

A Not So Great Beginning

Sunday, July 14, 1996 is sure to pass into history as something this nation will take a lot of pride in and for long. On the day the Jatiya Sangsad went into its Constitution-ordained business of being the repository of this state's sovereignty and, on behalf of our whole people, giving shape and form to that sovereignty for the good of the people. And, for sure, this was no opening of just another Parliament. Our people fashioned this day and the Parliament itself by negotiating an impossibly tortuous path, advancing every step with blood and tear and many-splendoured sacrifices of a myriad kind.

Thanks to the sentiments expressed by the President-on-the-way-out, the spirited and extraordinarily punctilious performance of the outgoing Speaker and the paternalistic and equanimous new incumbent, the day was saved in spite of pronounced acrimonious undertones of the speeches of both the leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the House. And also in spite of the usual parliamentary shoutings the tenor of the inaugural session was certainly one of commitment made by the parties to build a Parliament of co-operation. Although the opposition conditioned their cooperation on what they call as government harassment of their workers, this shouldn't pose any serious threat with the government hopefully being able to make it clear they are after pulverising only the criminals on their supremely urgent jobs of ridding the nation of an all-pervading terrorism — the rule of *mastani*.

This poor nation has seen too much of what is called tyranny of the majority. Now is the time for a magnanimous majority trying to involve the minority in everything they proposed to do — and also be fully understanding of whatever the minority want enacted and executed. Sheikh Hasina and her majority has set worthy examples of subdued and modest political conduct. This she and her majority must double and if possible treble in order to keep up the spirit of accommodation and truly help salvage the nation out of political quicksand.

And the nation is in no mood either to go in for a spell of tyranny of the minority. BNP's performance in governance has too many holes. To plug them all and advance to a winning position will call for a role we bit better than that of a perpetual spoiler. They must outgrow all such and be a powerful partner in governance, if not of the government which they have declined decisively.

July 14 is a red-letter day for all mankind. Fall of Bastille signifies unfettering of the universal man. The aspiration should be for all of us to work and build our destiny in a manner that can approach the universality of July 14.

Fearful Symmetry

The Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinees have made news this year in the most alarming and undesirable manner. Chagrined at the non-availability of the so-called 'common' or anticipated questions in the exam halls, they vented their anger by pelting stones and actually damaging the vehicles parked at different city spots. Shamelessly oblivious of their own inability to be sufficiently conversed with their syllabuses, students brandishing poles and sticks and rods proudly featured themselves in the front pages of different dailies recently.

Certainly, the questions were not imported from the moon. Perhaps, they were less predictable. Quite naturally, when exams are to be held under a system marked by the supply of same set of questions to all the examinees, irrespective of their boards, you better be prepared for a little uncommonness. Not that the examinees were not in the know of this change in the system.

A section of the disappointed group did really cut a sorry figure by going on a rampage, by exchanging their sacred identity of students for that of criminals. Sadly, this group of angry young men consisted of students from a college reputed for harbouring the most meritorious academic pursuers of the country.

It is the general air of lawlessness inherent in political activities that tend to affect the students in every conceivable way. But can this air of restlessness and the consequent excuse of inadequate preparation justify the countrywide violent incidents centering the HSC exams?

Students are the future leaders. If they do not have the urge to be honest with themselves at such a young age, if they are so hooked to the idea of buck-passing so early in their life, then which direction the country is heading to?

Oddities at ZIA

The Zia International Airport is our offering to the foreign tourists as a South Asian bridge-head to South East Asia. The idea is, not only are the overseas travellers expected to visit us they could also plan trips to attractive spots well within easy reach from Dhaka or Chittagong.

However, the latest in the series of slurs on the image of our airport comes in the shape of a reported police attempt to check the luggage of some foreign nationals who had already got on a taxi and were on point of departing for the city. After the customs check, the police had no authority or business to search their personal effects.

