

What Our Readers Say

OPINION

People's Rights

Harold D Biswas

THE curtain was at last dropped and the people no longer have to wait in frustration to see the end of the political tussle and bickering that had gripped the whole nation for more than two years. The non-party neutral caretaker administration is now formed to conduct the forthcoming election. But this structural change has taken place only after the nation witnessed so many losses in terms of lives, moral ethics and economy. Although the final whistle is now blown, the question remains, who became the loser and who is the winner. Was it a fair game, anyway?

The nation was almost turned upside down through agitation, street demonstrations, boycott etc. The civic and normal life virtually came to a halt. The thugs and goons took control of the people's lives and people became totally uncertain about the future it held for them. On one hand, the demand for a free and fair election under a non-party neutral caretaker administration had been ignored for long, taking no account of the greater interest of the people or the nation, for the sake of so-called constitutional rights, and on the other hand, people were intimidated and forced, even threatened sometimes to give cooperation for the non-cooperation movement in the name of so-called democratic rights, taking no account of people's agony and the state of economy. People rather felt that no political parties cared for the people's rights. What a precedence our glorious 5th democratic parliament has set for the democratic culture!

Out of stubbornness, the election was conducted on 15th February which did not care about people's participation. Although, the people could not send their representatives to the Parliament, the session was summoned and caretaker bill was passed. The then opposition parties continued with their indefinite non-cooperation movement and the whole country came to a ruination, specially its economy. The blood-line of the country was set to be cut off from its source — the garments sector. All the stoppages of works and lack of mobility for raw materials and products only helped to cancel over 600 million US dollar worth of export orders for garments. The Chittagong Port was affected and the normal operations were highly disrupted, not to mention the losses it had already incurred during the hartals of last two quarters. The ships and feeder vessels diverted their routes. The exporters missed their shipment deadlines and a majority of them lost new export orders. The banks were closed and the cash transactions of

for all political decisions and activities. They are the one who can sit a party in chair and unseat a government. The people's rights should be the first and foremost in democratic rights and practice of the political parties. No one knows what good, the next parliament will bring in for the people. But this is a time when the people should raise their voices to establish their rights, and no political parties should ever dare to curtail that rights.

All concerned in the political world should take note what people's right actually involve.

The people have the right to earn their living everyday or be taken care of, without any disruption of their normal lives and activities.

The people have the right to voice their concerns and demand in a constructive and controlled manner.

The people have the right to move freely in the public places within the country anywhere and anytime they want, without any obstruction.

The people have the right to seek compensation when their property and vehicles are damaged in the name of hartal and strikes.

The people have the right to choose to exercise their voting rights and to select their candidates without any fear or favour.

The people's rights cannot be curbed by intimidations and obstructions created by the political parties in the people's mobility and decision making process.

The people will have the right to choose to follow or not to follow the call by the political parties for any political movements, including hartals, strikes, aborhdh etc.

The people have the right to expect openness, accountability, integrity and transparency from all the political parties.

The "Constitution" is for the greater interests of the people as the "Democracy" is. All "Rights" and "Practices" are meant for the people. The "Government" and the "Nation" are also for the people. The "Politics" is for the people, as well as "People" are always the looser yet they are the one who become winner in any political process.

The people's rights say that whichever party is in power, whatever the form of government, whatever the decision making process, however great is the differences, however ugly is the hatred, how mean and selfish the politicians are — please, do not come out to the street to agonize the people, do not take their lives, do not destroy the economy, the means of people's survival. Stay inside the parliament building, that's where the people want to see you, that's where the people want you to fight for their cause.

the total economy virtually came to a nil stock.

The industries had to stop their production, only to see that their regional competitors are taking control of Bangladesh's established markets. In the peak season, the crops and cultivation were deprived of fertilizer. Not only the economy agonised, but the people from all strata of life suffered immensely. Office-goers were scared of crackers and bombs. Life was totally insecure. To whose benefit, did all this happen? The people's fate betrayed them and they became losers, not the political parties. Who will pay for the cost in the months to come? The answer again is "the People". The people's right to survival was ignored. They were sandwiched in between the power games of the political parties.

