

A Captive Nation Strives to Break its Shackles

by M M Rezaul Karim

The forthcoming election will be very important for the nation for a number of reasons. If this could be held orderly and impartially in a peaceful manner, the country would no doubt be able to pass a critical test and help develop a democratic tradition, which we all aspire so much to accomplish.

Good Approach

In his maiden address to the nation on Sunday evening Chief Adviser of the caretaker government Mohammed Habibur Rahman sounded reassuring with his approach to the question of maintenance of law and order or the rule of law.

Basically laying emphasis on societal responsibilities and obligations of political party followers to help keep peace and order, he went on to underline a minimal intervention by the government suggesting 'stern measures' only in exceptional circumstances: unless it became far too problematic for the government to work, the Special Powers Act would not be applied.

Rule of law is a vital prerequisite for not only civic peace under testing circumstances but also for the creation of an environment congenial to preparations for the upcoming polls.

The chief adviser has called upon the workers of different political parties to respond to the call of their leaders for peace and responsible behaviour. We agree with him that by maintaining discipline in their ranks, they would be doing good both to their own political parties and the nation at large.

The political parties are keyed up in the aftermath of the formation of a caretaker authority as they are all playing on a level-field stridently warming up to bruising slanging matches in the run-up to elections. At a time like this, the top leadership of any major political party ought to differentiate between inspiring and virtually inciting their workers in the political idiom they use.

We see the point about peace, tolerance and democracy beginning at home with parents or elders wielding a benign influence upon their youths. But then it is basically the civic and professional bodies on whom we would like to rely in matters of maintaining discipline in their respective areas and carrying the message forward. There is, we believe, a vast majority of non-partisan people in the country who under the non-party caretaker government should make bold to assert for peace and equanimity in the society at large.

Now is the time for various civic bodies to start educating the people about the value of their vote so that anything impacting negatively on the polls is swamped.

A Dastardly Act

This is not the way.

Assailants on Sunday drilled two bullets into the Pajero jeep carrying Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir. Were the criminals shooting to kill or they aimed to give Dr Alamgir the scare? Either way, it did not stand to benefit the goons or whoever they were working for. What could be gained politically or otherwise by killing or injuring Dr Alamgir? This could only land them into a situation of hateful rejection and denunciation with no easy escape. And if it were done to scare him or the leading bureaucrats who had earlier been threatened with unpleasant consequences by top BNP functionaries, the targeted men are not likely to oblige them by taking fright. And in the bargain it tends to implicate BNP in a murky unbecoming game completely unworthy of a major political party who just had a five-year stint in power. The stinking business gains in foulness with BNP failing to come up with a condemnation of the dastardly act.

This is not the way to help the nation go steadily to fair polls. This is not the way to help the society back into normalcy, into finding its true bearings and its best rhythm. This is the way to destroy all that the society had gained from two years of sacrifice. No good will come of it to the shooters either. Mastans do not live long. They live even less than they prepare themselves for. Their cursed short life is what they have been condemned to by their patrons.

If the polls by June 28 have to reflect truly the mind of our people, the mastans must go. Arms as a means to intimidate people into bartering away their voting right for a deceptive safety, must be uprooted from society before we can have a meaningful election.

MAY is normally a hot and stormy month in Bangladesh. Sometimes it brings in rains with blessed coolness, supplanting stifling heat and devastating storms. With the formation of a non-partisan caretaker government with Justice Habibur Rahman as Chief Adviser for holding the election in May, the raging hot political storm is about to subside and is expected to generate a smooth atmosphere reminiscent of the good old days. Dissolution of the Parliament and resignation of the Prime Minister were inevitable consequences that must have followed simultaneously in order to effect immediate transfer of power to the caretaker government.

The opposition leaders hailed the decision as their victory due to realisation of their demand for a non-partisan caretaker government for which they have been agitating for the past two years. The BNP have also likewise claimed victory, a victory for constitutional and democratic process as well as for having fulfilled all the promises they had made. In the final analysis, it is the people who would decide by ballots at the polls in May as to who is the real victor. However, the optimists, for a change, have won in realising their hopes.

The initial reaction of the Chief Adviser to his appointment to this high office of paramount importance was significant. He underlined the arduous character of the task of holding a free, fair and impartial election and sought

continued cooperation and support from all major political parties, who had already consented to his appointment. The primary and the most urgent task, according to him, was to restore the law and order and bring peace to a strife-torn nation.

