

Issues to a Dialogue

With leaders of the ruling and opposition political parties meeting the President and the acceptance by BNP to hold elections by May '96 (as demanded by the opposition), public mood has changed from unmitigated despondency to an anticipation of good things to follow. Indeed, our people deserve the deal their hard-earned expectations entitle them to. Let there be no mistake about this.

The opposition political party delegations have submitted their respective yet essentially similar charters of demand before the President. These include release of remaining political prisoners, annulment of February 15 elections, resignation of BNP government, formation of caretaker government in consultation with political leaders, and staging of fresh general elections by May.

As the opening gambit, the reiteration of their demands is alright but to set a deadline of a day or two to get a caretaker government formed and functioning after securing the resignation of the BNP government, is contrary to the spirit of a dialogue. If there is to be negotiations, then how can one side give conditions with 24-hour deadline. Must we forget that it takes two to make an agreement.

That the other side has been conciliatory to a point of climbdown and seeks a deal can not be ignored. After all, we cannot contemplate any credible election with any of the major political parties keeping out — a lesson that must hold good for all times to come.

So, our considered view is that all the opposition demands be reserved for discussion along with the ideas of other political parties and crystallised views of experts at the roundtable the President is expected to convene shortly after he has met the delegations of the remaining political parties. It is at the all-party conference that the modalities of a change-over the formation of a caretaker government, a specific date for election and the electoral nitty-gritties must all be discussed without any preconditions.

To facilitate discussion we urge the President to invite drafts of a caretaker bill for setting up a non-party government to hold the elections. All political parties should now concentrate their full energy in making the bill as full-proof as possible to ensure a free and fair election.

Sounds Familiar

Fertiliser famine has steadily been gripping the whole of our northern region over the past ten days. All over there a 50 kg bag of urea so far available at a fixed price of around Tk 180 is selling at Tk 500 to 600 — if at all available.

This has led to social tension between the blackmarketing dealers and the farmers. And the farmers are on the warpath — very naturally and justifiably — exactly as they had done in the earlier fertiliser famine. They are looting trucks and boats carrying fertiliser, gheraoing local administration establishments and clashing with the police. For almost all of the areas of Rajshahi Division as also of a bigger part of the greater Mymensingh district a farmer short on fertiliser is a desperate man — his whole family and his future just hangs on the timely and adequate supply of the stuff.

And this time the danger has not come alone. Farming in the same region depends very much also on irrigation. The whole zone has suddenly run out of diesel stock with there being no way to replenish it soon.

The transport situation has come to a standstill because of the current asahajog programme. Movement of fuel and fertiliser has stopped altogether. Although the fertiliser crisis started from other reasons, the shutdown of the Ghorasal plant being the main, the transport situation has escalated it to a very dangerous level.

The present pressures from all directions on the society, if unrelieved even for weeks, would certainly injure the nation grievously and leave it badly weakened and diseased. Politics must first be healed of its waywardness. As soon as the political clock will have been set right and a healthy clickclock would start issuing from it, time will have arrived for doing a world of repair jobs.

In the meanwhile, there should be no dearth of contingency measures to increase the availability of fertiliser when it is most needed by the farmers at the price they can afford.

Significant Findings

Political maturity of a good number of people has been mirrored in a Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad survey. The well-formulated questionnaire which exercised the minds of 15 thousand people in as many as 15 Jatiya Sangsad constituencies evoked revealing responses on all the curiosity-arousing ramifications of the current political situation.

Among that large cross-section of respondents, 71.2 per cent favoured polls under a caretaker arrangement, 92.1 per cent thought the opposition and the ruling party should come to a settlement through dialogue, and 68.7 per cent were in favour of the president sending a reference to the Supreme Court about the February 15 election.

The arrest of political leaders, seemed quite unpopular while 62.5 per cent thought the EC failed to ensure neutrality in its conduct. A new facet to the revelation is the lack of support to a military government expressed by 86.7 per cent.