The victory came on 30 March, but only after the people cried for help in their utter desperation. The people from all walks of life joined the huge crowds in front of the Press Club and demanded for an end to all the tussles and crises. The pressure being extreme and unbearable, the parliament was dissolved before the power was transferred over to Chief Adviser of the caretaker administration. Whose victory was it? Again, "the people". What the political parties could not do in two years in the 5th parliament, the people's force did it within two weeks.

After the people's movement in 1990, Bangladesh earned its best, and we also have seen what Bangladesh has done with its best. I wonder whether the Parliamentary form of democracy can ever be fully materialized and institutionalized. Was the democracy ever given a fair trial? How shall we measure the success or failure of the democratically elected 5th Parliament? This time, if the forthcoming election under the present caretaker administration is held free and fair with full participation of all the parties and people, will it ensure a democratic culture? Will not again the walk-out and boycott and absence bring an impasse to the normal operations of the next parliament since, "Opposition" in Bangladesh means to oppose every move of the ruling party, whether it be good or bad. The political parties professing to be democratic, were never successful in establishing democratic rights of the people. Will they ever be able to do so in future? Often I am compelled to wonder whether they have a clear knowledge of the "democratic rights and practice of the people".

All have to recognize that the people should be the ultimate factor and driving force

Let Us Restore Our Image

Lawrence J Gomes

As we come out of the current costly political turmoil, Bangladesh has her work cut out to erase the images that flash in the international press. The virtual shutdown of productive activities in the country this year alone will make it even harder to put an end to statements like the following: "Bangladesh is one of IMF's best (and most dependent) patients." Euro money, February, 1995.

"From high-flying Hong Kong to destitute Bangladesh, the traveller can find a stock exchange almost anywhere these days." Time, March 4, 1996.

Characterizations of the economy of Bangladesh like these are being resonated from the world press long after the inauspicious cryptic statement, "an international basket case," made by Henry Kissinger shortly after independence of Bangladesh. Many of us have reacted to these epitomes by saying that we are simply the victim of natural calamities — the frequent destruction of lives and properties by cyclone and floods pull us down through the economic ladder, unparallel to the other developing economies in the region. While there is some justification in using "luck" as a variable in our economic development equation, it is also true that we have withstood the nature's eccentricity and have recharted the course of our

economic activities by mobilizing domestic and external resources.

The confrontational politics have resulted in loss of many lives, output, jobs, and above all, at times, the shattering of our hopes in democracy and economic viability. This anguish and despair are certainly self-inflicted. To date, many have highlighted their concerns about the magnitude of economic loss and the strangulation of academic pursuits.

The political stalemate has brought the private sector production down to the economic basement. The businesses have been failing to meet the sale contract from the domestic, and especially overseas customers. The huge loss to the businesses which will take a long time to reverse itself is being tallied up not only in monetary terms but also in real terms — the loss of customers' confidence in sellers' ability to honour a sale contract. This loss of confidence is even more shattering when many of our business clientele criss-cross the highly competitive global market for the best deal in prices and services.

The overall cost of the political discord has transcended the staggering economic loss in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Just think for a moment — as a nation have halted the process of

imparting education to the millions of students from primary schools to the universities. We are depriving them of their basic education, technical education, higher education and research for personal political agenda. Recently, this paper commented that during the cultural and communist revolutions in China and Vietnam, schools and colleges remained open. We are allowing the shops to open, banks to function, and rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and tempos to ply the streets, but we are shutting down our schools and colleges — the center for learning and understanding our conduct.

As the country enters the stage of caretaker government we should start taking steps, feasible under the caretaker framework, to chart the course that would unleash us from the shackle of external dependency.

Let us have a political discourse and have it NOW — we don't want to be destitute. We have the potentials to be at par with the "Asian Tigers". We have goods and services to sell and we want to trade. We have young minds we want to educate, for they are our future. They are the ones who will resuscitate the nation so that it will no longer be the IMF's best patient.

The writer is professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin, USA.

Caretaker government

Sir, Better late than never. We heartily congratulate Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on the historic making of the provision of caretaker government in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

We are all confident that this amendment would always ensure holding of free and fair general elections in the country and would further strengthen the roots of democracy.