Similarly, first reaction of the leaders of the major political parties was strikingly and strangely similar which was rare but a welcome phenomenon. They also laid due emphasis on the need for peace and restoration of law and order. The trend of reaction as well as their remarks augur well for the political future of Bangladesh. With the bitter and disappointing experience of the people in the immediate past, they consider the present positive development in country's political situation to be too good to be true. Still apprehensive, they are now awaiting with caution what portends for them in future.

The people in general have been looking forward eagerly to a state of normalcy which they had been used to in the past, except on some occasions of national crisis, they have heaved a sigh of relief at the prospect of a return of sanity to the nation and are eagerly awaiting resolution of differences, if any, towards holding of a general election

smoothly in May.

The BNP chairperson asked for the creation of an atmosphere of peace in which her party could work for a certain victory in the forthcoming election. She laid emphasis on peace as a necessary adjunct to democracy and development, claiming her achievement in development to surpass what had been achieved during the preceding 20 years. The former Prime Minister transferred power with grace and dignity befitting the occasion of the oath-taking ceremony of the Chief Adviser.

The Awami League leader, in her turn, called upon her supporters to exercise restraint and not to seek revenge on anybody for anything. She also urged people not to take law in their own hands. This is the second time in three days she made such a welcome statement which did not escape careful notice of political advisers. The other party leaders also spoke in the same vein.

An overview of all these pacific statements and advocacy for a peaceful atmosphere congenial for holding an orderly, peaceful and impartial election in May logically suggest a near-ideal pre-election situation which would appear to be too good to believe. Unfortunately, extensive and indiscriminate use of armed hooligans and

professional students in the employ of political parties has rendered a violence-free atmosphere almost an impossibility.

The situation can perhaps be rectified by a further demonstration of earnestness by our leaders, who may make stronger statements, jointly or individually, effectually disbanding their respective armed cadres and warning them of severe consequences, if they committed violence. A commendable attempt of this nature had been made once earlier to dissuade armed students of the university from taking law in their own hands.

Another important statement made by the Awami League chief is about the process and propriety of formation of the present caretaker government, which represents a legal offshoot of an act of the 6th parliament. The ex-post-facto demand for cancellation of the 15 February election and of the resultant 6th parliament, therefore, assumes greater complexity in law and politics than ever before.

Now that the major political parties agreed to an accepted formation of a caretaker government under Justice Rahman, it is politically prudent not to raise the issue now and defer it to consideration by the new parliament. This act of Sheikh Hasina has saved people plenty of avoidable

troubles, helped promote an atmosphere of peace before election and deserves appreciation of all peace-loving people. Of course, otherwise a continued movement would have been counterproductive to the opposition and interfered unduly with their preparation for the coming election.

One very important element, nay a unique one, stands out clearly among the manifold movement of the former opposition parties. This pertains to the policy, action and behaviour of our public servants in the secretariat. Our land and people have undergone a grave national crisis and historic movements, including the all-out liberation war, but never in the past history did some of the Secretariat officials, including some most senior ones, organised themselves not only to strike from work but to intimidate successfully the rest from even entering their office.

The conscientious public servants never, as per service rules, allowed themselves to be drawn into politics before and developed a tradition worthy of pride and praise till now. It may have been a classic case of a silent majority having been helplessly overpowered by a vocal and militant minority among whom a handful of disgruntled ones played the key role. Otherwise, how could one

justify their pressing demand for constitution of an impartial caretaker government, which the ruling party had not only accepted but even requested the President to initiate arrangement for its formation. The transfer of power was automatically to follow within a couple of days. It was obvious to all. Despite my personal conviction about high standard of service and impartial posture of our public servants in general, unfortunately, this has set a dangerous and unsavoury precedent, which is likely to be emulated and taken advantage of by self-seekers in the future.

The forthcoming election will be very important for the nation for a number of reasons. If this could be held orderly and impartially in a peaceful manner, the country would no doubt be able to pass a critical test and help develop a democratic tradition, which we all aspire so much to accomplish. The months, rather years, of continued movement of harkats, seize and non-cooperation by the erstwhile opposition has brought in so much of devastations and loss of human lives and property that it may take years, if at all, to make up for the nation. The time for stock-taking is approaching fast. The history will eventually record in its annals who is really to blame. Likewise, the people will also be the sole arbiter and sit in judgement during the election in May for the same. Political parties beware, prepare peacefully to participate in the election and must place national interest over party and individual interests.

