

Judicial Uprightness

The Indian Supreme Court in a landmark judgement on Friday freed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) from the Prime Minister's overall administrative control insofar as probing the Hawala scam goes.

By a single stroke of judicial intervention at the probing stage of the case, the highest court in India has ensured fair and impartial investigation by the federal agency and put the national leaders, both in the government and the opposition, whose names have figured in the sweeping corruption scandal, on a level ground.

Most of the prominent government ministers and top-ranking opposition leaders arrested earlier on have since been granted bail by the court. They include the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani and Rao's arch-rival in the Congress Party, Arjun Singh. So, not only has the Supreme Court eliminated the possibility of any impression of a CBI bias in carrying out the probe, the once jailed leaders on both sides are also on bail to defend themselves without any fetters whatsoever.

Although this has undoubtedly earned adverse publicity for Indian politicians, at home and abroad, there is a positive side to it as well. The very uncovering of the sensational bribery scandal involving top political leaders of the country could not but strengthen the belief of the votaries of democracy in the power of public information and disclosures. Expectations of high ethical standards in politics have been resoundingly echoed.

Here is a supremely transparent instance of public accountability undergoing a litmus test in a neighbouring democracy which we are hoping would emerge stronger from the experience. The institutional strength of India's democracy has been largely due to the demonstrative independence of her judiciary, freedom of the press and strong bureaucratic traditions. Unless, however, the criminalisation of politics in India, featured by money power and strong-arm tactics, is rolled back sooner than later, it would eventually eat into the vitals of Indian democracy.

Prosper or Perish

National politics is increasingly disrupting normal life in the country. Student politics has been doing its equivalent in some universities for a much longer period. Rajshahi University tops the list. The normal functioning of this university could be carried out only for 103 days last year. Student clashes — mostly between the Jatayatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) and the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) — forced closure of the university for 188 days and the authority kept it closed for another 44 days just to avoid clashes.

The casualty figures of three students killed and hands of four others chopped off and damages to the university property can well keep us guessing whether the RU campus is a battle ground or a place of study. Rajshahi University could have beaten all other universities to it, had Chittagong University not displayed an even more deplorable student militancy and exacting of revenge. In fact, all universities in the country have a record of violence enough to make the nation ashamed of.

One thing is clear that the seats of higher learning are fast degenerating into cradles of musclemancy and terrorism. The tragedy is that the general students who far outnumber the political cadres, fall helpless victims to violent student politics. The students' right to unhindered study and other academic activities gets hardly encouraged by the parent political parties or the teachers at times. The question of punishing the violators seldom arises in real terms. In a situation like this it is difficult to maintain a congenial academic atmosphere.

The greatest casualty of all is the higher study in the country. Why can't student politics be a battle of wits instead of armed rivalry? The challenge is here. We have to decide whether we meet it intellectually or the way we are doing it now. That answer will determine if we prosper or perish.

One of ours for Commons

Congratulations to Dr Kabir Hossain on his nomination as a Conservative Party candidate from East London's Betnal Green Bow constituency for the British parliamentary elections. His sense of achievement is so much the greater for being a Conservative Party choice rather than a liberal party nominee. It seems the conservatives are optimistic about Hossain's chances in a constituency where the Bangalees are a sizable number.

They have a sprinkling of representation in the local bodies and councils but it is for the first time that one has had the blessings of the Conservative Party to try his luck for the Commons. Hossain has done his own community in Britain proud and, in an extended sense, all of us here, too. If he goes on to become a British MP, regardless of whether or not his party is voted back to power, he is likely to contribute his mite towards bettering the lot of the subcontinental population in Britain.

Reputably, the Bangalees are politically highly conscious wherever they maybe, and articulate in the expression of their view-points which perhaps mark them out among the immigrant communities. They are quick to learn the political idiom of the country of their adoption. Furthermore, the British public have had a sort of sustained interest in the evolution of Bangalee politics and in the welfare of its people.

Twenty-five Years After Independence, Why Must We Depend on the BBC or CNN for Objective News about Our Own Country?

Control and manipulation of the state-owned radio and television are not new phenomena in Bangladesh. In fact, the process started long ago during the British Raj, when the radio was used extensively and quite effectively for war propaganda.