How could the cops overstep their jurisdiction causing such a hassle to the visitors and, what more, a two-hour disruption in the traffic around ZIA following an altercation between the taxi drivers and the armed police? The drivers' union have even alleged that one of its members was beaten by the chief security officer of CAAB during the incident.

The airport authority is urged to make a public statement on the happenings and take prompt action against those found responsible for excesses.

They should also try to streamline the assorted oddities one faces inside the airport building.

Government of National Consensus'

Some Thoughts

by Mahfuz Anam

Just because AL government has been joined by one party and another one-MP party, it cannot claim anything even close to a consensus government. But, on the other hand, BNP should not throw the 'baby' along with the bath water just because of the AL's claim.

A good chunk of Sunday's afternoon Parliament session was spent on BNP MPs trying to term the present administration as a 'coalition government' and the Treasury Bench trying its best to prove that it is a government of national consensus (Jatiya Oikko-mater Sarkar). What we saw in the name of a debate was an exchange of accusations and counter accusations with absolutely no attempt on the part of either to understand what the other was saying. If yesterday was a sample of how this idea is likely to be debated in the coming days then we are afraid that a concept that has the potential for being of immense use to us may get totally distorted in the whirlpool of partisan politics.

Let us say it out loud at the very outset that it is wrong for the Awami League to term this government as one of national consensus. However, it is equally wrong for the opposition BNP to condemn this concept as a camouflaged attempt to establish a one party rule of the BKSAL type.

Let us put the facts on the table. Awami League won majority seats in the last election and as such has the right to form a government. However, in doing so AL has tried to broaden its base by inviting other parties to join hands in forming the government. We already know that Jatiya Party and lone man) JSD have joined the government and BNP has

disdainfully declined, terming it as an attempt to form a one party government. Now the question is can Awami League, or should it, call the present government one of national consensus just because JP and JSD have joined it? Could it have done so even if BNP had joined it? We think, not as long as Jamaat was left out.

On the contrary, AL can have a GOVERNANCE PROCESS of national consensus (what we think the present government really wants) without any party joining it if CONSENSUS can be achieved in the government's POLICY FORMULATION in every field. Imagine that before formulating its education, energy, agriculture, foreign, etc. policy the government tries to take into account the points of view of all parties. It then formulates a draft which is put through a whole series of discussion. Finally through a process of give-and-take we arrive at a text that everybody agrees on. The advantage of this approach is that even when a consensus is not possible, we can have partial consensus meaning some parts of a policy getting full support of all other parties getting partial support and some none. Even when no consensus is arrived at on any part we still have the advantage of knowing where the differences lie, how deep they are, and what can be done to bridge or narrow the gaps in the position of the respective parties.

So the main thing is CON-

SENSUS IN GOVERNANCE and NOT CONSENSUS IN GOVERNMENT (meaning forming the government itself).

It is our view that the concept of national consensus government is being approached in a totally arbitrary way by both sides. Just because AL government has been joined by one party and another one-MP party, it cannot claim anything even close to a consensus government. But, on the other hand, BNP should not throw the baby along with the bath water just because what the AL is claiming is wrong, and more importantly 'kill' the concept by comparing it with BKSAL idea.

We think AL has moved away from the traditional way of thinking about the formation of the government. BNP calls it coalition government. For the sake of argument let us accept it, and proceed. When does a party go for coalition? Only when it needs the support to form a government. Obviously AL had no such need. Sheikh Hasina could have easily formed a government only with her own people (and thereby pleased at least two more of her party men). Breaking away from our traditional politics, she chose not to. This is something new, and it must be appreciated.

What is Sheikh Hasina trying to prove by inviting other parties to join in her cabinet?

(More tomorrow)

Missed Opportunities?

by Nilratan Halder

Both the leader of the opposition and the leader of the house missed the opportunity to project a profile larger than life through magnanimity. Let them take up issues like the consensus government for thorough deliberations so that the public are enlightened

MOST of us had our eyes glued to the mini screen on Sunday from 3 pm onwards. The reason for us to become so enthusiastic about and attentive to the programme of the day is quite understandable. We all wanted to participate in a most important national event, the inaugural session of new parliament that was being telecast live.

