

Happy Signs

This newspaper had written on numerous occasions about the deteriorating state of our politics, especially about the rising violence, acrimony and mutual suspicion. Much of that still remains. However, we are extremely happy to notice a positive and constructive trend. We congratulate the opposition for its restraint in expressing its jubilation after BNP government's power hand over. It was natural that at the fulfillment of something they had been struggling for over the last two years, there would be a massive outburst. This might have led to incidence of harassment and humiliation of the members of the ousted party. Keeping this in mind, opposition leaders, especially Sheikh Hasina and city Mayor Md. Hanif called for peace, restraint and for avoiding confrontation. It is to AL's credit that it held its victory rally only last Saturday, almost a whole week after the event. In this regard, though BNP had started off on the wrong foot and indulged in some very offensive and ill-conceived political statements, it was quick to change course and temper its post-fall anger to more on to constructive speech-making.

More recently, in Khaleda Zia's press conference and Sheikh Hasina's speech at Dhaka, we have noticed a happy trend of going slow on the acrimony and who did what in the past, and emphasizing more on the plans for the future. This is how it should be now. As the election campaign begins we want to see our political leaders tell us more, and in as much detail as possible, what they plan to do for us if they get elected. We particularly praise Sheikh Hasina's attitude that whatever 'revenge' there is to be taken against BNP, it should be through the ballot. Let our love for those whom we like, and our rejection of those whom we don't, all be expressed in the time tested method of 'free and fair voting'. Now that we have installed a system — caretaker government — which will go a long way in guaranteeing an ideal election let us not spoil it by hate-mongering and false campaigning.

As voters we are now interested in knowing what the various political parties are offering. We want to tell our leaders that global communication revolution has touched us, however peripherally. And even if we cannot have access to all information, we have enough to judge who is telling the truth and who is not.

Space for Public Meetings

Traffic jam has become a standard nuisance of life in Dhaka. Each passing day adds to this nuisance in fearsome volumes. But this is nothing to compare with the situation created by public meetings held by the major political parties. Awami League's victory rally on the Manik Mia Avenue on Saturday was a very elevating sight — not only because it was a sea of human beings but also because the whole throng was so positive in their participation. But the great course exacted quite a price in terms of citizen misery. Road traffic was disrupted for hours.

Misery is not all of the suffering caused by big public meetings in Dhaka. An atmosphere of total anarchy takes over and pushes the situation into a literal nightmare in the vicinity of the meeting. Is there no better answer to this than 'it can't be helped'? Has anyone so far treated the question of people's inconvenience with the seriousness it warrants? The glorious caretaker movement has made the prospect of people exercising their voting right exactly as they wish brighter by miles. But this victory is but a part of a whole which is the sum total of all of people's rights. Right of moving unimpeded is among the foremost of these rights. That may not be hampered for any other right to ride over it.

A piece of history can be recalled here. All democratic struggles of the Bengalee people during the Pakistan times found their expression in public meetings and rallies. From the Paltan Maidan to the Race Course — there were open spaces to accommodate enough people. Non-representative governments, starting from Ayub's and ending with Ershad's, never liked these meetings and they closed those spaces. Where is the space Bangabandhu delivered his historic March 7 oration from or Indira Gandhi spoke to the people of a land to whose freedom she and her government contributed so much? Gone.

Space must again be found and if need be created for use by political parties as venues of such big conferences as Saturday's. There is a very big lot by Bijoy Sarani which can come handy if the military museum plan is shifted. The international fair-ground is another suitable open space. And for smaller meetings by smaller parties there are enough open space even in the older town.

Let the political parties themselves see the point and choose other sites than Manik Mia Avenue, Panthapath, Baitul Mukarram, Shapla Chattar or Bangabandhu Avenue — not to speak of the Press Club front. Let them prove they believe people to be above everything.

A Dangerous Confusion

There is widespread confusion this year about the day Pahela Baishakh or Bengali New Year's Day will fall on. As the day approaches to as near as less than a week, this unattended problem grows to wreck everything that the day stands for.