Let by-gones be by-gones. The long-cherished demand of the opposition AL-JI-JP has been met peacefully. If anyone has any objection, grievance or better suggestion on the passing of the provision of the caretaker government by the sixth Parliament let our seventh Parliament attend to it amicably and peacefully.

In the meantime, we would request the Election Commission to kindly complete the issuance of Identity Cards to all voters as early as possible without further wastage of time.

Let us all prepare ourselves from now for holding the next general elections peacefully and successfully with spontaneous participation of all political parties and the people without fear or favour or ill-will towards anybody in the greater interest of political stability and economy of the country.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka

Moral of the officials

Sir, It refers to your editorial dated April 3, 1996 entitled "Moral of the officials". You have pleaded: "the bureaucracy should not be threatened or demoralised at this critical juncture when they have to attend administrative backlogs and the electoral process at the same time and under tremendous pressure, as it is... Let them do some soul-searching and self-analysis to determine the degree of their fallibility or infallibility as government officials during the crisis period."

I am afraid you have failed to recognise the degree of offence committed by a handful of senior officials of the government which is tantamount to sedition and treason. They do so out of personal grudge and coerced or misled others to follow them. I am sure an overwhelming number of government officials did not like to join but was forced to do so under circumstances. The officials who joined the opposition rallies are senior government officials dealing with state policies and decision-making. It is not that they did not realise the implication of their action. The timing of their action is also significant. They masterminded their action at a time the government had already moved quickly to constitute the caretaker government and the issue was under active consideration in the Parliament and/or of the President.

Their behaviour is punishable under government employees conduct rules and action, in my opinion, should be initiated by the caretaker government forthwith, if they are found guilty. Government should not hesitate to take action against them as per law. Actions against a few officials will not demoralise the bureaucracy; rather it will boost up the morale of the large number of non-partisan officials. Proper action against the offending officials would certainly help prevent repetition of such even in the future.

The behaviour of these officials has already raised serious doubt in public mind about the neutrality of administration in the coming election.

The softline taken by the Daily Star on the issue was not expected from an esteemed newspaper as yours.

We call upon the caretaker government of Justice Rahman to take up the issue seriously in the interest of declining the administration and holding free and fair election.

Mahabubur Rahman  
8/6, Block-C  
Lalmatia, Dhaka-1207

Voice of reason and restraint

Sir, We in Bangladesh have just passed through the darkest period of our national life since the country was liberated in 1971. The situation has been deteriorating steadily. We had reached a stage where practically there is no law and order in the country. People could not go out to earn their livelihood, send their children to school, have to access to their savings in Bank to buy necessities, cannot go to any social institutions with complaints if they are harmed by anyone.

In simple words, the laws of civilised man did not work in Bangladesh during that phase. Evidently, the Bangladeshis had lost the ability to govern themselves.

There are, of course, accusations and counter-accusations as to who are responsible for this situation. There were some voices of counselling and reason, very faint though. Unfortunately, the newspapers of the country have not helped. Most tend to toe one line or the other by ignoring the ethnics of journalism. While they publish the news of vocal wrappings of persons fanning hatred and enmity in 5 or 6-column headlines in front pages, they cover the voice of reason and restraint in a single column headline usually in the last page of the newspapers, if any.

The common people of Bangladesh are suffering because of the greed for power, hatred for one another and pig-headed policies of the so-called leaders of the people. People are being persecuted for the sake of what they say are people's rights. In this situation, we can only pray to Allah to save us from the catastrophe and bestow wisdom on the misguided.

Mohammad Yusuf  
4/2 Zikatala, Dhaka-1209

Because of free press

Sir, In the prevailing political crisis of the last 23 months, Mr Mahfuz Anam deserves our thanks for having made several constructive suggestions to both the camps. On many occasions he criticized them. But his criticism was directed more against BNP government.

Whatever were the shortcomings of this government, the country will remember the last five years as a period of stability and unrestricted press freedom in the face of tremendous odds. According to Dr Goebbels, the propaganda pundit of Hitler, a lie repeated often enough becomes a truth. Take the case of recent election of 15 February. It became 'voterless' and 'farical' because of threats and violence at every level by the 'saviours' of democracy. Burning banks and private property cannot be a part of democratic movement.

