

From Bad to Worse

A government press note warning against unlawful acts and the ruling party's decision to resist opposition programmes that obstruct normal life are the first signs of 'get tough' policy—she spoke about prior to the elections— Begum Zia has decided to pursue. We think the pursuance of this policy at this stage of the political stalemate will only further deepen the crisis rather than contribute towards solving it. The fact that unlawful acts are committed during the hartal programmes of the opposition is true. It is also true that there is a lot of intimidation and coercion in implementing the strikes and hartals. But far more important than these is the fact that *fundamentally the problem with the opposition is political and not one of law and order, and as such the solution will have to come from political negotiations and not from a show of force.*

There is lot of criticism of the government for the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. That criticism, however, refers to the rising acts of crimes in the urban areas and to the incredible lack of security of life and property that citizens now feel. Here there is a lot of scope for the government to take tough measures. But to apply that attitude in solving what is essentially a political problem will only lead to further stiffening of attitude of the opposition.

Just as we counsel the government to avoid violent confrontation, so also we call upon the opposition to desist from forcing compliance of their programmes upon the people. Non-cooperation movement by definition must be non-violent. It must be based on persuasion, motivation and voluntarism, and not on coercion. There is no denying the fact that wherever members of public refuse to comply with opposition's programme, they are harassed, humiliated and sometimes even physically assaulted. We condemn all forms of violence on both sides and call for restraint.

We are convinced that force on either side will not contribute towards any solution. Dialogue must replace the street confrontations, and must do so before the situation deteriorates further. Leadership on both sides appears to have become frozen in their respective positions which, during the past months, have yielded nothing positive. What we need is the courage to be humble, and the patriotism to put the country above everything else.

Troubled Nilphamari

There has been a complete breakdown of law and order in Nilphamari for nearly a week now. The trouble ensued on February 19 following a TV announcement of electoral victory for BNP candidate Dewan Nurun Nabi. And, like the bull in a china shop, it has since splintered the glass-house all around.

The declaration of results touched off outbursts among the supporters of independent candidate Ahsan Ahmed Hasan, a BNP expellee. With marked vehemence they protested what they termed vote rigging and fictitious results of the poll. The processionists swelled in ranks following Hasan's arrest. Their mood turned uglier and violent clashes occurred between the police and the demonstrators.

In the line of duty young journalist Kamruzzaman died as police opened fire sharply underscoring thereby the increasing concern for the security of journalists in the discharge of their professional responsibilities. It was only after public pressure mounted on the authorities that they handed over the deceased reporter's body to his family. Thus he was buried at his village home 52 hours after his death. Another victim Abdul Aziz's remains were with the police until February 23. The authorities were apparently forced to release former BNP leader Ahsan Ahmed and some local student leaders enabling them to attend Kamruzzaman's funeral. Some enraged inhabitants of the town did not allow important district officers to say their Eid prayers at the Central Eidgah nor could they place bouquet at the Shahid Minar, it is learnt.

Black flags were said to be fluttering as a sign of alienation of the district authorities and law enforcement agencies from the local people. Ironically, it has been a same-side folly of sorts with the backlash of feuding within the local BNP erupting to an extent where even a former BNP follower-turned-candidate openly alleged vote rigging. Basically, however, it exposes an administrative bankruptcy and wavering.

Exceptional Folks

When the quest for money, regardless of what source it comes from, has become a past-time for many almost globally, Tokyoites have set a world record for turning over lost wallets to the police. The total amount involved has been of the order of 26 million US dollars.

Tokyo has sometimes been rocked by corruption scandals but equally true also is the fact that quite a few in high places resigned their posts when a moral controversy dogged their footsteps. We now have the evidence of presumably not very well-off Japanese people depositing moneyful of missing wallets with the police and imparting a powerful moral lesson to the rest of the world.

One of our rickshaw pullers the other day turned over to the Ramna police a lady's handbag he had found at the Shishu Park which contained two ourives of gold. He at once belongs to that human breed of which the Japanese or other Good Samaritans are parts. Need for money notwithstanding, it is the wealth of mind they preferred to be known by.