The confusion is neither with the government nor with the Bangla Academy whose reformed calendar is being used by government and institutions as well as most individuals. Certain enterprises and business houses have shown in their gift calendars Pahela Baishakh as falling on April 13.

To save the day and its sanctity the government should come out clear announcing its Pahela Baishakh holiday to fall on April 14. Bangla Academy would also do well to inform people through the press that it is indeed April 14. A failure to eliminate the confusion would prove costly in cultural terms.

Caretaker Revolution and King Canute's Dreams

We Bengalis have a glorious past, a glorious history. We are capable of creating great things, great music, great paintings and great people. Over two million Bengalis who are working abroad are known for their character and their integrity, and Bengali grit. We must move forward with pride and confidence.

ENCHIRIDION

Waliur Rahman



and cooperation in keeping with the progressive aspirations of mankind." Thus the will of the people has remained the constant factor in the 25-year history of the country; it was demonstrated in 1971, it witnessed it in 1990, and once again we saw it in March 1996 in its incandescent glory.

The caretaker government just sworn in with Justice Habibur Rahman as the Chief Advisor has a gigantic task ahead. Although their main responsibility is to ensure a free and fair election, the people in have a far greater expectation from them than just this. A free and fair election plus something more. Twenty-five years on we are still in search of the twenty-five years on we still have obstacles in giving recognition to the father of the nation; twenty-five years into our independent nationhood we are still mired in the debate of what we should call ourselves.

Justice Habibur Rahman has started in good augury. He has very aptly invoked Promethean hope in tackling the problems facing the country. His tremendous sense of history and his firm conviction about the purposive movement of history, and in this case, relating to Bangladesh, will certainly be his strongest trump card in guiding the nation to its desired goal. I am not over-ambitious to think like Santayana that to be born an American is something moral. But I am proud that to born a

Bengalee is also not less moral. Justice Rahman has reposed great confidence in our bureaucracy and called upon them to discharge responsibility with complete impartiality regardless of any threat or intimidation. Asia has a long and successful tradition of bureaucratic excellence. Be it the bureaucracy of India, or the mandarins of China, Akbar, Kangshi and Hideyoshi excelled in revenue collection, ensuring peace and fighting enemies — main tasks of the administration at that time.

My experience has given me the firm conviction that he espouses something called 'moral' in his actions. A Worcester graduate, Oxford, he has made great name as a thinker and writer — apart from his contribution in the field of law and jurisprudence. His work on Tagore is seminal. And his indexing of the Holy Koran shows certain amount of what the French call 'audace' and daring — a work well done. His unanimous election as president of Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA), of which I am a life member, did not come to me as a surprise. The ten colleagues he has selected to help

human nature, and life without it were worth our taking...

Abuse of power is a crime. In Europe and United States, taking advantage of office to one's benefit, pecuniary or otherwise, is a criminal offence. Such crimes are severely dealt with in courts of law. Harassing political foes under Special Powers Act does not promote the cause of civil society as the habit of making *prima facie* case to wreak vengeance on a rival does not help a society based on law.

There is some truth in the widely-held belief that the level of civilisation corresponds to a grade of juridical defence. This assumes increasing importance because history says since the days of Cain and Abel that although people — rulers more appropriately — always preach moral principles, but more often than not, the same rulers use power without regard to such moral principles.

Sometimes public money is derisively compared with Holy Water — everybody can have a share in it! It is known as a Latin disease! Many of our compatriots in Bangladesh seem to have taken it much too seriously. Remember, if you sow the wind you'll soon reap the whirlwind. Every man and woman of responsibility in the country has to bear in mind that we are treading the soil sanctified by the blood of millions of dead and martyred. Many of us in March 26, 1971 ecstatically say with Lamartine, "We are making together the sublimest of poems." The music of Berlioz and the poetry of Victor Hugo suddenly overpowered us. Within five years of independence, alas, some people started questioning the very basis of our glorious War of Liberation and even dared to say that universal suffrage is counter-revolution. And we

started abusing Bengali creativity; popular mandates were framed, election fixed and gerrymandering rather than campaigning for election became the norm rather than exception. Why this vacillation in our mind? Why should we suffer from a split personality? We Bengalis have a glorious past, a glorious history. We are capable of creating great things, great music, great paintings and great people. Over two million Bengalis who are working abroad are known for their character and their integrity, and Bengali grit. We must move forward with pride and confidence.

