

Hundred Days of Governance: The PM Explains and Answers

The BTV has served all the successive governments in the past in such a slavish spirit and to the detriment of truth, honesty and the interest of the nation that I for one never expected it to change overnight. During these hundred days, if the BTV has changed, the change is cosmetic.

BTV's Invitation to BNP

BTV has invited the Leader of the Opposition, Khaleda Zia, to participate in the next programme of Shabinaye Gijjasha. BTV is wise to do so, and BNP will be wiser to accept the invitation. With tempers running high between these two parties, the Leader of the Opposition may decide to refuse to participate, as she did in the pre-election Shabinaye Jante Chai. That indeed would be foolish, as it was the last time. With the Prime Minister's programme having been thoroughly messed up by overprotective (shall we say somewhat patronising) bureaucrats and overzealous party people, BNP now has a chance to embarrass the government by really allowing the programme to be as professional as it was originally planned to be. It is our view that BNP should not only participate, but do so in an open and democratic manner. In other words, it should do everything that the government did not, meaning it should not try to pack the audience with its own people and allow genuine questions to be asked in the programme instead of fake ones.

Some BNP members may say that going on BTV will give this body an image of credibility which would not be good for its future politics. Our feeling is exactly the opposite. The Opposition should make the ruling party prove its position that it believes in sharing the state-owned media with all shades of public opinion, especially the opposition. This invitation by the BTV is an important step towards institutionalising public debate on national television. Begum Zia will get equal time and opportunity to counter everything the PM said last Tuesday. Obviously what Begum Zia will say will be countered by subsequent programmes of the ruling party, which in turn will be countered by the opposition. This process will lead to a healthy public debate on political, social and economic problems which will ultimately help the public get a better grip on national issues.

Strengthening Local Bodies

On the first day of the four-day round-table conference on local government bodies, quite a number of interesting suggestions have been put forward. Almost all the participants at the conference have given their opinions in favour of elected representatives for local government bodies at all levels. They have been thoughtful enough to suggest provision of quotas for women and backward section of society in the local bodies. Such forthright views will have significant bearing on the ultimate shape the local bodies will take.

While the merit of election to the local-body offices is perhaps indisputable, some people may have reservations for quota provision. Well, a closer and clear look at our society will show that it has not experienced a uniform growth for all areas and at all levels. Even the most developed societies opt for some measures aimed at closing the gap between sections at different stages of development. Such a provision therefore is not going to do us any discredit.

Now let us refer to two other potentially groundbreaking steps that have come up in the first day's deliberations. These are: a) the delegation of power to local bodies to work out development plans and to impose 'limited taxes'; and b) arming the local bodies with some judicial power. If the details of the proposed system are framed meticulously to conform with our legal system and the scope for abuse of such powers is minimised, the prospect of a healthy and strong society looks bright.

However, dissenting voices as sounded by the professional groups like the Supreme Court Bar Association and the Bangladesh Medical Association are unfortunate. One objects to decentralisation of the judiciary up to thana level and the other pleads for exclusion of doctors from under the jurisdiction of local bodies. Then what will the local bodies administer or manage? The purpose of local bodies is to involve local people in development and take responsibility of self-reliance as much as possible. We hope, suggestions over the remaining three days will bring this aspect into a sharper focus.

Restive Society!

A dispute over a hen between families of two brothers has left three members of one family dead. This tragic incident occurred in a village in Chittagong. It is, however, of little significance when it has happened. It could happen anywhere in Bangladesh. More to the point is the fact that people lose their temper so easily and on trivial matters. Is the incident indicative of an intemperate society as well?

Unfortunately, the answer may well-nigh be in the positive. Not a small number of people get killed or wounded in connection with silly matters. People's pent-up frustration, failure and deprivation look for any opportunity to explode. Extremely nervous and edgy people are always unpredictable and with the increase of their number, society also becomes tense and unpredictable. Unpredictability breeds suspicion and lack of confidence, giving rise to an extra ounce of aggression in social behaviour of man.

It is not yet a sweeping symptom, but quite alarming. Overpopulation does not help our cause. But the remedy for the growing impatience has to be sought, keeping these people at the centre of all development plans. Poverty alleviation may be our priority but human resource development is no less an important agenda. We must aim at raising the GDP growth and at the same time stress on healthy development of our culture and value system. A balanced development of body and mind is what exactly helps avert the tragedies like the one in a Chittagong village.