To prove, however, that honesty can be exceptionally paying, the top Japanese do-gooder, the 19-year old who had returned 190,000 dollars to the police got the amount back after

THE question posed above may sound too dramatic to some but most people seem to sense that we stand today at a cross-road. Either we will veer away towards uncertainty, chaos and conflict or we will emerge strong, stable and united. The choice, it seems to me, is with Begum Zia. The New York Times expressed the same thought. In an editorial it said, 'If the prime minister decides instead on one-party rule, backed by bayonets, she risks losing her claim to legitimacy, and the world's better regard.' The New York Times has clearly pointed out the options available to Begum Zia. She will have to decide quickly because delay will be seen by the nation as a decision by her to rule by bayonet. She will have to face the consequences of such a decision. The opposition political parties have made it clear that they will never accept the legitimacy of the failed electoral exercise of 15 February or the government formed on its basis.

For over two years the opposition parties have advocated general election under the aegis of a neutral caretaker government. As far as one can gauge from different opinion polls, they have persuaded the vast majority of the people, regardless of class or even party loyalty, that it is a reasonable demand. After all, the people have seen a free and fair election under the neutral interim government of Justice Shahabuddin and they think it is a good idea to follow that model.

Surprisingly, it is the BNP government which has now provided a conclusive justification and created a national

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consensus in its favour. After the shocking experience of February 15 there is hardly any one, except perhaps a few BNP members, who question the desirability and necessity of holding elections under a neutral caretaker government. Again, the New York Times, as usual, made a most perceptive comment when it noted, 'Begum Zia has been unable to persuade opponents that her government, and its armed forces, can be trusted to conduct a fair election.'

The February 15 experience has demonstrated to the opposition parties that their mistrust of the BNP government is fully justified. They are now convinced that they would have been deceived and frustrated if they naively believed that Magura was a mere exception and that such aberrations may not have occurred in all the 300 constituencies.

Magura was certainly an authentic preview of things to come during the general election when the Magura-type excesses were brazenly repeated. On 15 February, the BNP knew that they were going to win all the seats, no matter what percentage of voters cast their votes. Yet rigging on a massive scale took place. Impartial observers, both local and foreign, have noted that ballot box stuffing was not just a matter of a few isolated incidents. Party activists did not leave anything to chance, in many centres they took control of the polling centres, stamped

the ballot papers and stuffed the boxes.

In one of the most stunningly absurd statements, Begum Zia claimed in her press conference on 18 February that the 15th February so-called election was free and fair and she has got a mandate to govern. When the journalists pointed out that rigging occurred on a massive scale, she admitted the irregularities but squarely blamed the opposition

Perhaps she thought that this was the only way she could claim that she has got a mandate to govern. Her press conference has convinced even impartial people that she is determined to hang on to office as long as she can, regardless of the legitimacy or lack thereof of her regime.

The question that baffles the people is the performance of the Election Commission. How can the election results

be validated by the Election Commission when the prime minister herself admitted irregularities? Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), has, in a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner, further confirmed widespread rigging and ballot stuffing. For the benefit of the readers I would like to quote extracts from FEMA's letter dated February 18, 1996 (of which a copy was kindly provided to me by the FEMA chairperson). It said, 'Since the (first) report was issued, the FEMA office has been receiving further confirmation about widespread rigging and ballot stuffing as well as extremely low percentage of voter turnout in various polling stations throughout the country. It appears that the votes cast in most of the 119 constituencies already declared do not tally with the actual presence of voters in these constituencies on the polling day. The kind of information that FEMA has been receiving through its network and volunteers also corroborates the reports by the national and international media. While upholding the routine constitutional norm it is a great tragedy that the entire credibility of the electoral process and integrity of the Election Commission has been undermined by such malpractice, as widely reported and observed. The question of credibility cannot be brushed aside.'

The chairperson of FEMA, in concluding his letter requested that the Chief Election Commissioner declare the so-called election results as null and void. He said, 'In the process of reviewing I further urge you to consider that the February 15, 1996 election was null and void for the reasons cited above and therefore, it is imperative to take immediate steps to hold a free and fair election.'

National and international opinion has quickly crystallized to reject the so-called election of 15 February as a valid and acceptable electoral exercise. Begum Zia and her colleagues must realize that they cannot use such a fatally flawed process as a mandate to govern. The only option open to her is to resign immediately and to request the President of the Republic to form a neutral caretaker government. He may, of course, consult the Supreme Court but neither the President nor the Supreme Court can possibly ignore the national consensus that has developed about the necessity for a neutral caretaker government to conduct the election. Begum Zia may be tempted to continue her rule but, as the New York Times noted, she risks losing her legitimacy. Regimes, trying to rule without the consent of the people, often end disastrously but, unfortunately, they also inflict unnecessary sufferings on the people and cause irreparable harm to the nation's economic life. Must we pay such a heavy price?