Nineteen ninety-six March distinguished itself by another great development: members of our armed forces again proved political philosophers wrong. They demonstrated extraordinary degree of maturity as a national force of cohesion and stability. They together with other social forces like money, land, religion, education, labour, and bureaucracy stood on the side of the majesty and mystery of people's will.

It is a great moment in the history of Bangladesh — moment of great resonance and possibility. We all must remember that if men were sane there would be no history. But history moves ahead in its own purposive way and Bangladesh is no exception. Justice Habibur Rahman, while carrying out his arduous task, would do us a favour by asking his distinguished colleagues, all men of good will and honour, to refresh their memory and reread Surah Rahman. He raised the heaven on high and set the BALANCE of all things, that you might not transgress it. Give just weight and full measure! And by simultaneously relating to them the 12th century legend of King Canute who rebuked his flatterers by commanding the waves of the mighty ocean to stand still — in vain of course — only to demonstrate the limits of power.

Ensuring a Free and Fair Election

by Professor M. Maniruzzaman Miah

THE people, by and large, wanted a caretaker government. And we have it now albeit the pangs of birth of this nascent baby have at times been too unbearable. Whether by replacing an elected government by an unelected one, a new experiment in democracy, we have done any good to the society is yet to be seen. For one thing, many among us apprehend that in the new law we have sown the seeds of probable political interference in the independence of the judiciary which has, against various odds, so far kept its head high. More important, there will always be a tug-of-war between the political parties in the process of choosing the advisers. This may be a permanent sore in our body politic.

Fortunately, the law does not envisage an adviser to be a neutral one, a fuzzy concept, but simply a non-party individual, a more specific and identifiable characteristics. It is expected that a non-party individual in his decision-making will be able to rise above pernicious extraneous influences and will thereby remain neutral. However now that the government has been formed, as the people desired and the hustings by political parties have already begun, let us not look back anymore. Rather, we rejoice on the fact that we have finally come out of the whirlpool which was sucking us down to an abyssal depth for two years.

The CTG will now have an uphill task, to say the least. The immediate problems the new government have to face are many: establishing law and order, restoring discipline in the rank and file of the administration, putting the economy on the track again, among others. The main task of the advisory committee, however, is to hold a free and fair election. I have no doubt in my mind that the new advisory team are well aware of their responsibilities. Even then it

may be worthwhile to express our opinion on the issue of the ensuring election and how best to make it free and fair.

First, there is the credibility of the Election Commission (EC) itself. We would not like to discuss whether or not the EC acted within their legal and constitutional bounds. Nor shall we examine whether all that has been said about the Commission in matters of conducting the 15 February election is justified. The unfortunate fact remains however that the EC had a surfeit of public accusations, rightly or wrongly. Any way, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) who was appointed for 5 years enjoyed certain immunity under the Constitution (Art 11.3) but himself has gracefully opted out of office clearing the deck for a new CEC to step in. The dust raised on the issue should therefore settle down. In choosing the new CEC, however, the government has to be very careful and discriminating and definitely should not go for those who are known to be jockeying for this lucrative office.

Another burning question is the mentality of some of our top civil servants. Quite a few among them expressed their solidarity openly with a particular political party. The Chief Adviser while addressing the high-ranking men in the service of the Republic referred to political movements in the past and remarked that each one was different from the other. There have been times in our national political life when the entire population rose against a particular regime. The 1994-96 movement was distinctly different from any of those.

This time the people were clearly divided into two opposite camps and by no stretch of imagination the movement could be called a people's movement. Moreover, right from the 24 November speech, Begum Khaleda Zia indicated on several occasions that the 15 February election was

meant to remove the constitutional bottleneck for bringing about a caretaker government. This message must have been clear at least to those among the civil servants who by dint of their merit have rose to high positions. By expressing their solidarity with a particular group they have, therefore, lost their administrative neutrality, to say the least. The present government, on the other hand, is to be a neutral government as between the parties contending for the election.