This time parliament has become the focal point as it did in 1991. After years of missed opportunities, people now have shown their readiness to actively participate in the affairs of the country. The so-called silent majority are no more a distant onlooker of events. This they have proved through their conscious and active exercise of voting right in the last election. So it is only natural that the business in parliament — particularly of the opening day — must receive an undivided attention from the public. How do the people's representatives perform? The MPs alone cannot be privy to all that takes place and is discussed in the house.

How things came out from the opening day of the inaugural session? The first day's impression, to my mind, is encouraging enough. It certainly did not begin on a high note, nor were there an exhibition of excellence so far as parliamentary performance is concerned. Yet at the end of the day things somehow fell in place. The BNP's inexperience and uncomformability with the uncouthness of the opposition were glaringly manifest at the beginning of the day's business. Outgoing Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali had no way to entertain the BNP's

demand for an adjournment. At that point the BNP's insistence on its members' right to speak verged on the ludicrous.

When the business in parliament began with the newly elected Speaker Humayun Rashid Chowdhury in the chair, the felicitary ritual by the ENP members got diluted by an overdose of angry political references. The members of the Treasury Bench — barring a few — felt provoked and responded ungraciously. The silver-lining in the whole deliberations is that everyone showed how keen they were to defend their respective cause. Can we now hope that we have just witnessed the first sign of a very lively and intense and consuming parliamentary deliberation to come? If it is, there is every chance that this parliament will fulfil most of the hopes and aspirations of the people. Or if this is just a foretaste of how difficult a customer the BNP will be for the ruling party to deal with in parliament, we have every reason to keep our fingers crossed.

We wish the drama — both acrimonious and ludicrous — that was enacted following Shipping Minister ASM Abdur Rab's — one of the ministers from outside the ruling Awami League — speech and alleged gesture did not take place. Both Rab and Salauddin Kader, a new entrant in the BNP fold, dampened — if not marred — the atmosphere in the house. The dividing line of course is a matter of approach or attitude. If the public representatives are serious about discharging their responsibilities, they will have to be extra careful in selecting their words, making

their moves, for here is a highly discerning politicized public who are keeping a constant watch on the men and women they have sent to the JS. There is little scope for anyone — either in position or opposition — to overemphasise and spend much time on petty things or undermine the people's faculty to understand.

Both the leader of the opposition and the leader of the house missed the opportunity to project a profile larger than life through magnanimity. Let them take up issues like the consensus government for thorough deliberations so that the public are enlightened. The difference between government by consensus and a consensus reached both by the ruling party and the opposition on a policy matter or an issue must be made clear to the people. The prime minister has promised she will take pains to explain the concept of a consensus government. Let the opposition be ready to find flaws with her argument.

Why condemn and reject it outright because it sounds new? Sunday's sitting was not the right time and place for discussions on the issue. We can look forward to a critical anatomy of the subject in the future proceedings of the session. Only then we know how to respond to this concept. Even then the BNP will be free to accept or reject it. We hope the BNP will similarly initiate new ideas for consideration. And the parliamentary debates will decide everything in favour or against. That is exactly how democracy will shape and get consolidated. The fierce contention, as witnessed on the first day, will work as a guiding force.



The Minimum Programme: How Adequate?

Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

ON the whole, the Minimum Programme put up by the United Front (UF) has been received well. Given the heterogeneous background of the various political parties, it was quite an achievement to have evolved a common approach and a minimum programme. Not many people thought this would be possible. For once however, the compulsions of a coalition government has smoothened out things.

Two other things may be noted: the first one is that the minimum period the UF needs to steer the programme through would be one year. But there is no knowing how events would unfold themselves. That brings us to the second point. The mechanism of coordination needs to be put into place at once. Certain decisions taken by the Finance Minister have been objected to by the left parties. If coalition is to continue, such things must be done within the privacy of the coordination committee.