The almost universal dislike for the adverse impact on the national economy is a pointer to where it has really hurt our people.

Political parties better pay heed. They must come to terms with each other to improve their standings with the electorate and salvage the nation from the brink of disaster.

Will the Bangkok Summit Herald the Advent of Asia-Pacific Millennium?

The Bangkok Summit was a gathering of a different kind. The West this time came to the East — not as 'conquistadores' but as equal partners.

ENCHIRIDION

Waliur Rahman



'conquistadores' but as equal partners. One does still have sympathy with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammads doubting words — the West would like to think their institutions and political ethos as the best while papering over or ignoring their weak points. The values of the East, in this case, predate and preposition those of the West. Who doesn't remember that printing press, the single most important invention in history, was an Asian invention. China invented Mariner's compass and gunpowder and Byzantines clockwork. The Tibetans discovered turbine movement but they were reportedly satisfied



All in silk: Would it be that smooth?

security which had hitherto cushioned the society from uppalatable socio-economic impositions. For the Europeans, it was also an effort to re-discover an area over which, Europe had established a colonial stranglehold over the past centuries in varying degrees. And last but not the least, Europe did not like the idea of America, the only superpower, to enjoy an unencumbered hegemony in Asia. But Europe would part passu, like the security umbrella of Uncle Sam, although they may not like to talk about it.

The year 1498 is an important landmark in the context of Euro-Asian contacts. Vasco da Gama landed at Calicut, South West coast of India, in that year. The Europeans since then did not look West for the next centuries. The interactions between the East and the West starting with the Crusade, were formalised, as it were, in May 1498. Both Henry the Navigator and Alfonso Albuquerque thought that every assault they make on the Saracens was a further victory for Christendom. But religion soon was replaced by another consideration, trade and lucre. As ambassador Panikkar said, 'Even with the Portuguese, who equated a monopoly in spice trade with religion, trade soon overshadowed the religious aspect of their mission. With the arrival of protestant powers, trade became, for a time, the only consideration.'

Kipling was dead wrong — the twain does meet when it suits their mutual conveniences. The Bangkok Summit was a gathering of a different kind. The West this time came to the East — not as

India. The efforts of the EU to come to Asia would be meaningless if they realise that the values of Asia are as good as their values of Europe. If Greco-Roman tradition gave us the institution of state and law and infrastructure in a more formal sense, it was Asia which gave birth to a civilisation sophisticated and humane, much older than that of Europe. Why Asia could not transform itself into a more technologically advanced region before Europe, is another question altogether. The fact that Europe has broken out of its confines to come to Asia is an admission of the historic truth that Asia can do now what they had done earlier.

But the summit was flawed in one respect. Not all the states of Asia, nor all the states of Europe, could participate. While talking of Asia, the purpose of the summit would have been served better if the countries of the SAARC region could also make their contribution. It was, therefore, important to see Susanna Agnelli, Italian Foreign Minister, president of EU breaking her journey in New Delhi. Her meeting with the Indian leaders, and invitation to India, a leading SAARC country, to participate at the London Summit in 1998, was a welcome decision. The markets of 350 million people of EU interacting with the markets of the Asian — Ten and SAARC and Australia-New Zealand would make sense for the next millennium, for the purposive growth and development of civilisation at the next century. Paul Kennedy in his Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,

detected a 'causal relationship' between the shifts which have occurred over time in the general economic and productive balances and the position occupied by individual powers in the international system. To collaborate his finding which refers, inter alia, to the shifts in trade flows from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic from the sixteenth century onward. He concludes that the shift in the global, productive balances toward the 'Pacific Rim' has far-reaching consequences in world economy and global security.