By closing down the ports, road and railway communications even after BNP climbed down to accept caretaker government demand, the Opposition had released the Frankenstein monster in our political arena.

Iskander Meah  
Gulshan North, Dhaka

Time to retire

Sir, It is disheartening to see that even after this catastrophic non-cooperation movement, our political leaders still cannot hear, nor choose not to hear the voice of the 'people'. The clearest and the most significant message about the political situation that came from the farmers in the northern districts during the movement, however, not much importance was paid to it.

The farmers, who are actually the backbone of this country expressed the exact sentiment of the people by forcibly taking fertiliser from the dealers (mind it, they did not loot, but paid the actual MRP) and burnt effigies of both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, because at the end of the day, they realised that these two leaders were solely responsible for the current turmoil.

The political leaders should take note of this significant event and come to terms with what the people really want, and that is New Leadership. In fact, latest issue of Asia Week had a one-page article which put the current political situation in a nutshell. It stated clearly that our country will continue to suffer as long as these two leaders are in politics, because the fundamental problem is less political than it is personal, the issues here are sheer vindictiveness and revenge and not of national importance. I think all concerned of this country will agree that in the best interest of the nation, the two leaders should retire from politics as they have miserably failed to represent the people.

Farhan Qudus  
New DOHS  
Dhaka

Silver Jubilee of Independence

Brig Anisur Rahman

As an elderly citizen with little bit of experience in public service, I would like to share my feelings with your readers on the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of our independence. As you know, the intellectuals and journalists are considered as the conscience of the nation. Hence, I would like to pay my personal tribute to The Daily Star for providing an effective forum in that direction. Your consistent efforts to uphold the cause of national interests are indeed praise-worthy. But the target group of your readers who matter most in the decision-making have failed to take note of your subtle messages. As a result, the nation is at a critical crossroads now even after a quarter century of sufferings and sacrifices. The Silver Jubilee issue of your esteemed daily has a number of articles on the historic events leading to our national independence. They are mainly on the nostalgic feelings and experiences of the learned authors. If you read between the lines, there appear to be some pertinent questions lurking in the minds of any self-respecting citizen. They are, firstly, what are our achievements during the last twenty-five years of nationhood? And secondly, what are our national investment for the future generation to preserve the hard-earned independence? Thirdly, have we accomplished the sacred task entrusted to us by the freedom

fighters?

We as a nation cannot expect reasonably acceptable answers to these questions. Obviously because of the fact that the vast majority of our people (70% by any statistical standard) are yet to be freed from the terrible illiteracy and poverty traps. The democratic ideals of achieving such basic needs are lost in the doldrums of political bankruptcy, economic deprivations, administrative corruption and inefficiency. Then what are the rationales to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of independence? The probable and appropriate answer lies in yet another question, i.e. why the successive governments since 1972 have failed to deliver the goods? As a neutral citizen, I would like to emphasise on the immediate need for a consistent "self-analysis and evaluation" to be carried out by the leaders and intellectuals of all professional groups. It should be undertaken as a priority task at the highest level to find out practical solutions based on a nothing short of soul searching process. The findings of such an endeavour should be taken up as the national agenda for most effective action programme with top-most priority. By this way we can definitely regain the lost opportunities and achieve our targets of national development within a reasonable time limit. So that we don't have to

feel sorry again on say, the 30th anniversary celebration of national independence.

I am sure, any conscious citizen will agree that the time is running out very fast. We have already lost twenty-five years of our national life. The prevailing situation with extreme sense of frustration, despair and confession in public mind cannot be overcome only by having a free and fair election as manifested by the failed life of our 5th parliament. Free and fair election is nothing more than the first step towards a long democratic journey. Ultimate results depends on the honest, efficient and farsighted leadership at all levels and fields of national activity.

Since The Daily Star has already provided effective platform for soul searching in certain areas of our national life, you may kindly consider such an exercise for the next 90 days on the topic: "Successes and failures of successive governments in Bangladesh since 1972" as part of our Silver Jubilee of independence. The effort may be joined by like-minded independent national dailies and weeklies, think-tanks and research centres. The resultant outcome of such indepth study may become suitable recommendations for the next elected government to take up for implementation through concerted action programmes.