THE question posed in the title of the article is not a rhetorical one. I ask the question in sadness and frustration. It seems to summarise the nation's failures in different fields of life. In a moment of crisis in our national life, we instinctively turn to the BBC or VOA or ABC but never do we think of turning to the Bangladesh Television or Radio Bangladesh for accurate and objective information on what is really happening in the country. We do not trust these national agencies.

The now-discredited one-party election on 15 February was an occasion when people in all walks of life wanted to get an objective picture of the political scene. Did the voters turn up at the polling centres? Was there the usual stuffing of the ballot boxes by the ruling party? Did the presiding officers turn up at the centres to perform their duty? What was the public response to the opposition's call for the boycott? Unfortunately, the official news media, owned and operated by the government with the money of taxpayers, failed to provide reliable information on any of these points. It is a matter of profound regret that both the Radio Bangladesh and the BTV have totally lost their credibility. Begum Khaleeda Zia and the BNP are fully responsible for the current sad state of our official news media.

Control and manipulation of

the state-owned radio and television are not new phenomena in Bangladesh. In fact, the process started long ago during the British Raj, when the radio was used extensively and quite effectively for war propaganda. During the Pakistani period, these media were not only used to bolster the regime that happened to be in power; Gen Ayub Khan went a step further by creating the Pakistan Press Trust to publish state-owned newspapers. These newspapers are still being published though their circulation has fallen so low that they virtually run on taxpayer's money. Thus the desire of the rulers to control and manipulate the news media in their interest has been a fact of life in this country for a long time.

However, the people are fed up with this practice. They resent such gross abuse of their money by the government. They are no longer prepared to foot the bill for agencies such as the TV and Radio when these media are blatantly used for propaganda purposes and not for objective and unbiased dissemination of national and international news.

Public opinion on this issue crystallised during the nationwide agitation against the autocratic regime of Gen Ershad.

In the charter of demands prepared by the leaders of the different political parties and their alliances, the control and management of the state-owned news media figured prominently. These demands had strong grassroots support. When the political blueprint for the future was finally drafted by the three major alliances, the autonomy of the

able to watch Bangladesh Television or listen to the national radio for correct and objective news.

Unfortunately, they were rudely disappointed almost from the beginning of the BNP rule. There were no changes in radio or television. In fact, these powerful media were turned into propaganda vehicles for Begum Zia and her

owned newspapers. These were turned into mere propaganda sheets of the BNP and beating the BNP drum was their only job.

What is remarkable about the whole issue is that Begum Zia has broken her pledge to the nation without providing any explanation. She has broken many pledges during her five years in office but this one the whole nation has noted very carefully because everyone (all television viewers and radio listeners) has a strong interest in seeing change on this issue. They do not want to continue to suffer the indignity of depending on foreign news agencies for truthful news about their own country. Begum Zia and the BNP government have let them down. A former BNP information minister, well-known for crude and blunt talk, boasted that since they were an elected government they would run the state-owned news media as they wished and no one should question this right. Despite extremely loyal service the minister eventually lost his job for an act of disobedience but nothing changed under his successor. Gross abuse of the taxpayer's money for the glorification of the party and its leader has continued.

The farcical exercise on 15

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



state-owned radio and television was included as a major demand of the nation. The demand was that the radio and television as well as the state-owned newspapers should be placed in the care of autonomous bodies somewhat along the lines of BBC, in order to release them from the stranglehold of the party in power. The BNP was a party to this charter of demands. It was a solemn pledge given to the nation by the three alliances. People in all walks of life were jubilant when Ershad fell and one of the causes of jubilation was that at last they would be

party. The nation was shocked to see that Begum Zia had followed even exceeded Ershad in her abuse of the BTV and the radio. People began to turn off the television when the news time came because they were fed up with seeing the same faces day in and day out. Whether there was any news worthy event or not, some sort of report on Begum Zia seemed to be obligatory. The ministers, the joke went, were the only ones to watch the BTV during news time because they loved to see their own pictures on the television screen. As far as the state-

Divided You Stand, United We Fall

by Sayed Talat Kamal

THE spokesman for one party calls it a success, the spokesman for another party calls it a failure. The people call it farcical, and it is not the result of elections they are talking about.