It was perfectly clear, ever since Sheikh Hasina's government crossed the 90 days of governance, that completion of hundred days will not go unnoticed. One could also foresee the appraisal to follow three predictable lines — one, mainly eulogistic; two, highly critical; perhaps aggressively so; and three, dispassionate and balanced, because well-meaning and non-partisan. Obviously, the third kind of appraisal was the one likely both to carry conviction and to help the Prime Minister.

The press, the print media, has generally speaking, confirmed my expectations. I am one of those, following anxiously the performance of the present government, every right step filling me with hope, every sign of weakness causing trepidation. With the announcement that the Prime Minister will appear on the TV before a select audience, explaining her actions so far and answering questions coming from the floor and from telephone callers, I was terribly excited. Despite the fact that my relations with the TV set is very casual, I decided not to miss the programme. My only hope was that load-shedding wouldn't spoil my joy.

Before coming to the BTV show, I call it deliberately a BTV show — a word of praise for the press. I make a distinction between the friendly press and the hostile press. I leave out the hostile press whose hostility seems to be so total and unqualified that I do not expect any sensible comment from it. The friendly press, on the other hand, may be with a few exceptions here and there, have evinced remarkable sense of fairness in its judgement. It has taken note of both the positive and the negative side of the present government's record of the

hundred days. On the negative side, it has highlighted the law and order situation which continues to be pretty bad, the fumbling and poor handling in respect of postings, promotions, rewards and punishments in the upper tiers of administration, clear signs of partisan spirit in naming directors etc., for the management of corporate sector bodies, to mention just a few of a number of sectors where the record of performance is poor. To balance this, there has been a lot of good words on the positive side, too. That there has been a change of climate in the political and cultural arena, who can deny, not surely the friendly press.

But the BTV is a different story. It has served all the successive governments in the past in such a slavish spirit and to the detriment of truth, honesty and the interest of the nation that I for one never expected it to change overnight. During these hundred days, if the BTV has changed, the change is cosmetic. The change of tone was inevitable. All the wrongs of the past done to history, to the father of the nation, to the war of liberation, to the warriors of that long struggle, and many such wrongs had to be remedied. The change was too sudden and too radical for the Opposition to stomach it. Its protest was loud and raucous. But there has been a friendly protest too, not always articulated. In remedying the wrongs of the past, BTV did it in its own way, crude and lacking in good sense, in moderation, in good taste. True, it is too much to expect that BTV will rise above itself. BTV, I am

sorry to say, will continue to be what it has been in the past, and in its desperation to serve the master, will do more harm than good. The latest evidence was its handling of the Prime Minister's programme last evening (October 1).

Though stronger words are available, I'll not use them, regarding this programme, which had aroused so much interest across the nation. It could be a milestone, in the present government's honest efforts to initiate good democratic practices. Already, Sheikh Hasina, in choosing a non-partisan retired Chief Justice as the country's

arrangements were too formal, with a strong suggestion of oriental grandeur. The whole format was wrong. First the select audience appeared to be hand-picked, consisting of people not likely to ask the right questions. It reminded me of a famous cartoon by Max Beerbohm: Brownie among admiring ladies, all craning their necks to the poet, round and composed and self-satisfied, the eyes of the ladies melting in joy and admiration. No, this BTV scene was not that comic, only slightly ridiculous, not on account of the PM — far from it — but on account of the BTV format, whoever might have devised it. But, let us re-remember, BTV, in the Mukhomukhi programme of Muhammad Jahangir, and in the pre-election Sabhinaye Jante Chai programme of Anisul Haq did

show it was quite capable of performing much better, provided the planning is good and the conduct is in able hands. The format, I would concede, was partly dictated by the occasion. Normally, in regular meet the press or meet the people sessions, the Prime Minister is expected to make a brief statement or a particular issue or a few select issues of immediate concern, leaving the rest of the time for questions and answers. Maybe in future, this pattern will emerge, and facing the PM, we will have pressmen, not the elitist, blue-panelists of Dhaka University, reporters who will feel free to ask questions, sharply and pointedly. From her performance last evening, I can visualise Sheikh Hasina equal to the job, with ready, clear and confident answers. But on this occasion, her own statement took full half an hour. She felt obliged to touch on all, or nearly all, the issues arising out of her hundred day's governance. Perhaps she could concentrate on fewer, and only major issues, taking half the time she actually took.