Social and Economic Priorities

PL Chowdhury

THE long drawn political impasse is now over. Light is visible on the horizon. The non-partisan caretaker government for holding the next General Election is now a reality. The ensuing all-participatory general election will definitely strengthen the infant democracy of Bangladesh and also contribute to its progress.

The civic life of the people and the economy as a whole have been affected much in the face of recent political movement and social unrest. Keeping this in view it will be of prime importance to identify the priorities and also work out appropriate measures to restore normalcy in the social and economic order of this country.

To start with the social priorities, the law and order situation needs urgent attention. The people in general must be able to walk in the street without any fear. Hijacking and snatching away of money and materials from pedestrians and violent incidents out of political or non-political clashes are almost a daily phenomenon. In the capital city of Dhaka there have been frequent incidents of robbery. Incidents of fire in shopping complexes and also in the slums have taken place number of times with reasons unknown. All these unusual happenings are to be prevented to ensure a peaceful and active social environment. Authorities must ensure that the law and order situation is fully under control and required measures are also taken for this purpose.

The Educational institutions have remained closed for a good number of days. Responsible authorities need to think about steps to restore proper educational environment in schools, colleges, universities etc free from arms and violence. Further, through a discussion the examination dates may be rescheduled allowing time for the preparations of the students.

The economic priorities also deserve immediate attention. When almost all the developing countries are busy with their measures of economic reform, it is a different story for Bangladesh now. Today Bangladesh Economy needs rescue measures.

uation faced during the recent weeks. Adequate transport facilities for the distribution of agricultural outputs throughout the country are needed. This will improve the supply position and generate cash for the next crops and also for the livelihood of farmers. Further, the farmers are still facing the problem of shortage in supply of fertilizers. Credit facilities and urgent logistics support may be provided for this. In absence of required remedial measures the problems in agricultural sector may culminate in a further low productivity and this may adversely affect the food grain prices on the one hand and the foreign currency reserve of the country on the other hand. If huge imports are needed to fill up the gap, considering the importance of agricultural sector in our national economy these problems need to be addressed with proper priorities.

For industrial sector also measures and assistance would be required for the losses suffered in respect of production, sales and/or exports etc. Fiscal measure like downward revision in the percentage of value added tax, import duty and corporate tax may be considered. As the present liquidity situation in the banking sector may not be in a position to extend adequate support in terms of increased credit facilities, lower rate of interest etc, the fiscal measures may be very useful for this purpose.

Devaluation of taka currency will help the exporters but simultaneously adversely affect the import-based units. As such it may not be appropriate. Bangladesh Bank may come up with specific measures in respect of providing fresh packages of short-term financial support to the local manufacturers and the export-based industries as far as it is feasible.

The rate of inflation is on the increase since 1995. And it is higher during 1996 due to the prevailing situation. With the level of prices shooting upward the people in general are hard hit. Steps to combat the upward trend of inflation is needed now. For this the normal production and supply position is to be restored first. Changes in the rate of interest or in the exchange rate of foreign currency may not be al-

lowed to effect the inflationary situation adversely.

With the increase in number of educated and semi-educated youths, the unemployment situation is causing further concern. Usually there is a tendency to think that the increase of investments in the country proportionately reduces the percentage of unemployment. But the experience shows that most or some of the investments may be capital intensive with latest technologies and only a few heads may be needed there against billions of dollar investments. As a result it will not contribute to easing the unemployment position significantly. The authorities may review the options for labour intensive small scale industries in rural areas. It will generate employment and also avert the rush of unemployed people in the cities causing social and environmental problems.

The level of Forex reserve continued to mark a downward trend during 1995 and 1996. Export earnings also shows a declining trend. In the context of present uncertainties in respect of the export market of Bangladesh the situation needs close attention.

The meeting of the donor countries scheduled to be held in Paris has been shifted from April to July '96. Our forthcoming national budget in June may be affected due to this uncertainty in respect of foreign aids and investments.

