

Removing Tariff Barrier

It is quite assuring to know that Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee favours withdrawal of tariff and non-tariff barriers on goods imported from Bangladesh. The issue deserved to be treated much earlier in the light of the widening trade gap between India and Bangladesh. So far Bangladesh has unsuccessfully pleaded for wide access of its goods into India. Now that the minister holding the portfolio of foreign affairs has come out in support of Bangladesh's cause, we hope things will start moving at a faster pace towards materialisation of the small neighbour's demand.

Dhaka's expectations have been quite modest. It is not asking for any undue favour. Indian goods find their access into Bangladesh market at a tariff rate between 25 and 30 per cent, whereas commodities from Bangladesh face the international tariff rate of more than 60 per cent for access into the Indian market. This is no way of reducing the trade gap heavily tilted towards the big neighbour. Import from India has gone up by leaps and bounds, while our export to that country has gone up only fractionally.

A look at the increasing trade gap from Tk 71.43 crore in 1984-85 to Tk 1,567.97 crore in 1993-94, should convince one that urgent action is required to be taken in the area. We surely can do better than exporting goods valued at Tk 85.50 crore as we had done in 1993-94. The fact is that we have for such a long time allowed the gap to yawn through lack of a reciprocal approach from the other side. This can easily be remedied if there is enough will behind it.

India is a large market and there are commodities here, which, with a little bit of salesmanship, on top of the tariff waiver, can do the trick for us. Then India could set up joint venture projects in Bangladesh with buy-back arrangements. Let's concentrate on goods which have instant advantage in the Indian market and then go on to do some marketing research to find out fresh potential for some new exports. Things should move on the Indian side so that we get the access for our goods to India. In the meantime we can set the targets and proceed to reduce the trade gap accordingly.

Arms Recovery from DU

The Tuesday raid on six residential halls of Dhaka University has yielded, as of always, next to nothing? The immediately previous raid early this year got leaked beforehand, deliberately or whatever, and the boys were smart enough to clear out in time. Why this repeat performance now?

The gangs needed no leak this time. Only at Shahidullah Hall police went unannounced in the small hours of Tuesday. For the remaining five halls it was notice enough to take cover. What was the big idea behind such transparent raids? All Dhaka knows about there being a sudden amassing of both new arms and non-student outsiders in the halls. How could all of it vanish in hours?

We refuse to believe that police doesn't know about the top gunmen and their cache and how and where to get them both. Then why this dismal performance?

Private arms must be recovered and the sway of the gunting cadres completely eliminated before the nation can have a fair and free election. This was not possible as long as political parties patronised and protected and in fact, groomed, kept and pampered these hordes as some sort of underwriters of an important kind of political clout.

That was one important reason why election had to be held under a non-party government. The present caretaker government has no way but to eliminate armed power if only to justify its genesis.

Tuesday's raids — their conduct and their results — are very little to take heart from. Arms recovery programmes never had any satisfactory impact in Bangladesh. And the present government must execute it to an effective level within at best two months. The task is formidable but there is no other choice. Police and, if need be, armed forces must give their all and people must wholly co-operate with them to make the ensuing polls immune to terror and violence. Arms must not be allowed to serve political ends in a nation bound, of necessity, for democracy.

Mystery in Cox's Bazar

A scintillating — scandalising one may as well call it — piece of news emanated from Cox's Bazar on March 24. A very big haul of modern automatic and light to heavy weapons and matching ammunition was made by the police on that day. To make things more sinister in cloak-and-dagger terms, 17 persons, said to be aliens, were rounded up with the seizure of the arms. Thus far is known as the authorities allowed it to be known.

After that the scandalous part begins. The 17 persons seem to have completely vanished. There is no record with the local police — who made the haul — of these persons being even arrested, not to speak of detained. No one knows where they are now. The police are saying the whole thing is being handled by the higher authorities and they do not know anything.

Unless clarified, the situation, as it stands, might be construed to have bearings on questions of national security. And with nothing coming from the government, this is giving rise to speculations wild and dangerous.