Dr Rajib Humayun gave the impression of a worried headmaster, with a celebrity suddenly visiting his school and having expressed a desire to meet the boys. The well-tutored and well-behaved boys know what is expected of them and are coaxed and induced to ask a few bland questions. What stopped the organisers from making the audience more mixed, more varied, I fail to understand. And why the conductor of the proceedings had to look out for the possible ques-

tioner? Certainly this carried a suggestion of the whole show being stage-managed? Some of the persons thus picked up didn't even know how to ask a question. But the Prime Minister did know how to answer questions as and when real questions were asked, how to parry questions and, occasionally how to give only half answers. To one or two questions she really had no answer, and she, with an engaging smile, admitted her ignorance. She seemed to be more eager to face questions coming through the telephone. As I could see, there were many, and only a few were allowed to reach her. I suspect that some of those could be more penetrating than the ones from the floor, and I believe the Prime Minister would have loved to face them, her invisible audience. The strong and obvious censorship which precluded scores of distant participants from being heard will certainly act as a damper in future and here a bad precedent has been set. In future, I would suggest, the scene should be shifted from Television Bhaban to Gana Bhaban, the Prime Minister's official residence. Those should be her own public relations programme, to be televised live from the spot.

With all these limitations, the programme has not gone in vain. The Prime Minister has spoken, and spoken well. The nation now knows what she has to say on so many national issues. Only, the nation does not know how many other questions, perhaps more pressing questions, were censored off, and all due to the BTV culture: fear of freedom. The Ghost of the past is still there. How to exorcise it, quickly and decisively, should be the headache of the ministry and the minister.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

next President, in showing to the sitting President the respect and courtesy due to him from the Prime Minister when she called on him on return from a visit abroad — and this was a clear departure from what her predecessor in the office has been doing or not doing in her five-year rule — and also in shedding to a large extent the pomp and grandeur surrounding the Prime Minister, to mention only three of the many gestures which go to show her good sense, humility, her down to the earth approach to governmental issues, in all these gestures and practices she has proved her commitment to democratic norms as understood in the present-day world. So when she agreed to appear in the television programme of question and answer, she was only pursuing her policy of trans-

parity in administration and accountability to people. What she proposed, BTV disposed in its own way, in choosing to use milder words, as I said earlier, I would call it a good idea badly managed.

I was disappointed, deeply disappointed, by what I saw Tuesday evening. Perhaps I am to blame, perhaps my expectations were wrong, I had in my mind the US President's regular appearances before the press in the laws of White House, the brisk walk up to the rostrum, the freedom, informality and spontaneity of the proceedings. Here, on the TV, the PM's sitting

The Question is Moral

If the nation has to survive, it has to be vigilant enough to raise noise against the dishonest and those who have pocketed public money. Materialism or consumerism will not affect the nation so much as the lack of protest against those who compromise with principles.

Such a development will only strengthen the Deve Gowda government, because many Congressmen are keen to join the government.

The Congress strength at present is because of people like AK Anthony from Kerala, Sharad Pawar from Maharashtra and GK Moopanar from Tamil Nadu. But their mere presence will not improve the party's image. Congress has no future if it does not revive its ethos, cleanliness and integrity, with Kesari if possible and with Anthony if necessary.

In any case there should be conventions in all political parties whereby members should resign from the office they occupy if and when there is even a shadow of doubt about the integrity. Had such an attitude been adopted, Bharatiya Janata Party chief, LK Advani, would have quit. I am convinced that he is not guilty. But when a court frames charges of corruption, at least the president of a party, which claims to follow certain norms, should not be seen sticking to the position. Even now it is not too late for Advani to resign, particularly when Raj placed in somewhat similar circumstances, has stepped down. The question is moral.