One wonders how they can remain so with some of their top men in the administration having shown their partisanship in public. Unless the government solved this question I am afraid this is going to be their Achilles' heels. From the speech by the Chief Adviser at the secretariat, one could discern that he is quite aware of the nature of the problem. We do hope he will take appropriate measures to make the administration truly a neutral one.

The third issue which right from his assumption of office the Chief Adviser himself has been repeating is that of law and order. The Gano Forum and the LDF, in particular, have all the time been warning on the importance of arms recovery and of the *mastans*. While the problem has many facets all will agree perhaps that if arms and armed hoodlums are not contained all sincere efforts by the government will be set at naught. If the government wanted to recover all illegal arms, it is really difficult? The administration has to be however strictly neutral in their operations. There will perhaps be accusations against the law enforcing agencies but that should not deter them from doing their duties. People, by and large, will welcome. Brandishing arms for coercion must stop.

Finally, there is the question of 'black money' to use Dr. Kamal Hossain's term. Some people say money has no

colour. Let us not debate on that. The issue is one of using money, ill-gotten or not, for influencing voters in different ways. The government and the EC must see and ensure that only because of money, one candidate does not get undue advantage over others. The Election Commission has formulated some rules in regard to the maximum limit of expenditure for anyone seeking election. It should see that the prescription is abided by strictly. Only the other day Jacques Lang, the socialist minister for culture in France's President Mitterand's cabinet lost his parliament seat because he, a university professor, submitted an account of expenditure for his election campaign, which was a trifle higher than the limit set. Already an internationally known figure, his stature went up still higher.

Will our future parliamentarians emulate the same example and will our EC make them do so? In any case it is not enough for the government to say that they are non-partisan and neutral as between different political parties contesting the election but they have to act without fear or favour to prove that the election will have been free and fair.

Let us also face the fact that the government, however well-meaning it might be cannot by itself deliver the goods unless the citizens co-operate with them in their effort. We do not pretend to teach our political people as to how they should behave but the wall of mistrust that separates them is anything but acceptable. Will the contending parties, their leaders and the candidates at least smile at each other? Courtesy does not really cost anything. It may, on the other hand, pay them a good dividend.

The writer is a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka and a former ambassador to Senegal.

To the Editor...

Politically conscious

Sir, If Begum Khaleda Zia, presently, chairperson, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, believes voters are not politically conscious then she must be living in a fool's paradise. Strangely enough one who allowed her 'officials' to work for the 6th parliamentary election during her tenure as the prime minister of Bangladesh and took punitive actions quietly sitting in her office, has now been using her 'mancha' to 'direct' an imaginary government to 'sack officials doing politics' to ensure fair elections. And she is the person who had declared anyone who is not affiliated politically must be either 'mad' or a 'child'!

Those officials who talked on the 'Janatir Mancha' surely did not belong to the non-believing beings who can do and carry out kind of act in order to satisfy one's ego.

Nahatasha Kamal
8 Bhajohori Saha Street, Dhaka

Newspaper and partisanship

Sir, The day the BNP government handed over power of the caretaker government, we were astonished and hurt to find that *The Daily Star*, particularly through its editorial pieces, is taking expressly the side of the opposition. It is apparent that it has begun anti-BNP election campaign.

How can *The Daily Star*

blame the BNP for the bullet attack on Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir without being sure of the gunman who could not be arrested red handed?

T J Akhter
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Not a defeat

Sir, After the passing of the caretaker bill, the opposition parties had no justification to continue non-cooperation movement which cost Taka 300 crore per day to the poorest nation of the world as the resignation of the prime minister was certainly a matter of few days only.

Begum Khaleda Zia passed the caretaker bill in the Jatiya Sangsad and resigned. But it is not her defeat. For one thing, to Begum Zia, the stake was either to resign or to accept the colossal loss and damage to the life and property of the people, and economy of the country due to continued hartal, strike and blockade by unruly opposition activists. The fact that Begum Zia, instead of creating a tragedy like that of Tiananmen Square, chose the former, keeping the interests of the nation above her personal interests, undoubtedly substantiates her love for the people and the country.