If the authorities feel this to be something that must be kept away from exposure in the national interest, let them brief the editors accordingly. If it is not quite that the government should forthwith issue a clarification to remove public misgivings in the matter.

The way the Cox's Bazar arms haul is being allowed to gather mystery and proving ideal for irresponsible canard campaigns, is sure to hurt the government more than any other quarter.

Rising Above Party Interests

by Dr Nasreen Khundker

It is the party which has to be answerable to the people, and not the people who are hostage to the party. Perhaps we are too concerned with past injustices to take much cognizance of the present or the future...

to such a state that all political parties have viewed their interests in a very narrow sense to coincide these not with the interest of their respective constituencies ie the people but with the interests of only their membership, both cadres and leaders.

In this situation therefore, most of the people are unrepresented and without a voice, being merely silent spectators even though their very livelihood is at stake. On the other hand, to the political parties which dominate the scene, the plight of the people; whether their present despair or their future condition, be it as acute as a famine or extreme lawlessness, is an issue which can be safely ignored. Whether it is the ruling party or those in opposition, what seems to matter most is power and ego.

But power for what purpose? The legitimate question for the people is whether power vested in one party or another will make any difference in their lives, or will it simply degenerate into a situation where power merely benefits members of the party or parties in question, along with those who can receive some patronage in the process. If this is a true representation of our political scene, then the sad truth is that what we have is not a multi-party democracy, but the play of multiple fac-

tions. And factionalism, as we know, is an extremely degenerate state, which even a broad-based popular party is in danger of falling into, if it loses touch with its constituency, the people.

My understanding of the matter may not be too far from the truth, given that in the last few years, no other issue has been part of the political debate, apart from that of a caretaker government. This may in itself be magnanimous on the part of the opposition, because a caretaker government gives an equal chance to the ruling party to be re-elected.

Resisting this and going ahead with a one-party election by the BNP did not show much respect for principles, or for democracy. But the issue does not rest here. Otherwise, we would not be seeing such divisiveness amongst different sections of civil society to give support to the ruling party or the opposition. If the political parties have no agenda beyond the interest of its membership, any support is likely to be tenuous, and based on an understanding of to what extent one's self-interest will be met by giving support, rather than on the basis of principles or what is considered to be the social good, despite the fact that there are some whose sympathies are quite genuine.

One also cannot rule out some confusion in the matter, so that one does not know whom to support. Nor can one rule out fear, because either a failure to give support, or lending support to one party or another, inevitably leads to threats and harm, as we have witnessed in the last few months. This is of course a far cry from democracy, as is commonly understood, and the spontaneous support to political parties and programmes that it allows. This again brings us to the crux of the matter, a singular absence of any policy or programme from the agenda of political parties which the people can identify with in recent history.

Given the factional nature of present day politics, and the total alienation of the political parties from the people, the ruling party did not have to justify any of their policies or failures. Thus they were not accountable to the electorate for the fertiliser crisis, for alleged corruption, for mounting crimes, for failure to solve the problem of traffic congestion or pollution, or for disparities in the income distribution.

In short, the failure to respond to any of the felt needs of the people. Nor did it have to publicly justify any particular policy, such as import liberalisation, privatization, or industrial sickness, be it good or bad. The opposition on the

other hand has very little to say on these issues either, or what they plan to do which is likely to be different, once they are voted to power.

This is definitely ridiculous and quite contrary to what we have experienced in our own political history. Thus we know that a Maulana Bhashani or a Sheikh Mujibur Rahman knew the pulse of the nation, for they worked with the people, peasants, workers, teachers, students and industrialists. Even a minor leader in our past had to earn his support through hard work with the masses.

Needless to say, this is not based on the ability to bestow favours to particular individuals, or the ability to channel State resources to build a road or a school in his locality. Contrast this with the present scene where farmers, businessmen or garment workers have to beg with the political parties for the right to work, or for supply of essential inputs. Surely this is wrong. It is the party which has to be answerable to the people, and not the people who are hostage to the party. Perhaps we are too concerned with past injustices to take much cognizance of the present or the future, even though the situation demands that we bury our hatchets and learn to work together.