The term 'non-cooperation' when last used was used to send a strong message across nearly a thousand miles. The call was a prologue to the historical six point demand — in 1971, which led to a war. Today the call can be heard again from the same party, but this time could it just lead to a civil war, setting brother against brother, father against son?

As the situation progresses, or in this case deteriorates, no party can claim success or failure with the present political crisis. The shout that the success of the movement is the call of the people or the cry that the people has not supported the call of the movement are all personalised 'dreams' conjured up by the leadership of the respective political parties in the country.

No contributing member of society should say that he can support either parties in light of the present political situation. People do not bring out their vehicles in the heart because of the risk of its destruction and the risk to their lives, not because they fully believe in the cause of the opposition. People are attending office not to show support for the government in this period of opposition called 'non-cooperation,' but because they cannot afford to lose any more working days. Destruction of property, public or private, is a crime. Not because of the irrationality

and chaos it brings but because of the amount of valuable resources, including foreign exchange, wasted. With the loss of more and more working days and loss of productivity, more and more failed deadlines, in the export industries and more and more missed school days, the people of this country are being asked to pay a far heavier price than they can either afford to pay or are willing to pay.

The person making a contribution to society, the person trying to make ends meet, the honest individual who wants nothing more than to live his life are the people who are saying — enough. The political leaders are playing their own game of supremacy in their ongoing struggle to be one step ahead of the 'enemy', losing the true sense of the fight far behind.

The masses supporting the movement have always been delinquents and people who cannot make a contribution to society. The economy does not help, with the growing disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' an animosity for each other has developed. With the advent of corruption there are a lot of people in the country with amenities that they do not deserve, advantages that are not their due. Because of this the country must undergo intense reform for any headway to be made. But with a reformed and new competent leadership,

The majority of the people in this country are moved by emotions and sentiment, not by the black and white of an economic or an ideological platform. A definite lack of formal education among the voters only helps in the confusion. In a country where the voters cast their votes with the recognition of a symbol instead of a rhetoric, democracy is not what needs to be fought for. The leadership of this country must concentrate on encouraging foreign investment, open markets and seeing that the living standards of the people improve.

The leadership is only putting the wool over the masses' eyes, and confusing them with irrelevant ideas in their pursuit for power. With the support of people who do not know better and who do not understand that destruction of property, killing of people over what is considered ideology differences it is pulling the country further down into the doldrums.

The old styled politics of yesterday has to be discontinued immediately for a more intelligent approach to development. Unfortunately, the political culture is still embedded in the politics of nostalgia. Political leaders are still judged for competence with familial ties instead of education or ability. The leader of a mostly uneducated nation must be among the most highly edu-

cated, and one with the ability to use that education effectively. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Prime Minister until 1990, was the architect of the economic miracle that has increased the Singapore per capita income to US \$23,000, in just 30 years. The second richest nation in Asia, after Japan, Singapore was officially recognized as a developed country this year.

The present day hot item, on the world agenda is democracy for all. Bangladesh in the present day is still too immature to utilise it for the benefit of all its citizens. Democracy comes with liberalisation of the economy and with the liberalisation of ideas. The people would still prefer to have their thoughts governed.

The majority of the people are more concerned about at least two square meals a day, they do not care for ideas that promise them a better life in the near future. The masses are like small children, only just beginning to venture out into the world. They are not equipped to understand that a little restraint now will promise a consistent uniform country-wide development later. And besides the economy has conditioned them to only think of their own benefit and the benefit of their kin, what matter is it to them of the benefit of people with whom they have no contact.

The country is in need of a

positive development in the hands of a leadership that is committed to the good of the nation and not just their own. In the twenty-five years of the nation's independence, such a leader has yet to rise. Today a larger number of the people in the country are more educated and more cognizant to their environment than the numbers during the independence; today the people are demanding of their rights.

With the growth of industrialisation in the country and the export of labour, more and more people in this country are becoming aware that the economic benefits can also be theirs. The industrialisation was jump started by industrial investment, and by foreign investors. If the current political trend continues the country will lose what little development that has taken place so far, alienating foreign investors and local investment.

The economy has never been the ruling party's to own. It has always been the asset of the nation and its people. The political opposition parties at any given time in the last twenty-five years have attempted to hurt the economy in their bid to hurt the ruling party. The result: an occasional change in the leadership and a falling economy.