Towards Developing a Democratic Culture

by M Mortayez Amin

The examples of undemocratic and autocratic practices of BNP government should not mislead someone that AL and JP did all the right things during their tenure. We know history paints a very grim picture about the way AL and JP ruled the country...

DEMOCRACY itself is an essence of some sort of culture which needs years to blossom. Very unfortunately we are such a nation that we do not have a democratic culture in the true sense of the term despite years of struggles and bloodshed. Why can we not claim a democratic culture of our own which our neighbouring country boasts of? Because we do not practice it from top-down to grass-roots level. The political parties have got a fundamental role towards the end, in order to flourish democracy in a country. But the way our political parties talk, they do not exercise it in organisational activities. The politicians air high voices about democracy but few or no politicians can claim that their parties are run in a true democratic manner. The leaders of various committees of these parties are just selected and labelled as elected. And due to this absence of democratic practices, AL, BNP, JP—all have centred round one personality of their respective parties. AL got disorganised and broken into parts before Sheikh Hasina was flown in to take over the leadership. BNP got fragmented before Khaleda Zia was dragged in into the party. Our political parties have set examples of ready-made leaders without whom these parties get disarrayed—it is a proven phenomenon. So they should nurture democracy for their own sake before they commit it to the nation. Our political parties were feuding over 'caretaker government' issue for long over two years. This very issue exposes their own abysmal condition. The politicians have themselves proved that they are not worthy to create an environment where people, the only and sole authority of the republic, can exercise the very democratic right to choose their representatives. Every political party in power, since independence, tried to rob people's opinion

and wrest the sovereign power of people. Just look at 1991 general election. Only a neutral caretaker government under the dynamic leadership of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed could ensure a highly applauded general election. This very instance also reveals, the other way round, the undemocratic and anti-people attitude and nature of our political parties.

The current political impasse reminded every conscious citizen about how a democratic culture can be evolved in a country like ours: An interim caretaker neutral government can only ensure a congenial atmosphere for franchise. Election Commission and other government machinery can work without being intimidated and influenced. But after election when a party is voted to power, we cannot expect miracles from that party as regards democratic norms and principles. Because no political party has got democracy practiced within and throughout. BNP can be immediate example in this regard. This party was elected in 1991 through the finest elections in the history of our country. But we have seen misuse of power, corruption and autocratic measures taken up. We heard and saw the airing of solemn pledges of Begum Khaleda Zia that she would repeal black laws, separate judiciary from executive, make electronic media autonomous, etc. if voted to power. The election manifesto of BNP also highlighted these promises. People voted them to power only to see those promises revoked. The electronic media remained the property of the party-in-power as it was in the past. Independent judiciary remains a dream of the nation. All black laws are still serving the very political purposes of the ruling party. The law enforcing agencies are being used to intimidate political opponents. These are the consequences of the undemo-

cratic and autocratic practices of the government with which they govern and use the law enforcing agencies to their own benefit. Because all the directives and orders are channelled downward from the top where a sits biased political person who neither practices nor allows to practice democracy within the party itself. So we cannot expect anything extraordinary.

The media is rightly regarded as third state elsewhere in the world. But in our country, we see people gathering around radios to hear BBC or VOA. State controlled radio or TV no more attract them. The reason is obvious. Newspapers often, reportedly, are not provided newsprints and advertisement as per their circulations. The criteria, they say, are different, though not written. The judiciary system also perhaps has its hands tied and run being influenced by administration. Independence is a must for the judiciary system if one likes to see it function properly and discharge its duties honestly. The ruling party in question also perhaps cleared their attitude towards containing corruption. The PM ordered, few months back, the Anti-Corruption Department to take prior permission from her before filing charges against high-ups. Apparently had she been sincere to root out corruption from every stratum of administration and society, she should have given the Anti-Corruption Department a free-hand to deal with matters they are assigned for. Recently the Supreme Court of India wrested the power of PM Narsimha Rao to control Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) to pave the way for an unbiased probe into Hawala scandal. Can we not learn a lesson from this example and ungrip the Anti-Corruption Department? The party-in-power can do it and opposition can get it materialised. But when?

The series of examples of undemocratic and autocratic

practices of BNP government should not mislead someone that AL and JP did all the right things during their tenure. We know history paints a very grim picture about the way AL and JP ruled the country. In many cases, they perhaps even did more than what BNP has done. The reason behind highlighting the activities of BNP government is that it was elected through an unprecedented fair and free election. The people naturally had had very high expectations of this government. They expected many things to be streamlined and restructured and practiced in order to instill the very essence of democracy.