The phenomenal economic growth in the Asia-Pacific rim is a matter of great satisfaction to all of us. We may also share in their pride, we may also share in their success, individually and collectively, provided we press into service our own creativity and innovativeness, in relative transparency and democratic freedom. For that the Asian experience of the colonial past could be dependable guide. Asia is already the number one buyer of arms and sophisticated military hardware from the West. We certainly need adequate self-defence mechanism to safeguard our sovereignty. But we must not be oblivious of the spectre of James Tobin syndrome: increased military expenditures are always necessary to counter enemy threats! The fact of the matter is that this kind of threat-perception becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and countries as a general rule, end up in spending more resources in defensive purposes than they can afford. The vicious cycle multiplies and military conflicts become inevitable.

If learning from the mistakes of the past, we maintain, an intelligent and realistic balance between economic prosperity and national security, only then could we give a meaning, a resonance to the next millennium — the millennium of Asia.

Politics of No-Compromise

by Imtiaz Ahmed

POLITICS in Bangladesh has entered a decisive phase, a phase that can be best referred to as the politics of no-compromise. I say this not merely to highlight the current dismal state of affairs, i.e., the on-going political stalemate between the ruling party and the opposition parties, but also, and more importantly, to posit the view that the general (electoral) masses of Bangladesh have unwittingly become the organizers and reproducers of this politics, a vocation they have come to share historically and structurally. Let me explain this further.

People's Position in Politics

People go through many phases in politics. This is a truism very few will choose to challenge. At times, however, the phases may not always be as real as they appear! In the last two and half years, corresponding to the period of the current stalemate, three such phases could easily be discerned, one seemingly contradictory to the other. In the first phase, we find a conciliatory public. This is well reflected in several public opinion surveys conducted between 1994-1995. In such surveys, the bulk of the masses opined in favour of conciliation between the government and the opposition parties.

The second phase saw a polarized public, still waiting for their respective parties to deliver the goods. In fact, in January 1996, barely a month before the election, a public opinion survey carried out a somewhat hypothetical question to the residents of the Dhaka city: 'If all parties participated, whom would you vote for?' The respondents, some 1075 of them, maintained that 35.9% would vote for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), 34.4% for the Awami League (AL), 12% for the Jatiya Party, 5.4% for the

Jammat, 3.7% for the 'independent candidates', while the rest (8.6%) were 'undecided'. The polarization is of course best reflected in the support given to the two major parties — BNP and AL, although a more fundamental polarization can easily be deduced from the position-opposition share of votes.

The third phase in which the public now finds itself is what I would call a public that is inactive but sensible! On the election day (15 February 1996), the bulk of the masses, over 90% of them, simply stayed home. In the midst of continued violence, this was more an affirmation of people's love for life than a consolidated political move. Such mass sensibleness or inaction, however, transmits confusing signals, which further exacerbates

emerged from our encounter with colonialism. Firstly, colonialism gave birth to a polarized political milieu on a country-wide scale. This is best reflected in the struggle between the colonial government and the colonized subalterns. At a particular moment of history, this took the form of a struggle between the 'colonial' and the 'nationalist' forces, the organization of which led to the polarization of things in both 'public' and 'private' spheres of life, like, education, historiography, music, even dress worn by individuals! This polarization, in so far as it restricted political manoeuvres and civil expressions, was destined to polarize other areas as well. Indeed, with the demise of colonialism becoming imminent, South Asia saw a proliferation of po-

litical parties, starting with religion but slowly encompassing other areas as well, like, language, culture, complexion, gender, in fact, all those areas which once enjoyed a pluralist past. Equally critical is the second milieu, which in a sense is both the cause and the symptom of the first. Indeed, in the face of polarization, the colonized subalterns could do little other than resort to violence in the campaign to redress the wrongs done by the colonial power. It is this situation that prompted Mahatma Gandhi to plea for non-violence, but ironically such a situation, in the wake of its precise structures, with little or no space for civilized response, was destined to reproduce further polarization and violence. And it is indeed in the midst of violence and polarized politics that the

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lates the no-compromise position of the politicians and the public alike. Put differently, the culture of violence puts a limit to conflict resolution, the outcome of which is certainly tragic. Indeed, when people are caring for life, politics seems to be suffering from want of life.