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



for it and said, 'There were irregularities at some places but those were done by the opposition to discredit the government... they called hartal, intimidated the voters and forced their entry into polling centres.' So she believes that the ballot box stuffing was done by the Awami League members! A very remarkable thought indeed. What were the armed forces and the police and BDR men doing on that day? Did they also conspire with the opposition in permitting them to go into the booths and do the ballot stuffing?

The funny part is that Begum Zia does not seem to realize the absurdity of her claims.

be validated by the Election Commission when the prime minister herself admitted irregularities? Is it not the duty of the Election Commission to take cognizance of the statement by so high a personage? They can't pretend that the statement was not made or that she did not know what she was saying. Mr Justice Sadeque was said at one point before the election that if he was unable to ensure fair polls he would resign his office. Now is the time for him to act and prove to the nation that he is a man of honour.

The call for declaring the fictitious results null and void has already been made by dif-

Consequences of February 15 Election

by Dr Mustafa Chowdhury

The crisis of democracy arises if the government cannot sustain legitimacy. Legitimacy crisis occurs if the government fails to protect the rights of the people including the right to exercise franchise.

ELECTIONS permit a peaceful change of leadership. They make it possible for the largest number of persons to participate in politics and permit the largest number of viewpoints to compete for popular support. They provide legitimacy for the regime and create a sense of mass participation in government, and serve to create a democratic facade for the regime.

The crisis of democracy arises if the government cannot sustain legitimacy. Legitimacy crisis occurs if the government fails to protect the rights of the people including the right to exercise franchise.

The election was held amidst great violence, as apprehended. There was a very low turnout of voters. Since the opposition political parties boycotted the election, and voiced threats, people did not take interest in exercising their right to vote. Though the Election Commission claimed that 15% of the people participated in voting, much less than that number really voted in this election. At many such centres where reportedly there were no polling officers, BNP supporters were allegedly engaged in vote rigging. In some centres reportedly votes were cast more than the number of voters registered! Polling could not be held in 2431 out of 21,106 centres across the country. The massive deployment of some 400,000 members of the Army, BDR, Police and Ansar to prevent violence and facilitate voters' safe arrival to the

polling centres failed to convince the voters to come to the polling booths.

Since the poll results seem so manipulated the government has failed to gain legitimacy through this election. The image which it bore before the election of February 15, 1996 has been tarnished and its will and honesty are, naturally, seriously in question.

The February 15 election has rather proved to be a blessing in disguise for the opposition. The election has enabled the masses to observe and understand the farce of such election. Foreign diplomats and donor countries who had difficulty in comprehending the concept of a neutral caretaker government before February 15, 1996, have now perhaps realized the necessity of conducting elections under a neutral caretaker government.

What Next?

Since the February election has supposedly failed to gain legitimacy for the BNP government, it now has to accept the demand of a caretaker government put forward by the major opposition political parties. The reported vote rigging in this election appears to convince the people that

under BNP government no free and fair election can be held. Therefore, people may now extend more support to the opposition's demand for a caretaker government.

The opposition has already declared this government illegal and requested the President to form a caretaker government to hold free and fair elections within 90 days. Since BNP appears to have lost legitimacy and credibility, more so through this so-called election, it seems to have no choice but to concede to the opposition's demand; otherwise, the people may very soon build up a united and concerted movement.

Thus the acceptance by BNP of the opposition's demand for a neutral caretaker government may help in establishing social peace and stability and save democracy from ruination. Negatively, one apprehends, violence and anarchy may prevail and the country will pass through turmoil, disorder and instability. The consequence of such social and political instability will only lead the society to nowhere.

The writer is professor of Political Science at Dhaka University.

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.

Whither bridging the gap?

Sir, For instance, a com-monster or a villain is spell-bound and stupefied when he visits the house of a minister, a top ranking political leader, a bureaucrat, an industrialist or a famous businessman. He is simply thrilled and dumbfounded to see the pomp and grandeur of the house. Well I don't blame any one, this is fact. Most of our people live below poverty line. They live in sub-human condition. Their per capita income is US\$220 i.e. Taka 9020 per year. Tk 751 per month and Tk 25 per day. Can a common man or woman meet his/her daily expenses on food, housing, clothing, medical care etc. with a meagre amount of Tk 25 per day?