The state of affairs in the country as a whole also reminds one of the situation in most campuses and educational institutions of the country, and which has been going on for quite some time. Different factions engage in gun battles, totally alienated from the wider constituency, the teachers and students. What is at stake is their own glory and betterment, not the betterment of the institutions, or the achievement of social good. This is of course generally perceived and reflected in common parlance. I have heard Dhaka University being referred to as a 'sector', ie a battleground for factional politics.

Let me end by saying that my purpose in writing this article is not to generally condemn everybody an everything. It stems from a deep-seated belief that the present state of affairs should be checked, not only to resolve the present crisis, but also to shape the future course of events. Political parties have to once more think of representing the people, and being accountable to the people. The true role of politicians is to understand the social good, not simply the good of their membership. This is rooted in an understanding of not just 'politics', meaning out-manoeuvring one's rivals, but an understanding of the socioeconomic situation of the country and what is good for the future of this country and once again, the people.

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The Caretaker Logic

To uphold the rule of law and save society as we want to live in it, we must have a caretaker regime, one that is legislated into existence by the current Parliament, as have been done in Bangladesh.

Elections are to be held in 90 days. By an overwhelming unanimous vote of Parliament, the Bill had been passed a few days earlier and soon signed into law by the President.

Given the distrust displayed by the major political parties in each other's carrying out free and fair elections, a non-partisan arrangement seems to be the only course to save democracy from turning into anarchy in such situations. Given also the fact that even the so-called non-partisan governments can tilt the balance in favour of their party and/or individual preference if they resort to macro-managing the results in a scientific manner as one suspects was engineered over the heads of the 'Moeen Quereshi' Administration in Pakistan in 1993, it is important that only those persons be chosen who are known to be fully committed to their own preferences for individuals and/or parties.

Choosing of a retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is an important step in this direction. If such a person is unavailable then one can reach down the line to persons who may have been senior enough and acted as Chief Justices in the absence of that personage. In the case of Pakistan, Moeen Quereshi was seemingly plucked out of relative political obscurity from abroad and was prompted in his choice of colleagues by those intelligence functionaries to whom he owed his good fortune in the first place. The net result was a subtle shift in preference by members of his cabinet as well as in provincial appointments with bias against one side, even if not totally committed to the other.

It is important that the 'Chief Advisor' is given a free hand to choose his own panel and act as Chief Justices in the interim government. Because official secrets will come into the knowledge of these individuals, it may be necessary to ascertain necessary credentials from at least three secret agencies as to their character, integrity, patriotism, honesty, etc, it being imperative to take these reports from different sources because any one biased report emanating from some motivated individual may unnecessarily tarnish the reputation of the intending cabinet member and thus disqualify

him or her.

In Pakistan, the two fair elections are the ones held in 1970 under Gen Yahya Khan which led to the break-up of the country in 1971, and in 1988 under General Aslam Beg which led to Ms Benazir coming to power. The first time. The 1990 elections were contested by PPP as being micro-regged, but the 1993 elections

One feels that the caretaker logic must be translated into the need for a genuinely national government, to be headed by a retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and a cabinet composed of such persons who are non-political, non-controversial, individuals of known integrity and honour, committed to the country and permanently resident in it.

the citizens of the country as well as the supreme interest of the nation. In effect, they will carry out a system reform that must be put to referendum. While accountability will be a great temptation, they should leave this to a duly elected government.