Another vital question however remains. Is the Minimum Programme adequate or inadequate? For the most part, it is adequate but there are two crucial omissions: one, while something has been said about

the health programme, hardly any mention has been made of family planning. It is not necessary to go into the whole background or family planning. After 1947, it was at first neglected, then enforced by compulsion during emergency and subsequently allowed to tail off. In practice, however, not much is being done with the result that population is booming. What is more relevant is the fact that steps to control the unchecked growth of population are inadequate as well as far from effective.

For past several years, there has been a good deal of emphasis on 'Education For All'. In the long run, this change of emphasis (particularly education of girls) would certainly have a bearing on population growth. Being a long range measure, unless certain other steps are taken, growth would continue more or less unchecked and economic progress would get retarded.

Any kind of compulsion is out of question. Only feasible option is health coverage being introduced extensively. It is the infant mortality rate to be brought down. In a state like Kerala, rate of survival per 1000 births is as good as in a

European country. In certain districts of UP, Rajasthan and Bihar, rate of mortality is as high as 400 per 1000. In these areas, special efforts have to be made. The Minimum Programme does not show much awareness of these dimensions.

The second gap is more puzzling and equally difficult to defend. How is it that there is not even a passing mention of amending the 1861 Police Act? For more than a century, nothing had been done to revamp the Indian Police. How it behaved during the emergency does not have to be recalled. The high-powered commission set up by Janata government, had not finished its work when Indira Gandhi came back to power. The concluding volume was submitted 15-20 months after this and a draft Bill was also appended.

The UF government is, in a sense, successor to Janata government. Whether it can implement all that included in the Minimum programme remains to be seen. Interestingly, there is a reference to reviewing the Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, etc. but there is no ref-

erence to redefine the powers of the police.

One of the first things that should have been done after 1947 was to have redefined this charter of work. But the new rulers found it convenient to use police as an extension of state power. Hardly any political party took the initiative.

This recommendation remained only on paper. Mrs Gandhi had no intention of redefining the charter of work. According to the Constitution, any state government can and could have amended the Police Act unless, under powers of co-currency, a new central Act superseded the state Act. Another way to obstruct state government doing such a thing would have been to have the Governor refer the matter to the Centre for approval and sit upon it for years together.

Indeed, no one is keen on it. It suits every politician. When it comes to the common man, very few things affect him more intimately than how the police perform. But such is the cynical ruthlessness of today's politician that even when he suffers at the hands of police, his endeavour is somehow to capture power. Once in

power, he does the same thing as others are accused of.

From the point of view of the common man, very few things are more important than a complete revamping of the police and the policing system. Everyone suffers from the way things are organised now. Those who get the first whiff of power, want to retain power and do things to their own advantage.

The nexus between politicians and criminals is talked of very often. The nexus exists and it is because of the influence of those who are criminally inclined that nothing changes nor is there any attempt to change. This is not to suggest that economic measures and other things which have been described at length in the Minimum Programme are unimportant.

Without going into further details, one important recommendation of the Police Commission, made in 1981, is that there should be a State Security Council. Its chairman would be the Minister in-charge of Police, with six other members. Two of them would represent the government and the opposition but the remaining four would be

one each from amongst the retired high court judges, retired civil servants, social scientists and academicians. The secretariat would be provided by the Director General of Police.

This single recommendation, if implemented, can have a tremendously transforming effect on the working of the police. If the tenure of those above the Superintendent of Police, etc. is unaccountably abridged and transfers, if made out of vindictiveness, are not enforced, it would not be possible for the politicians in power to do what they do everyday. In fact, if these reforms are implemented, things like communal riots would become things of the past. As almost every single enquiry has shown, it is only when the government is not too keen to stop the riots that riots break out. To contain them is simple. But what is needed is what is called political will.