There are some people in our country who live in fantastically comfort and Babylonian opulence. How much money do they spend per month for their high standard of living, rest and recreation and tour abroad?

Why is such a colossal difference between a rich and poor man in our country? Does not the widening gap between the 'haves' and 'havenots' fall under the purview of violation of human rights?

It is not a violation of our Constitution Article 19 which says, '(1) The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens (2) The State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between man and man and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and opportunities in order to attain

a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic?'

What sort of free market economy are we following and for whom? To make the poor more poorer and the rich more richer?

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Appeal to eschew violence

Sir, An emergency meeting organised recently by the Bangladesh Inter-Religious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), held in its office at Iqbal Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka strongly urged all concerned to follow the path of non-violence. This is the context of the current political impasse and the very disturbing incidents of violence. Members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship of Bangladesh and the Christian peace group Pax-Christi, Bangladesh, also endorsed this appeal for tolerance and respect for life.

Brother JD'Souza
Secretary, BICPAJ and Advisor, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Bangladesh.

It is not a violation of our

shares and debentures are not listed with Dhaka or Chittagong Stock Exchange.

The Magura Paper Mill is a joint venture enterprise of government of China and government of Bangladesh. BCIC looks after the interest of government of Bangladesh in view of BCIC's long experience in the line while China has several thousand years of experience in paper making. Under the above facts it is time to find out the reasons of such delay/failure while investors' money have been totally stagnated, and diminishing as such.

Let our Security and Exchange Commission, the successor to Controller of Capital Issues, look into it seriously.

Sadiq Ali
1201/1 Maghbazar
Dhaka

Board of Investment, Khulna: A clarification

Sir, With reference to the above, this is to inform that the news published on 10/2/96 in The Daily Star stating 'some unidentified people set fire to the office of the Board of Investment, Khulna (Divisional Office). Fire Brigades put out the fire. The extent of damage could not be ascertained' is not correct. In fact on Friday afternoon, (9-2-96) some unknown persons blasted a bomb absolutely outside of the Board of Investment office near the corridor of Joint Stock Company office. However, the Board of Investment office was not affected.

Director,
Board of Investment,
Prime Minister's Office,
Khulna Division, Khulna.

Traffic jam

Sir, The traffic jam in the metropolis has virtually become a havoc. One has to wait

for long hours to pass through certain city roads. The traffic jam is also contributing to environmental pollution because the vehicles release huge amount of black smoke while waiting in the long queue during jam. Traffic jam is compelling people to waste their valuable time and energy which in turn is badly affecting the efficiency in the offices and other institutions.

The authority have to take urgent steps to contain traffic jam. Such steps may include, (i) removal of unauthorized shops, constructions, business etc. from the roads and footpaths, (ii) construction of separate lanes for rickshaws, (iii) strengthening the traffic administration for ensuring strict implementation of traffic rules.

M.Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

The name United Nations

Sir, Please allow me to extend any sincere appreciation to Mr Zahidul Islam Shimul, M A English, Jahangirnagar University, for his letter published in The Daily Star of January 31 which was in response to my letter (D/S 15/01/96).

I was just thinking to send the said letter to some Indian paper magazine for the desired information required by me, when I found the reply. Thanks also to The Daily Star.

However, I would further request the enlightened readers to quote the poem of Alfred Tennyson— 'Locksley Hall'. Unfortunately, in Khulna there is no such library from where best books written in languages other than Bangla can be had for reference. In Dhaka the case must be different. I believe.

K R Zaman

ferent responsible quarters. Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), has, in a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner, further confirmed widespread rigging and ballot stuffing. For the benefit of the readers I would like to quote extracts from FEMA's letter dated February 18, 1996 (of which a copy was kindly provided to me by the FEMA chairperson). It said, 'Since the (first) report was issued, the FEMA office has been receiving further confirmation about widespread rigging and ballot stuffing as well as extremely low percentage of voter turnout in various polling stations throughout the country. It appears that the votes cast in most of the 119 constituencies already declared do not tally with the actual presence of voters in these constituencies on the polling day. The kind of information that FEMA has been receiving through its network and volunteers also corroborates the reports by the national and international media. While upholding the routine constitutional norm it is a great tragedy that the entire credibility of the electoral process and integrity of the Election Commission has been undermined by such malpractice, as widely reported and observed. The question of credibility cannot be brushed aside.'

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