But if violence has kept the bulk of the masses at home on the day of election and if the latter has contributed nothing to conflict resolution, the transformation of the public from a position of conciliation to polarization, as outlined above, suggests something equally ominous. Like the culture of violence, such a transformation of public position is part and parcel of both history and structures.

Possessed by the Past

Two critical things

violence and intolerance in the like of the political society. Political parties, voluntary associations, intellectuals, media, schools, sports clubs, all that civil society represented, got tainted by this reconstruction.

While this represents a very general picture of South Asia's encounter with colonialism, Bangladesh's situation remains even more precarious as it has the misfortune of experiencing colonialism twice, first British (1757-1947), followed by the so-called 'internal colonialism' under Pakistan (1947-1971). I have little to say about the latter, except to point out that polarization and violence got further intensified during the 25 years of Pakistan rule. The bloody birth of Bangladesh sums up it all!

Politics Without People

What we now have is full of

ironies. I will highlight only three. For want of better expression, I will label the first, as neo-fascist practices in politics. This is best reflected in the organization and reproduction of political parties, be they in or out of power! But then, political parties are labelled neo-fascist not so much for their capacity to perform violence in the streets (which of course is a point to be reckoned with) as for subscribing to 'heroine/hero worship' within the party. Admittedly, there is no democracy inside any of these parties, election of the leadership is either based on prior selection or decided by a show of hands, which only makes a mockery of election. Leadership in such cases is simply a representation of 'heroine/hero worship'. Such a development, however, not

problem is the fact that 'three Cs' shuns creativity; interestingly, not just for restricting politics to 'safe (age-old) grounds' but more importantly for restricting politics to a small coterie of self-seekers as the bulk of the people neither practice nor benefit from the operation of the 'three Cs'. Consequently, democracy which cannot survive without creativity is forced to reproduce itself through uncreative means!

The last irony I will call, representation in crisis. It resulted from what has been said above and the failure to reform representational structures in the light of population growth. Apart from the fact that a very few 'Haji Mohsins' and 'Gandhis' now participate in politics, a more serious problem has come from the reality that one Member of Parliament (MP) represents 150,000-200,000 citizens. Such a representation makes a mockery of democracy for it is impossible for an MP to meet in person and represent those who have voted her or him to power. Consequently, 'intermediaries' (ranging from corrupt officials to hired mastans) end up having real power as both MPs and the people, albeit for different reasons, become dependent on them. Representation must reckon with the fact that it is neither MP nor the people but self-seeking intermediaries who do the representing!

The ironies do not end there. People are so ill-equipped to free themselves from such ironies that they end up living their life reproducing them, unconcern of the fact that they are the main victims. Nothing can be more pathetic than this.

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To the Editor...

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

Live and let live

Sir, The letter in your daily by Shamim Choudhury on March 8 caught my eyes. Hats off to Shamim who has the guts to pronounce such a truth. It is time that the innocent people realise that they are being used by our so-called desh premick politicians. People should wake up and see that so far the general public are losing their lives — be they policemen, students, rickshaw pullers or just people from the slums who get a few bucks in exchange of picketing. The political leaders have their children and relatives in safe places so they don't get hurt. Their children generally do not go to any educational institutions in this country, so they are not deprived of education. The leaders are playing puppets with our children.

All the western countries have a basic rule that if any student does not attend 80 per cent of the total classes he/she is not allowed to sit for the final test. It is obvious when you

realise that if a student misses more than 20 per cent of the classes he/she can not catch up with the rest of the class or cannot complete the syllabus. But what is happening here?