It is a sad situation that the UF government is not giving evidence of this political will. Properly speaking, a new Police Act should be passed in the same session in which the budget is passed.

—Mandira
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To the Editor...

Expectations
Sir, So far Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made few important addresses including her first one to the nation over Radio and TV. The speeches, pledging, among others, to give good governance and transparency both in civil administration and defence, to make it possible for the people of the country to live in peace and progress and let the administration and other sectors work without any fear and interference of the party in power. Her speeches full of high hopes and promises have been acclaimed by all and sundry.

Having been thrown out of power the Awami League had been struggling for the last 21 years, and finally they got through to carve out their niche. Their admittance of past faults and their promises to toil hard solely for the good of the country have moulded the people to repose trust in them. The people will look to

it that their trust is not belied. BNP too had similarly showered good words five years ago, but the people, barring a few, have been frustrated at what they did during their five-year tenure. People's awareness has grown far and they are now more conscious than before, and they are now averse to hearing any tall-talks any more. Surfeit of promising words has by this time poured out of the people at the helm, now it is time to put them into action.

While we wholeheartedly wish AL's godspeed in their endeavour to forge the country ahead, we feel like reminding them that they must pay heed to the constructive and progressive counsels being proffered in different dailies by people of different opinions. That will pave the way for permeating democracy or democratic norms everywhere, and instilling innovating ideas into the total upliftment programme, as also simultaneously creating a society free from

economic exploitation and religious oppression or fanaticism.

It needs no emphasis that in the present context of socio-political situation yet to be stable and power consolidated, the AL must be guided by pragmatism, wit and wisdom of highest order, and not by whims or winks from any quarters.

Further, since charity begins at home, the members of the cabinet are expected to demonstrate unalloyed patriotism, integrity, fairness and austerity in their personal life, as well as in the discharge of their dignified but delicate responsibilities. As one said, 'Be bold in what you stand for and careful in what you may fall for.' We would want the AL hierarchy reckon this at every step and every policy they are going to implement.

They need not be bold enough to take hasty decision on some controversial issues of national importance, for that

may warrant criticism from, and rift among the people and cause their untimely fall. What they immediately need is to take bold step in matters of how to contain terrorism, extortion of money from terminals and other places, and arrest price-hike which they have also pledged in their election manifesto.

We have great expectations from the AL government. We hope they will not let us down, and will preclude with might and mettle any possibilities of recurrence of the host of harrowing incidents of killing, or for that matter, ignominious acts of myriad omissions and commissions.

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Answers, please ...
Sir, Everyday, now and then, there is the story of failure everywhere. The water remains standstill and the life

is as it is, where it is. Who cares for the welfare of others? Who commiserate with the sorrows, distress and grievances of others? Who helps solve the problems and sufferings of others?

A man or woman is getting more and more self-centred and selfish. A person is interested in his or her own personal benefit, gain or wealth. How would one cheat, deceive or deceive others has become the story of success for most individuals these days.

Is the world moving in right direction? Do the billions of people on earth enjoy a blissful happiness? Is the UN successful in its mission? Why the former colonial and imperial powers are most advanced and prosperous countries in the world? Why are millions of people on earth half-fed, half-naked? Why do they lead a sub-human life? Why half of the world does not know how the other half live? Are freedom, democracy,

human rights, justice, food, shelter, cloth, medicare, employment and education meant for a handful of advanced and developed nations, big and powerful countries? Should the people of rest of the countries live only on the mercy of powerful, opulent and affluent? Whither aims, objectives, functions and duties of the UN, non-aligned countries, OIC, Arab League and SAARC? Why are the innocent peoples of Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda, Brundi, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan suffering? Why are the millions of people of Bangladesh deprived of natural water of the Ganges?

There is one and only one thing which can maintain humanity on earth — that is the feeling of brotherhood and the observation that the whole world is the family of God and there is no distinction between race, colour and geographical nationalities.
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