject in the print media. But alas, no avail. And the long awaited grand finale is at last unfolding before us now. I for one know very well indeed, like many others, what it is actually like to be in the midst of the great melee at the nation's political arena and watching helplessly the confusing and often uncontrollable events affecting our lives.

Perhaps the political situation at the start did not look so desperate, but it has deliberately and progressively been made to reach a point of no return. All the negotiations and mediations, pressures and persuasions from within and outside have so far proved to no avail. Even foreign envoys were dragged on the stage to meddle in our national affair, indeed created by our own doings. Government and main opposition parties have continued to remain firm on their respective grounds and political stand-off is allowed to continue up to the very end, at least till to date. Upon failure to find any tangible solution of the crisis we are now debating on who was and is responsible for the failure.

Enough warning signals have already been given by the people through print media to those who really

matter, to refrain from taking any confrontational course, but apparently the warning signals have not so far been heeded. Not yet. And the visible intransigence is allowed to persist. Would the solution to the political crisis fuelled by some stubborn stance taken by the contending parties and presently passing through the tortuous path, ever find any light at the end of the dark tunnel? That is the question in everyone's mind. Such a solution is not apparently visible now. But who knows? Anything can happen to salvage the nation, even when it is seen as impossible and viewed to be much too late.

As the saying goes there is no last word in politics. The one and only big question remains as to how this impossibility can be turned into a possibility. This may well be taken as a challenge. Soon

the people may even start voicing enough is enough. Will the good sense prevail on our leaders to save this nation for the sake of the people or at least for their own sake? When shall we learn the hard lesson? We have fallen flat on our backs by the events when all other nations around us scrambling to get into the race for economic progress and prosperity and indeed some have even found such progress within sight. Common people are only concerned of their own livelihood and well-being and seem to care very less on how the country is run and not 'ruled' by what form or type of government.

The stake is much too high if we fail to find some solution to the crisis without further loss of time. Let us not prove the age-old saying that a nation gets what it deserves and certainly we deserve a better fate than the one apparently threatening our future. It is never too late to salvage the nation from any situation however much difficult it may look.

Constitutional Conundrum and Conventions

by Manzoor Hasan

THE country seems to have reached an impasse: politically and constitutionally. But there may still be a solution to this deadlock. Let me propose a constitutional paradigm which would take into account the aspirations of the main parties. Essentially, the present impasse has to be resolved within the framework of the present Constitution but by employing a mechanism which is not catered for by the latter. The demand for the caretaker neutral administration to oversee the forthcoming general elections has come about over the recent years but due to various reasons the political parties have not been able to resolve it either prior to the resignation of the Members of Parliament or since their resignation. One of the main impediments has been the lack of provision in the Constitution to allow the formation of a caretaker neutral administration.

The Constitution of Bangladesh is a written one but unlike most countries Bangladesh is not just governed by the written legal rules of the Constitution. The broader definition of Constitution is a collection of the legal rules and the non-legal rules. This definition of Constitution is applicable to both written and unwritten constitutions. But the incontrovertible fact is that the legal rules, either within a written

constitution or an unwritten one, cannot operate in isolation. The Constitution, the Acts of Parliament, the rules and regulations and the decisions of judges are only the legal components of any government. They form the "visible" parts of the government but then they are supplemented, modified or even nullified by the constitutional conventions. These conventions, I would describe, as the "invisible" parts of the government. These constitutional conventions can either develop over a period of time through body politic or much more quickly through a political agreement. It is the latter that I would like to concentrate on in the context of the present constitutional impasse.

Constitutional historians will be able to put forward examples of many agreements arrived at by the politicians to work in a particular way. These agreements are immediately binding, morally and politically. At a later stage these agreements can be, if felt necessary, enacted by the Parliament to become the law of the land. The effect of such conventions is to supplement, modify or nullify a provision of the Constitution. A medical analogy can be drawn by stating that such a constitutional convention paralyses the arm of the law but does not amputate the limb; it merely makes its use impos-

sible. There are many examples of this effect of constitutional conventions. In many Constitutions the heads of state are given the legal power to veto or refuse one's assent to laws passed by the legislature. This power has been nullified by constitutional conventions. Nowadays, the Head of the State of the United Kingdom by constitutional convention does not refuse her assent to Bills or disallow an Act which has been duly passed by the Parliament of a member of the Commonwealth and assented by the Governor-General.

The Third French Republic and the United States provide a convention against the re-election of their respective Presidents for a second and a third term, respectively. Constitutional conventions can also transfer powers granted in a Constitution from one person to another. The Canadian Constitution gives a clear power to the Queen's representative, the Governor-General, to appoint whom he pleases to aid and advise him in the government of Canada. In practice, by constitutional convention, the Governor-General appoints ministers on the advice of the Prime Minister. Similarly, the power of the head of state is transferred to others in the exercise of, among other things, the dissolution of the Parliament.

In order to extricate ourselves from the present political and constitutional impasse an agreement can be reached by the political parties to transfer the executive power either to the President or to an agreed third person to form a neutral caretaker administration.

Furthermore, the agreement can set down a new set of formalities in relation to a nationwide general election.

In conclusion it has to be stated that the constitutional conventions must not be seen in isolation from the body politic and the law of the Constitution. The constitutional conventions can provide the much needed flexibility and change when the formal mechanism of constitutional amendments is not possible in the short term or will become politically and financially extremely expensive in the medium to long term. Above all, in the words of Dicey, constitutional conventions were "intended to secure the ultimate supremacy of the electorate as the true political sovereign of the State." The onus has always been on the politicians to find a resolution and at this eleventh hour it is even more important for common and constitutional sense to prevail and save us all from a prolonged period of unrest, which can only be against our national interest.

In a similar manner and