Again, the opposition parties made it convenient to blame Begum Zia for the 'farical election' and labelled her government as 'illegal'. But they, without hesitation, grabbed the fruit of that 'illegal' government (the pass-

ing of caretaker bill).

Lastly, as a retired government servant myself, I find no justification on the part of some agitating government servants stopping all office works and demanding the resignation of the prime minister especially when the latter had already passed the caretaker bill and herself advised the President to form a caretaker government in no time. Again, unlike H M Ershad, Begum Zia came to power by contesting an election under a caretaker government, in which all the opposition political parties participated and lost. Compared with those of Awami League and Jatiya Party (who were both in power previously) the performance of BNP government was not certainly very bad. So, who will win the next general election is anybody's guess. But if BNP again comes to power, it will be a very much amusing if the same agitating govt servants, instead of resigning en masse (which is very doubtful) continue to serve under the BNP govt.

Mohammad Mujibur Rahman,
Khulgaon, Dhaka

Bus dacoity

Sir, Your news item (DS April 07 1996) on 'Bus dacoity on Chittagong-Cox's Bazar highway again' has prompted me to write this letter with terrible concern for there is not a single action seen to curb this situation either by the district police administration of

authorities concerned so far.

Five robberies in a week — how on earth this could be possible on a busy highway like Chittagong-Cox's Bazar? With the guns and goons, Chittagong-Cox's Bazar road has virtually turned into a highway of Hell, I presume. We, who are to shuttle between Chittagong and Cox's Bazar very often, demand immediate capture of these bandits in order to make the passage safe for our lives and belongings.

Hassan Jahangir
Nil Nirjan
Agrabad, Chittagong

Patronising the Judiciary

Sir, Mr M A Kayesh has rightly drawn public attention to the popular tendency of referring national issues to the judiciary (Star, March 25) in and out of season. Bad politics is undermining the image of the legislature, thanks to lack of statesmanship.

The politicians are also ruining their image due to presence of bad eggs, but unfortunately, the bad eggs appear to be in a majority! Replacement of leaders by leaders well not solve the problem. A new type of leadership has to take over, peacefully, with public support. The student community, can take up a position critical of old-style politics, as politics is heavily dependent on student workers. It is time for a silent (not violent) revolution.

A Zabr
Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

TV Time Bomb

WASHINGTON — When Rupert Murdoch offered to give free television time to the candidates running for president, he dropped a nuclear bomb on the broadcasting industry.

Harley Jefferman, the CEO of Zig Zag News, was up in arms. "Doesn't the man know that political broadcasting is a business?"

"I guess not," I said. "But it's an interesting idea to give free air time to the people who will run the country."

"Balance. Elections are won and lost according to how much money is spent on a campaign. Everyone knows that he with the most commercials wins. If we give away the air time, anybody could run for president."

"Perhaps, but in every election your industry raises the rates, and if someone can't pay them, you say that he has no business being in the race. It's refreshing to see the candidates offered free time. I think it's a good thing."

You worry about the candidates — what about the network stockholders? Don't they count for anything in a presidential election?

"They count for something but not much. I never met a broadcasting company stockholder who would be any good as president of the United States. Why don't you just go along with Murdoch and look good in the eyes of the public?"

"You really don't understand how this business works. We count on political advertising every four years. The revenue means more to us than Christmas. If we start giving away free air time, the politicians will expect us to do it all the time. It's one thing to give free air to President Clinton, but who the heck wants to give it to Alfonso D'Amato?"

"I think that you're over-reacting," I told him.

"The American people will respect you for doing something like this, and will probably watch your other programmes, that have nothing to do with politics."

"It's out of the question," he said.

"How about this, I suggested. 'Give free air time to all the candidates except Steve Forbes because he's the only one who can afford it. Whatever you charge him will make up for all the others who don't pay.'"

"That's not such a bad idea. But our real problem is Murdoch. If he keeps giving away air time, we'll be no better than the British, and everybody knows what a terrible government they have."

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