I know this write-up, like many others, will never awake and shake our politicians. But I sincerely believe if conscious people try sincerely to mobilise public opinion about democratic culture, the politicians will be compelled to walk along the path of democracy, respect and practice democratic norms and thereby help develop a democratic culture of our own.

OPINION

Rowdyism at the Secretariat

Some education with a government employment in the capital city is supposed to bring in some qualitative changes in the conduct of a person vis-a-vis his counterpart in the village with no education and no secured livelihood. But what has happened in connection with the assaulting of a liftman by two gangsters in the Secretariat recently calls for condemnation.

The people working in the Secretariat are bound to behave according to certain specified rules and regulations. They cannot take the law in their hands. Whatever has happened, and wherever it has taken place, it is under the purview of a certain ministry or department assigned to the task of tackling such developments. But what on earth the Secretariat people found that they indulged in wildcat demonstrations! It is further more frustrating that the demonstrations were joined by officers some of whom were no less than Additional Secretaries. Woe to their behaviour! This callous-like behaviour indicates to the fact that whatever be their education or designation, they are yet to shake off their peevishness. The public servants cannot question the appointment of a minister. It is the business of the politicians. It is a malady of audacity and gross misdemeanour liable to punishment.

It has been recently noticed that during any political turmoil the government employees of different denominations pose to be the champions of popular interests. Unfortunately they do not know the fact that the people of the country always view them as synthetic chameleons, who never fail to harass them in every possible way.

The government employees are notoriously the aggressive beneficiaries of all the blood that has been spilled on this soil. In most of the developing countries public servants are often esteemed as worst enemies of the common man by the development agencies.

However, they must know the fact that 'services' are indispensable, but not the 'servants' who are too fond of their selfish bargain.

Mohamed Abdul Mutalib

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Dhaka Day by Day

Floodlight Cricket on a Dhaka Street

Arshad Hussain

Think about a day-night cricket match on a Dhaka street under floodlight. It still seems to be an event of the future. But in Dhanmondi, a day-night match was held last week. It was more of a night-midnight-dawn match than a day-night match. The match took place on a street off the Mirpur Road.

We've seen youngsters play cricket on the streets during hartals and the non-cooperation programmes. What does it take to hold a night-match on the streets? Nothing much. All you need is a long, quiet stretch of a neighbourhood street which is as wide as 20 feet. About 12 floodlights fitted onto the roofs, windows adjoining, telephone poles, etc. provide the illumination. And plenty of influential neighbours to back you up and who are of course willing to pay all the expenses. You also have to be out of your minds or cricket-mad to arrange such a match. It helps if you don't have exams the next morning.

slogans, held up placards, and shouted for their teams. The atmosphere, as Tony Greig would have said, was electrifying.

As the first match progressed the neighbours packed onto their verandahs to watch the game. Parents cheered their sons with every ball bowled. The make-shift tea-stalls and cigarette-booths called it a day and the shopkeepers (and others who couldn't sleep) stood jam-packed on one side. These people were all there in the quarter past twelve when the first match ended and then slowly the crowd faded away leaving behind only a couple of policemen, a few children and the security guards to cheer us in the second match.

Playing at night with no scorching sun on your head and a cool breeze blowing throughout the match made it really enjoyable. There were a few problems in sighting the ball at first but gradually the sighting got better as the eyes got used to the artificial-lighting. The



Anyway, this match was arranged by a few apartment owners in a certain neighbourhood. For the last couple of years, cricket matches between two apartment blocks facing each other have been a regular feature during the hartals. The two apartment blocks have been bitter rivals since then. This night match was also between the two blocks with nine-a-side teams. Matches of course have to be played with tennis balls and so there aren't many broken windows.

Two matches were actually played under the lights, the first one beginning at 8 pm. This led to the finish of the matches at 3:30 am!

Lights hanging from balconies, telephone poles, rooftops and pillars flooded the neighbourhood at about quarter past six in the evening. People from all the surrounding apartments came out to see what was happening. Passers by stopped by wondering what was going on and some even stayed back to see the first ball. As the bowled. Children chanted

thrills and excitement of playing night cricket got us through the two matches without supper (however, we did have the official drink and also the nothing-official-but-it-drink and other junk food as refreshments). We completely forgot about our poor neighbours who were trying to sleep.

World Cup Cricket mania had struck every part of Bangladesh for the last one and a half months. Even after the world cup it seems a few people have not yet regained sanity. One cannot recommend that night cricket be played too often because the neighbours may just lose patience.