The crisis in Bangladesh was very much visible and as such could be handled, the major problem has been the overblown egos of the two women leaders. In Pakistan there is continuing erosion of the rule of law at the highest level, a penchant for irrational contempt that is frightening. This has turned the fundamentals of government-running into virtual tribalism that augurs a not-so-visual disaster in the making. At the same time, we are mired in a debt trap that is ever increasing as every quarter we add to the burden to meet IMF obligations. The three pillars of the states, the Executive, the Judiciary and Parliament are at odds in various permutations and combinations. Whatever the merits and/or demerits of a recent Supreme Court verdict, the assault on the judiciary has seriously undermined the concept of civilized society being governed by certain laws that are interpreted with deep respect for the superior insti-

tutions, the apex being the Supreme Court. While there are merits in some of the electoral reforms proposed by the Ms Benazir regime, some of the proposals are seriously flawed enough to expect 'constructive engineering' of votes to obtain a suitable verdict, at least down the line.

As it is, the Opposition is questioning the accuracy of the electoral rolls. The Presidency and the Armed Forces are now at a crossroads with what to make of what is increasingly seen as a motivated purpose transcending the sovereignty of the nation. Can they be counted upon to uphold the respect due to the institutions by safeguarding the interests of the country before that of any individual?

In 1972, late Z A Bhutto gave an interim Constitution to the country till such time the 1973 Constitution was approved by Parliament. This constitutional fabric was necessary to preserve the rule of law in the grave crisis the nation was thrust in with the secession of half the country in December 1971. Almost 25 years later, we are faced with a national crisis of unimaginable proportions. Unless we can resolve these issues with the utmost dispatch, the country faces further disintegration. To uphold the rule of law and save society as we want to live in it, we must have a caretaker regime, one that is legislated into existence by the current Parliament, as have been done in Bangladesh.

AS I SEE IT
Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

in which PPP was successful was adjudged by them to be fair. However, critics maintain that macro-management drastically altered the results past midnight in 15-18 key urban-rural constituencies when it became clear that PML (N) and allies were on a victory roll. At the same time, at the national level, the MQM boycott drastically tilted the balance in favour of PPP and its allies. While the caretaker-logic was very much alive, the caretaker principle to oversee a free and fair election was unfortunately violated. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, Hasina Wajed's AL had to initially accept the result of the extremely fair elections in 1991 under a caretaker regime but in an about-turn born out of political frustration has, for the last two months of BNP's term of office, violently militated against it, thus circumscribing the capacity of Khaleda Zia to govern. The net result has been virtual anarchy that has badly disrupted a newly burgeoning economy.

The cabinet should have 25 per cent of its members as retired judges (of the Supreme Court) retired bureaucrats (of federal secretary status), former Armed Forces officers (of rank equivalent to lieutenant generals) and elder business persons of known corporate repute. Such a government should have about 18-20 members, 9-10 who will run day-to-day government and 9-10 who will study those portions of the Constitution, election mechanism, etc, that have anomalies and need rectification for the common good of

Dhaka Day by Day

Caustic Comebacks

by Farah Ghuznavi

Most of us, at one time or another, have faced social situations where a witty response to a sarcastic comment from someone has been imperative. Similarly, most of us have also faced the humiliation of a moment where the aforementioned witty response has totally failed to materialise, leaving us spluttering with indignation, and unable to retire from the situation with any semblance of dignity.

A cartoon strip I recently saw illustrates this point. A man and his wife are seen having returned from a party, and are preparing to retire for the night. The man is seething over assorted comments made at his expense by those who attended the party (all of which he has clearly failed to respond to in an appropriately witty fashion) So, as he prepares for bed, he complains to his wife, "When he said that, I should have said .... blah, blah, blah" After he has gone through this routine several times, his wife finally gets fed up of listening to him, and says, "Why don't you just shut up, and go to bed!" Five minutes later, the man is seen lying in bed, and thinking to himself, "when she said that, I should have said, ...."

