

Dialogue under President

As things stand today, the opposition and the ruling party are agreed on two fundamental points. One, a dialogue must be held to resolve the crisis; and secondly, a neutral government will supervise future elections.

What apparently upsets the apple cart for the BNP is the opposition's insistence that unless the talks are initiated by the President of the Republic they shall not sit for these.

The President of the Republic has a given status of primacy in the Constitution under circumstances such as are prevailing in the country by virtue of his residual powers.

To start the process we suggest that President may send out separate letters of invitation to all concerned to attend a dialogue at his initiative.

Worth Reciprocating

The ruling BNP took a wise decision by deferring its public rally from today to tomorrow, and then bringing it back to today, in order to avert a confrontation with the opposition.

The opposition parties have in the meantime shifted their programme to March 7, as they claim, to facilitate the return of the devotees from Ijtima to their homes.

The day should also be spared of hartal because of its historic importance. The March 7 speech of Bangabandhu provides for us an occasion of celebration and proud remembrance.

Now that the BNP has made a positive gesture, let it be reciprocated. Much of the confusion will be removed through similar moves.

We have all through been pleading for a few such concessions and conciliatory moves for bridging political differences between the party in power and the combined opposition.

Hamas Strikes

The Hamas militants' latest wave of terrorist strikes in Israel cannot but bring some ignominy on the glorious Palestinian Revolution.

Why is Hamas acting in such a fashion? Plainly to undermine and eventually to scuttle the peace process. And the timing of the massacre couldn't have been more adverse for Shimon Peres in view of the ensuing polls.

Destabilisation would not be allowed to infect states, for one thing by the world powers, and by the states in the region, for another. The peace process, although starting with Israel-Palestine strife at the centrepoint, has now become a Middle-East peace process with all of the Arabic-speaking world having very real stakes in it.

Islamic fundamentalism is fast becoming a synonym for cowardly terrorism — anti-human and militating against all positive values of all religions — particularly Islam. The murderers are equating jihad with terrorism in all of maghreb and mashreq and beyond.

Israel is preparing for a terrible retribution for the Hamas murderers. While they must be made to pay for their crimes, the peace process must be protected from any untoward scratches.

BANGLADESH has gone through a prolonged period of crisis and it seems to be taking a turn for the worse. The question which is being asked is whether the crisis could have been managed and whether it is inevitable that the crisis be transformed into a state of conflict.

A crisis is just one stage of conflict. In order to appreciate the present crisis of Bangladesh one has to take into account, among other things, the mental factors as irrationality, prejudice, stereotyping and other forms of misconception.

US Congressman widely known as a trouble-shooter for his outstanding contribution and excellence in resolving disputes and crises wherein US interests and concerns were serious, could also have played a kind of shuttle diplomacy to bring the two topmost leaders — BNP chairperson and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and AL president and erstwhile leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina to a "Negotiating Table" at least during his recent presence at Dhaka.

At the end of his two-day unofficial visit to Bangladesh the trouble-shooter law-maker while talking to the waiting press at the Zia International Airport, just prior to his departure for Washington, apprised the nation of his detection of a few shots (may be termed as trouble shooter's shots or Richardson's formula) which he believed could be effective to put an end to the present impasse in Bangladesh. The shots are:

- a) Dialogue, not confrontation between the leaders: Because he felt "since there was no dialogue between the two leaders for a long time, crisis aggravated."
b) Dialogue without any pre-condition: Because he might have a realization of his talks with Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina that pre-condition worked as an obstacle for opening any dialogue between them in particular and leaders in general.
c) Dialogue can be started from where it stopped in January: Because if a dialogue is to be resumed, it needs a start or point and it is better to start from the where it stopped.

symbolic importance and compromise may become quite difficult as such a move will be seen as a sacrifice of some great principle. Finally, in such an environment there is a greater propensity to overreact to perceived provocations. In such a context clichés such as "catch-22 situation", "vicious cycle", "too late, too little" would be branded rhetorically.

Whether a crisis can be resolved depends on a collection of techniques ranging from the reduction of psychological abnormalities among the political leaders to forceful means. In between the two extremes, there are other options. But before the appropriate remedy could be applied it is necessary to carry out a proper analysis of the crisis, for example, is it a legal or political crisis or a combination of both.