The investors around the globe are looking for opportunities. Collective initiative from the authorities and entrepreneurs is needed to activate the investment climate of the country. Industrial environment free from agitation and violence would be its foundation. Authorities may think about fresh incentives for the local and foreign investors. Because measures of decontrol alone are not enough to attract the investors. Tax on dividend may be waived or reduced significantly. The rates of taxes, interest and inflation are to be comparable with other countries in the region. Positive outcome may be expected only if the returns on investments in different sectors are attractive to the investors. Stable economy and dedicated efforts are needed for this, without wasting our time and energy any more.

This Time, without Mayhem

Mahjabeen Hasan

Bangladesh is now noted perhaps all over the world for being the place of a giant tug of war between BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia and Opposition Awami League Leader Sheikh Hasina Wazed.

This rivalry has been going on, as is observed, for more than a decade. Both the ladies had inherited leadership of their parties and both had suffered major losses. One would think that having so much in common they would be friends. But destiny proved otherwise.

In 1990, both BNP and AL, despite their differences, joined forces to overthrow the then President Ershad, and succeeded. This unity could have blossomed into friendship. But what fate had already written, can perhaps never be erased.

This proved to be true. Because in the 1991-polls conducted by the caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin, Begum Khaleda Zia came out the victor. But in 1993, when BNP won some by-elections Awami League refused to accept the results and said that the polls were rigged. From then on, the dispute was carried on resulting in the walking out of the MPs of Awami League and their allies from the Parliament in March 1994.

In 1995, the opposition called 150 strikes, shaking the economy of the country. This year, Awami League and their allies once again called strikes which had been going

strong from late February till the other day.

For nearly two years, the opposition had been boycotting Parliament in order to bring down the government of Khaleda Zia, their demand being a neutral caretaker government.

After the February polls, Begum Zia accepted the opposition demands. Meetings between BNP and opposition Awami League took place. And on March 30, Begum Zia resigned and the 6th parliament was dissolved. As expected, the strikes also stopped. The public breathed a sigh of relief. But the new election is unlikely to settle the feud and produce a compromise.

It seems that the problem between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed is more egoistic than political, and this is highly damaging for Bangladesh, which is one of the poorest countries in the world.

This feud has already proved to be fatal for the economy of Bangladesh. The volume of exports has decreased. The sales are slow. Many people who had gone to their villages were unable to return to their place of work in the city because the drivers of buses and launches were afraid to move. And so, the country was losing a sum of millions of Taka everyday.

Government servants have never entered politics publicly while in service before, but this year they did. It has been rumoured that they were

coaxed into it. Ever in 1990, during the fall of Ershad, this was not seen so.

If Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina were truly concerned of the country, then they wouldn't have been incapable of settling the feud and announcing a compromise. But, as it is apparent, the two ladies are after power and not peace.

Indeed, even after the May polls, it is suspected that the mayhem will not stop because if BNP wins, AL will still continue to try to topple the BNP government, and vice versa.

After all, there is no guarantee that after the May polls under the neutral caretaker government, Awami League will calm down. And if Awami League wins, BNP might call strikes or non-cooperation movement as Awami League did.

Therefore, the best solution to this fundamental problem which may slowly but surely cause damage to Bangladesh, is for both the party leaders, that is, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed to step down from politics so that alternative leadership may emerge. And doing so, they will also enable Bangladesh and its citizens to start again, and this time without mayhem.

This would possibly be the consensus of the younger generation if their opinion is taken today, without any fear or favour and in secrecy.

The writer is a student of class IX, Maple Leaf International School, Dhaka.

Government employees' protest

Sir, When the process was going on to form a caretaker government and handing over power, what the employees of the secretariat did, stunned us.

Syed Mohiuddin, president of federation of government employees association called upon Begum Khaleda Zia to resign immediately, otherwise, he threatened, the officials and employees will join the people's process. He also requested the officials and employees of different ministries, including foreign and railway ministries to bring out processions and join them at Janata Mancha. This sort of action is very deplorable and contrary to ethics.

Why this last-moment support to the opposition political parties? What is the mystery? May be they want to be in the good books of the opposition political parties lest they come into power in the next general election. Actually, they have lost their trustworthiness. Violating the allegiance, they have set up a bad example.

One should not encourage this sort of behaviour, one day it may act as a boomerang.

Nur Jahan  
East Nasrabad, Chittagong