There are, of course, some fortunate individuals who always have a ready quip for the situation at hand (non doubt these are the same individuals whose sarcastic comments the rest of us usually fail to respond to in time!) An example of this was a person I know who ran into someone whom he despised. The latter individual was a pompous idiot, and was at the time proudly riding a horse he had recently purchased in an attempt to show how westernised he was. "What do you think? How do I look?" he queried, no doubt expecting extravagant praise of his horsemanship. He was sorely disappointed. Without missing a beat, the first man said, "I really don't know what to think. You see, this is the first time I've seen a jackass riding a

horse!" Often, there is a sense of satisfaction in scoring points off someone in this fashion even when the individual concerned is not present at the time. An uncle of mine had gone to visit an acquaintance of his who was renowned for his bad temper, and his savage guard dog. To warn people off, there was a large sign posted on his gate, saying "BEWARE OF THE DOG .... THIS DOG BITES". When my uncle arrived there, he asked if the gentleman was at home, and was informed that he had in fact gone out. "So why haven't you taken the sign off?" he enquired of the astonished servant, before sauntering off.

Finally, the ultimate satisfaction in such cases can sometimes be when the person at whose expense the comment is being made does not even understand that this is the case. Take a colleague of mine whose boss was infamous for being extremely obnoxious (and not particularly quick-witted either). After a particularly bad day at work, when he chose to subject his subordinates to a tirade about their various inadequacies, they were still smarting from his comments when my colleague gave a long and apparently soothing speech to this man.

Acknowledging his various comments, he said "You must understand, sir, we are all worthless shuorer bachchas (sons of pigs). What do we know? You have to explain this to us, sir. After all, apni amader ma-bap (you are our father and mother ... much used Bangla phrase!) The fact of what it made him if he was their father and they were all sons of pigs went completely over their boss' head, and he was in fact quite flattered by this flattering and pacificatory (or so he thought!) speech. Meanwhile, his subordinates got their revenge on him most satisfactorily, since they could barely hold in their laughter until they had left the room!"



To the Editor...

'Janatar Mancha'

Sir, Why 'Janatar Mancha' it became a prickly issue in the eyes of the BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia making her declare that the city mayor, an Awami Leaguer, Mohammad Hanif had created the stage for foreign agents? And look at what the two US Senators have said about the issue of power transfer through orderly democratic means. In contrast, she mentioned about the protection of former leaders and their livelihood and of their freedom, right after her climbing down the stairs of her 'Ganotantra Mancha'.

Now let us look back a little. In the last so-called parliament (6th) who were the parliamentarians? May be Bangladesh is prone to making history and again would like to do the same with another election likely to take place in May. Was not the last election a one-party one with no Opposition Leader of the House being there at the Sangsad Bahabon? If we remember correctly, it was the Awami League who always got blamed and abused for creating a one-party rule in this country.

But is there any other example of a sitting parliament in our country with anyone but BNP? If Begum Khaleda Zia is to go scot free for all her misdeeds then why should Ershad rot in jail? The recent attack on his wife and a JP leader who is also editor of a national daily should be an eye-opener to all concerned. It is about time we thought accordingly and deliberated on the issue of electing or voting for someone who has already proved one's worth. How long are professionalists victimised during the misrule going to stay like that? And those engaged on CON-TRACT BASIS will be continuing at the cost of the public exchequer.

When hundreds promoted are still OSDs? Incidentally, we must go back to 1972 when the 'Janatar Mancha' at the Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddin) had been created and who were responsible for the removal of that dais overnight that had been built at the cost of six lack taka and was meant to express the people's democratic rights whenever the time deemed so? How shameful one can become to abuse while standing on another stage and talking of 'Janatar

stage? About BTV: It has always been a little cute thing for all of us, all through the years. On 30th March night they proved they were part of the Janata. But on the 31st night they suddenly seemed trying to be come stooges of the government headed by President Abdur Rahman Biswas. So while Mr Biswas runs the country, being the commander-in-chief of the army, navy and air force, Md-Habibur Rahman tries to show the rules, or is about to rule the country faithfully, sincerely and with honesty.

On the night of 31st in the Bangla news bulletin BTB showed the ex-PM first and then the Awami League chairperson, while in the 10 o'clock English news Sheikh Hasina was shown first and Begum Zia thereafter. Likewise in the Bangla news there was no mention of Begum Raushan Ershad, although she was shown addressing a meeting. But in the English news her name was clearly pronounced. One wonders why this mimicry and its purpose.

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