There is no denying the fact that before going for a thorough anatomy, analysis and consequently testing the applicability of the shots of the trouble-shooter, a careful enquiry into the stands and formulas of BNP and AL backed by the opposition is an unavoidable pre-condition.

BNP's post-election stand goes as under:
a) BNP being the party in power had to go for elections to the Sixth Sangsad under its constitutional obligation under the circumstances, favourable or not. With the elections over, constitution has duly been saved, preserved, and fortified.

As the very elections were not for staying in power for the constitutionally stipulated 5-year term, dialogue should be started with opposition to reach at a formula or consensus for a free, fair and fully participated election.

Putting the consensus formula into a bill and getting it passed accordingly by the Sixth Sangsad before moving for a free, fair and fully participated election under the new arrangement — caretaker or interim caretaker government whatever the name may be.

Opposition-backed AL's post-election formula stands established during the British rule. The college has the prospects favourable for upgrading it into a full-fledged university. The people of northern Bangladesh who are usually poor are sending their sons/daughters to Dhaka, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Chittagong, Khulna, Kushtia for higher studies while Rajshahi University alone cannot bear the load of the students of the entire area.

Similarly the Haji Danesh Agriculture College of Dinajpur can easily be upgraded into an agricultural university. This college has enough area to accommodate an university. At present, the students of remote areas who want to build up their career in agriculture and other agro-based faculties are rushing to Mymensingh to take degree in their desired subjects.

The people of the area will be encouraged to send their wards for higher education if facilities at a cheaper cost are available at their door-steps. It is really most unfortunate that there is still only one full-fledged university for the whole of northern Bangladesh whereas facilities for higher studies have been more or less expanded in other parts of the country.

Will the government look into it?
Mahbulul Haque Chowdhury
Kalabagan, Dhaka

Nowadays, Bangladesh has become a political turmoil-prone country and no one can say what shall be there on tomorrow perhaps except Friday because Friday is a weekly holiday and also a prayer day for the Muslim community. So, no political party in Bangladesh perhaps puts any hartal or blockade programme on Friday.

Therefore, we the candidates fervently appeal to the authority for rescheduling all the remaining dates also on Friday instead of normal working days to relieve us of anxiety.
Iqbal Ahmed
11/7, Iqbal Road, Dhaka

Crisis to Conflict?

by Manzoor Hasan

Whether a crisis can be resolved depends on a collection of techniques ranging from the reduction of psychological abnormalities among the political leaders to forceful means. In between the two extremes, there are other options.

The other important factor to be taken into account in analysing the process of crisis management is the quality of information channelled to those who are taking the final decisions. Studies in crisis management would show that most toppled politicians in Third World countries had a strong belief that they would survive the storm, for example, Ayub Khan in Pakistan, the Shah of Iran, Marcos in the Philippines just to name a few.

A common mistake on the part of the politicians when confronted with a crisis is to compare it with a previous one. Every situation is novel when all its properties are considered. The Liberation War of 1971 is not comparable to 1996 and neither is the topple of Ershad in 1990 comparable to the present crisis. But nevertheless human beings categorize events for the purpose of evaluation and action. It is the quality of this categorisation that could make a real difference between survival and downfall of any government.

the politicians and other leading citizens of the country can still resolve the crisis.
Henry Kissinger wrote in his White House Years: Some may visualize crisis management as a frenzied affair in which key policymakers converge on the White House in their limousines, when harassed officials are bombarded by nervous aides rushing in and out with the latest flash cable. Oddly enough, I have found this not to be accurate: periods of crisis, to be sure, involve great tension but they are also characterised by a strange tranquillity. All the petty day to day details are stripped away; they are either ignored, postponed, or handled by subordinates. Personality clashes are reduced; too much is usually at stake for normal jealousies to operate. In a crisis only the strongest strive for responsibility; the rest are intimidated by the knowledge that failure will demand a scapegoat. Many hide behind a consensus that they will be