The politics of this country has proved farcical to outside observers. The only news that reaches beyond the borders have been negative. News of

February is unworthy of being called an election because not more than two to five per cent of the real voters cast their votes and the legal requirements of a proper election were not fulfilled. The demand for declaring it null and void is reaching a crescendo. There is, therefore, no doubt that new elections will have to be held very soon to put the nation back on track. Otherwise we will plunge into uncertainty, instability and even breakdown of law and order. As the nation goes into the preparations for a new general election, the question of the control and management of the officially-owned and operated news media must once again be brought into national focus. We must build up a national consensus on this issue.

The shame of having to turn on the BBC or the CNN whenever the nation reaches a crossroads is unacceptable to the nation. All the political parties must pledge that regardless of who wins and forms the government, the official news media will no longer be used for party of personal propaganda. I sincerely hope that civic bodies, professional groups and others active in public life will join hands to make it one of the foremost national demands. Freedom of the news media, in the broadest sense of the term, is an indispensable condition for the successful functioning of a democratic political system.

floods, news of famines, and news of political unrest have saturated the papers abroad. If the political crisis can be averted, then news of development, news of progress and news of social reform can take their place.

The newspapers report that US Congressman Bill Richardson is very excited with his first visit to Bangladesh. Richardson describes Bangladesh as an 'important' country and that he will present a 'firsthand account to the US Congress on Bangladesh.' The question is what thoughts does he take back with him?

Time and time again, the political opposition has deliberately attempted to foil any prospect of foreign investment. When the US Trade Delegation visited Bangladesh in July last year, when the British Trade Delegation visited Bangladesh in November last year, the first thing they witnessed was the day-long strikes called by the opposition parties. They witnessed that the political nature of the country's political parties was to bring the economy to a standstill.

It is small wonder that the leadership do not realise that by subjecting the country to undergo economic and social degradation the task they want to take up of saving the country becomes far more difficult. Ironically, with the political culture of mass destruction and blatant disregard for property that the disillusioned youth of this country are witnessing, the true problems of development is yet to surface.

The writer is a young executive in a private company.

The Right Speech Can Change Everything

Commentary by Mahfuz Anam

Continued from page 1 It is our belief that the Prime Minister's speech should contain offers that it will be politically unpopular for the opposition to refuse. Looking back, the offers that BNP made to the opposition from time to time, over last two years, and consider them as a complete package, they are not insubstantial. None of those offers worked because they came in small doses, over a long period of time, and as such failed to convince the agitating opposition and the public that supported them. As we said earlier, and many times in these columns and editorials, they were always 'Too little, too late'.

Some in BNP will say, the offers failed because the opposition was insincere, and never wanted a settlement. While it may be valid for a small but powerful section, but for the mainstream opposition, it is not true. Leaving the opposition aside, why BNP's offers never proved sufficient to win over the considerable section of the public who, regardless of party affiliation and personal belief, felt more comfortable with a neutral mechanism handling elections rather than a party government. The flaw, therefore, was both in the content of the offers and the staggered timing of them. And it is with that experience behind us, that we urge the PM to make such offers in the speech this evening that will meet the need of the hour.

And what is the NEED of the HOUR? First, to realise that BNP's government stands greatly weakened after the elections of 15 February '96 than it ever was before. It was a Pyrrhic victory, if ever there was one. What the Prime Minister is being mistakenly led to believe to be her 'victory' stands out as her most unashamed attempt to twist the electoral process to continue in power. This Begum Zia may find difficult to digest, but it is the truth. And the faster she accepts it the better it is for all. Just one example should suffice. Before 15 February Begum Zia was the

unquestioned elected leader of the country. After that fateful Thursday she is 'victorious' after an election that NOT A SINGLE body, both nationally and internationally, save her own party (and that also publicly, and not privately) endorses. From an unassailable position Begum Zia has come down to a highly controversial, if not a totally unacceptable, one. Even in the best of times, will anybody anywhere accept the verdict of an election in which the ruling party gets 206 out of 208 election results declared?

There is a qualitative difference between the government that followed 1991 elections, and anything that can come out of the one held last February. However unpalatable this may appear to be, the bitter pill of this realisation must be swallowed by the BNP. Lack of recognition of this fundamental blunder that comes not so much from inaptitude, but a supreme arrogance and deep seated disdain for the people, bringing further political chaos and social disharmony.