But if any of you people out there are as crazy as we are and want to play night cricket like we did, remember to cover all the drains and manholes in your neighbourhood and make sure you have a huge stock of balls, so that when a ball smashes through a window or pops into a neighbour's balcony in the middle of the night, you have another one ready! We lost six balls in the process.

To the Editor...

Election: Can one run for third term?

Sir, Can a person elected twice to become the Prime Minister or the President participate in an election for the third term? What does our Constitution say about this and what do our experts have to comment on such an issue?

Obviously, I am referring to Begum Khaleda Zia who participated in the Jatiya Sangsad election twice and got unanimously elected as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. As the days of guns and goons have not ended, we await a genuine reply or comment.

Habibur Rahman Khan, 10/7, Iqbal Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

An appeal to the Chief Adviser

Sir, I am obliged to thank all concerned who have wholeheartedly contributed to bring an end to the recent political impasse in the country. With the withdrawal of non-cooperation movement, it is our hope that the country's economic and other development activities will start afresh though much has already been lost.

However, now it is not the

opment in the days to come. A caretaker government is about to start functioning and thanks to the former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman for accepting the task to bring peace in the land. We have had enough crises and abnormalities in our political arena. It is now the time to hope for the best and all political parties shall work in harmony to achieve their objectives as well as the country's overall development. I do hope that all concerned shall cooperate with the caretaker government for its success.

Moreover, I have a few requests to the Chief Adviser, Justice Habibur Rahman, for his sympathetic attention, on the following issues:

i) April 7 is the Easter Sunday of the Christian community. It is observed worldwide. The Bangladesh Christian's have also got the privilege to observe this day as an optional holiday. However, this year it may be observed with some concern that the SSC examination is due to start on the same day. We have earlier requested the Education Secretary, the Chairman and the Controller of Examination to reschedule the date but all went in vain. We now earnestly request the Chief Adviser to kindly take necessary action to shift the examination from April 7 to April 8.

would appreciate the inclusion of at least one minority community member in the caretaker government to ensure participation of all caste, creed and culture.

ii) For the coming general election, a mandatory rule should be passed that no political party must use religion in the election campaign.

Dennis D Dalta, Rajashan, Savar.

Fate of BNP, lesson for others?

Sir, In 1991, BNP was a popular party. Its leader Khaleda Zia was at that time a highly respected public figure. But in a span of five years things changed unfavourably for the party as well as the leader. There are many reasons, many theories and arguments will be endless. But one agreed cause is the segregation of the leader from the 'people'. Identity with the 'people' was the main strength of Khaleda Zia. She could sit down anywhere and the masses would surround to protect her from the force of the tyrant. But alas! Now she is protected by the full might of the state from the same people.

I urge the future rulers to take the lesson, imagining Sheikh Hasina, to be the next leader, it should be suggested that

she should start thinking now about the measures to avoid this sorry fate. She should not lose contact with the 'people'. She is the 'triumph card' of Awami League. She should remain the head of the party (refusing to be head of administration), putting it into right track whenever there is tendency of derailment. As soon as AL goes to power, if it does, vultures would start to gather. It has started already. The power base would be surrounded by the vested groups who would prefer the leader to be away from the masses. Facts would be hidden and fictions created. Canards spread and truth suppressed. Distorted pictures would be presented to the leader and people's voices discredited. Interested coterie would deny any wrong-doing and malign the critics and truth-seekers. Sheikh Hasina should act as guardian angel for at least one term. From her party seat she can even caution the administration against corruption and anti-people measures. Uplift of country's fortune would necessitate many harsh measures, like austerity. AL should not risk to discredit its triumph card in the process.

Though not an Awami League I shall lead the day AL would meet the fate as has beenfall on BNP.

A sympathiser.

Marzina, and then?

Sir, I am writing to know about the outcome of the investigation into the reported rape of Marzina (aged 14) last October.

Two policemen and another local man were arrested in Chudanga. Local people reported that the girl, who was unconscious, was taken to hospital.

It is now more than five months since this event took place and despite Jahangir Hossain's, the Police Superintendent of Chudanga, announcement that there would be an investigation into the incident, nothing has been made public so far. The perpetrators of this crime have not been brought to justice and Marzina has received no compensation for the violation which she has suffered.

Through the attention of your newspaper I hope that you will be able to effect an inquiry into this injustice and that international standards of human rights will be maintained in Bangladesh.

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