reluctant to shape; others concentrate on registering objections that will provide alibis after the event. The few prepared to grapple with circumstances are usually undisturbed in the eye of a hurricane. All around the there is commotion; they themselves operate in solitude and a great stillness that yields, as the resolution nears, to exhaustion, exhilaration, or despair.
In this hour of great need when the country is faced with a terrible internecine conflict where are those few who would grapple and be counted. This is the time when one has to be imaginative in approach rather than being predictable and phoney. This is the time for real leadership taking into account the people's aspirations and fears. This is the time to forget personal ego and bring into focus the national interests. Without the magnanimity and foresight the consequences could be dire and like the lemmings we will be heading towards the sea and in mass hysteria throw ourselves off the cliff and commit a collective suicide. Time will tell whether the nation will be spared that suicidal urge.
The writer is a Barrister-at-Law.

Richardson's Visit to Bangladesh: Some Speculation

by Sinha MA. Sayeed

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Political Crisis: An Overview

by MA Mutaleb

THE 15 February elections in Bangladesh were held without resolving the stagnant political crisis. The political crisis and, especially, the recent elections have thrown political arena into a blind alley reducing further the limited leeway available to the major political parties.

Political climate was turbulent during the pre-poll period also. The Chief Election Commissioner said that elections should be held for constitutional continuity. Here he apparently became the self-proclaimed guardian of the Constitution. According to Article 7 of the constitution, all powers in the Republic belong to the people, and therefore, he should not have put 'the people' in an atmosphere of steadily increasing violence and insecurity in the name of elections. Some eminent legal experts said that holding of elections within 90 days from the dissolution of the parliament was merely directory and not mandatory. Supreme Court is the final interpreter of the Constitution and other laws. The President of Bangladesh could have referred the matter to the Supreme Court under Article 106 of the Constitution for its opinion. The Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh could have fol-

lowed a recent Indian precedent. A few months ago, the Prime Minister of India said that election would be held in Kashmir very soon. The Chief Election Commissioner of India, Mr T N Sesan with his two colleagues travelled throughout Kashmir for assessment of the actual situation. On return to New Delhi he declared in a press conference, "Holding of elections in Kashmir is not possible as extreme violence prevails there." On account of the extreme political crisis, country-wide violence, and insecurity it was perhaps the duty of the Chief Election Commissioner not to hold the elections. The question of Constitutional continuity could have been considered by the government, the political parties and the Supreme Court when referred to it.

Political crisis can never be solved by force. In West Bengal, political murders reached a figure of 1200 in 1970. Troops were called in to help the civil authorities in holding 'peaceful' elections. Despite extensive patrolling by the troops, 120 deaths occurred during the election campaign. Of course the political crisis of West Bengal was quite different from that of Bangladesh. Yet that can be at least a distant example.

The Chief Election Commissioner was the most powerful man in Bangladesh as it appeared from his pre-poll pronouncements. Army was called in to recover illegal arms and to help hold peaceful elections. Arms recovery drive was not successful as it appeared from subsequent reports and incidents. Report from different sources said that on the election day voter turnout was extremely low. It was the lowest in the history of elections in Bangladesh. There was allegation of ballot-stuffing and

other gross irregularities including absence of presiding officers or polling agents. So election was neither genuine nor meaningful being not reflective of the opinion of the population. Meaningful elections could not be held in a peaceful manner in an atmosphere surcharged with violence, fear and insecurity in spite of deployment of huge number of members of law enforcing agencies including the Army, unprecedented in Bangladesh elections. The whole electoral process did not comport with international standard for a truly electoral exercise, because 'genuine elections' envisaged in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot be held without participation of the major segments of population and major political parties.

In the light of experience gathered from the 1988 parliamentary elections, the psychological effect of an idea that induced people to feel that except BNP other parties taking part in the elections were not known in the political field while the mainstream opposition parties boycotted the elections that BNP candidates were elected uncontested from 48 constituencies and would be elected as well from others even with lowest voter turnout and that violence would prevail resulting in chaos made people pessimistic about and kept them away from participating in the elections.

A definitive choice between genuine elections promoting democracy and merely cosmetic change which will not affect the stagnant position of status quo remains to be made by the major political parties for the good of the country and the people.
The writer is a practicing lawyer.