Second, the country's economy is on the verge of collapse, and that whatever has been achieved over the last 25 years of our independence, including the impressive macro-economic stability during the BNP government, stands fundamentally threatened. Entrepreneurs and people in general are tired of the continuing crisis and are blaming the government for not doing enough to solve it. It may sound unfair, but being in power — in that driving seat, so to speak — that is how it is. Mass psychology works like that, whether one likes it or not. Just as there are advantages in being in power, so also there are some disadvantages. This is one of them.

Third, a fundamental change has occurred in the political scene after the arrest of the political leaders and, ever since, the incidents in Chittagang, Narayan-ganj and some other places in the country. These have been viewed as repressive acts by a government whose complete



rule, after 21 February, is highly questionable at best, and non-existent at worst. The current government may have a legal body, but it lacks a democratic soul. And we know what a body without a soul is like. BNP, and Begum Zia personally, will be making their biggest mistake if they fail to understand the qualitative change in the status of their 'legitimacy' in the public eye. Please do not make the fatal mistake of thinking that this view is held by the opposition alone.

Under the above political circumstances the Prime Minister will address the nation with a view to solving the political crisis. It is our view that her offer to the opposition, if it at all comes, should have two distinct categories: a) First category of offers should be geared towards creating the environment for the following unilateral actions: i) Immediate release of all political leaders; ii) Declaration to hold general elections within the shortest possible time (period being determined only by the logistics of holding one); iii) Acceptance of a caretaker government to hold that election. b) Second category of offers should include invitations to talk: i) To determine exact for-

the type of speech as suggested above, it will appear PROACTIVE, rather than reactive. She will get credit for putting the interest of the country above that of the party, and greatly benefit from a swing in public opinion. BNP will look as a party genuinely trying to solve the political crisis. Instead of 'appearing to capitulate', Begum Zia will appear to be challenging the opposition to also rise up above partisan politics for national interest. As for negotiating options, BNP will need none as everything will have been laid before the public, who then will see who is working for the nation and who against.

All the points of our suggestion have been more or less agreed to by the PM. Indirectly she has conceded to them all. What we lack is her putting it together and announcing it. With a dramatic speech of the PM like the one we suggest, the opposition will be forced to reconsider its plans for non-cooperation and come to the dialogue. If they don't BNP can go to the people and gain their goodwill. But without making

the type of radical offers as we suggest, BNP will appear insincere and the opposition will continue to be able to carry significant segments of the public with them, as they are doing now. We urge Begum Zia to look at the present in a 20 to 30 year perspective. If she backs, her action of today will stand out as a farsighted and bold move for reconciliation that brought peace, harmony and, hopefully, prosperity to a divided and demoralised nation. On the 26th of this month we enter the 25th anniversary of our independence. With what confidence, hope and vision of the future will we celebrate this auspicious occasion? Please give us this gift of harmony and reconciliation to mark this occasion. I end with a note of caution for our readers. We may prove to be totally wrong. The PM and those encircled in power may be thinking in a totally different direction. If that be the case, then we might get a radically different gift for our 25th anniversary.

Rickshaw

Sir, In this age of latest model advanced automobiles, it is very hard to compete with a slow-moving outdated vehicle like Rickshaw. But its outstanding contribution to the GDP, highest among total transport sector as recently focused in your esteemed daily, really disposes me to patronise it. Rickshaw, the city's much used commuter and a common means of transportation in over all Bangladesh is a simple, three wheel human driven vehicle. It does not use any fossil fuel. So it is not polluting the atmosphere — and thus is environment friendly. During hartal, our nagging political problem that handicaps us in all respects, rickshaw is available as it does not come

Resorting to rickshaw, many of the poor and illiterate are earning their livelihood and thus reducing the country's unemployment problem to a certain extent.

So instead of venturing for any ban on rickshaws, as many have already suggested and the authorities perhaps are contemplating ventures should be on changing its model, advancing power mechanism facilitating more drive with less labour, creating separate lane for rickshaw on main roads reducing congestion etc.

Virtually, in Bangladesh perspective, rickshaw suits better both the economy (broadly) and population (majority). It should have a face lift.

Nasiruddin Ahmed