Proper education is the main criterion for a healthy nation. Lack of this or a healthy leadership will cause a severe crisis for the nation. If this situation is carried on for some time, I don't know what the next generation will have to offer to the country. My urge is a mother of two school going children and as a citizen to the ruling party and the opposition leaders — it is a good sign that you have agreed to go for a dialogue, please make the most use of it and come to a solution if not for the sake of this country, then at least for the sake of late Ziaur Rahman and late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

I have tried to point out only the education but the same impression is on the total socio-economic situation. The Economist of 24th Feb '96 informs us that the govern-

ment has enabled business to push growth to nearly 5 per cent. The garments industry has grown from almost nothing to a business employing one million people and accounting for more than 60 per cent of the country's exports. Without street politics, without the frequent stoppages that deter new investors, Bangladesh would be a wonder.

We need a solution very badly. Please live and let us live.

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Constitutional legitimacy

Sir, The three major opposition parties again expressed, as usual, their deep resentment to the Radio/TV speech of Begum Khaleda Zia, the Prime Minister, which has been hailed by many for her positive approach. And Awami League president Sheikh Hasina called for refraining from any election to give 15 February a constitutional legitimacy!

It's really shocking to observe that the opposition is in no way to come to terms whatever is being offered by the elected government. If it has become illegitimate in their version it's due to the out-come of their obstinacy and

non-cooperation from the very beginning. I do not know how much more the PM could concede when she declared, 'we're ready to endorse the most acceptable solution in the national interest' and she has sought all-out cooperation from all political parties with open mind and already outlined, in reasonable terms, as to how to fulfil the demand of the opposition parties.

As we all know the deliberation of March 3 would be in the line of professed or expected course of action, 'as per the provision of the Constitution'. As I see it the PM continued to talk in unambiguous terms about the constitutional obligations and the whole nation knows that it has to follow natural course of actions like: there has to be a Parliament and the Parliament has to move bills for amendment of the Constitution whatever necessary as per time and requirement of the country. Now if someone thinks either Khaleda or Hasina could revise or rewrite the Constitution by a stroke of pen only because they don't like each other, he or she is wrong. AL chief's main demand, as I can read, is Khaleda's resignation. I cannot reconcile as to what legitimacy Constitution gives her (Hasina) to demand this of an elected PM?

Whatever be the demand of the people, it can surely be

taken care of by the Constitution and the Parliament, but everything has to follow some rules. Let us proceed systematically, as outlined by the speech, and work out all constructive terms passionately and shun the politics of destruction. As the opposition is now demanding from the government a lot of things, legitimate or not, they (the opposition) should also keep in mind that they don't get legitimacy for ruining the country's economy and keeping the whole country in captivity by burning and damaging private and public property.

Let the opposition keep in mind that PM's speech disappoints them only, and not the whole nation. I am a member of the public and I am happy as the PM has outlined very courageously the broad programme, the rest has to be settled across the table.

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Attack on a bus in Israel

Sir, With a heavy heart we condole the death of the passengers in the bus which was recently attacked by Hamas suicide terrorists. However, our minds are still fresh with the memory of the murder of Mosadiah in Malta and of Hyash in Lebanon. One can explain the act of provi-

dence in one's favour. So when Rabin was murdered by a Jew we anticipated the apparition of Shakaik telling us like the ghost of Hamlet's father: 'List, List O' Hamlet!'

Now again when tears overshadow our eyesight, we witness the torso of Hyash leaping on a concrete floor, and hear his severed head pronouncing in pain: 'Humanity is sliced by selfish logic; the cowardice of Mossad is termed as courage while our action for survival is painted as terrorism. The usurpers are called patriots while the sons of the soil are branded as terrorists.'

Both Jews and Muslims believe in Allah; but both of them may not explain an action of His in the same way. So Rabin's death may not be linked with the assassination of Shakaik; but the death of the bus passengers is surely, in my analysis, triggered by the murder of Ayash. Didn't Peres pawn the lives of the Israelis when he okayed Mossad's plan to kill Ayash? Below the surface of the peace process, both Rabin and Peres kept on signing the hitlist prepared by the Mossad. The Israelis might chant slogans of renaissance, but they will not look into the fact that it is they who introduced the stimulant and the Palestinians react with their navy.

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