One unfortunate fallout of Advani's case has been the harshly worded correspondence between Ram Jethmalani, Advani's lawyer, and Anil Dewan, crime jurist, appointed by the Supreme Court in the havalas case. Jethmalani was the one who had written to Narasimha Rao, then the prime minister,

that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was not pursuing the havalas case because high-ups were involved. One of them is Advani. Anil Dewan is quite right in criticising Jethmalani on appearing as a lawyer in Advani's case. The entire case depends on the 'credibility of diaries in which the names of havalas recipients are written down. Till the other day, Jethmalani was in the forefront in alleging the involvement of politicians, whose names had been recorded.

He was, in fact, part of the inner circle, which planned how to book the guilty. Now he will be destroying the veracity of diaries. As an intelligent lawyer, as he is, he should know that if the reliability of the diaries comes to be doubted in Advani's case, the Jains, who recorded the names and the other accused, would have the advantage.

Anil Dewan calls a spade a spade when he reminds Jethmalani that his volta 'face' would be improper, clearly not befitting a gentleman. This incident once again raises the question of morality. Should a lawyer make compromises for personal friendship or something else (Jethmalani was the law minister in the BJP's 13-day-old government). An

swer to such a question is important because there is increasing tendency to see professionals, politicians and even plebeians to throw away principles to the wind. If the custodians of the system are determined to violate the norms for their ends, who is going to have faith in them or the values they preach?

There is yet another example of the dilution of morality. I am referring to the dismissal of the BJP government in Gujarat. This has, in fact, helped the BJP

protest. All this does not condone the dismissal. An elected government, if not defeated on the floor of the House, is sovereign and cannot be trifled with.

This has been the demand of all political parties, which constitute the United Front. They have gone to the extent of asking for the repeal of Article 356, which gives powers to the government to take over the state administration in the name of breakdown in the constitutional machinery. Whatever provocation, a state government that enjoys a majority should not be bundled out. Congress at the centre used to oust opposition ministries at will. What is the difference between then and now?

When the Bonmal government in Karnataka was dismissed by Congress it enjoyed the majority. He said he would like to prove it on the floor of the House, still he was ousted. The Supreme Court in a post-facto judgement has said that the dismissal was wrong. There are several such instances. Therefore, the United Front's minimum programme was quite right in laying down that the scope of Article 356 has been interpreted and circumscribed by recent decisions of the Supreme Court. Our aim is to reflect these decisions and amend the article to prevent its misuse by the Centre. The UP should legislate its decision.

I think that the dismissal of the Gujarat government, Rao's late resignations and the acrimonious debate between the two lawyers have one thing in common: lack of faith in clean methods. Whatever governments, parties or individuals may claim to be, they are found wanting when their own commitment is on test. Their belief in the ends is so dubious as is their confidence in the vitiated methods they adopt.

Nothing matters except success, however, ignobly achieved. Since the country's politics has degenerated into petty maneuvers, it is difficult to fathom the low depths to which it has sunk. Who is to judge what is right or wrong or who is to punish the wrong-doer is not an easy question to answer because there are only the handful at whom the finger cannot be pointed.

Truth, honesty and fairplay are now relative terms. Whether the system will be cleansed is dependent on the efforts the individuals or a collection of them put in to make rulers, bureaucrats, professionals and others accountable. If the nation has to survive, it has to be vigilant enough to raise noise against the dishonest and those who have pocketed public money. Materialism or consumerism will not affect the nation so much as the lack of protest against those who compromise with principles. The question that faces India is moral. It should remember, on the occasion (October 2) of the birthday of the country's father that he upheld values and principles above what goes today in the name of public life.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

He was, in fact, part of the inner circle, which planned how to book the guilty. Now he will be destroying the veracity of diaries. As an intelligent lawyer, as he is, he should know that if the reliability of the diaries comes to be doubted in Advani's case, the Jains, who recorded the names and the other accused, would have the advantage.

There is yet another example of the dilution of morality. I am referring to the dismissal of the BJP government in Gujarat. This has, in fact, helped the BJP protest. All this does not condone the dismissal. An elected government, if not defeated on the floor of the House, is sovereign and cannot be trifled with.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Crimes

Sir, I am quoting here some headlines of news items published in The Daily Star on 28.9.96. These are: Muggers killed in police firing, businessmen held in city, wrists of 2 alleged terrorists severed in city, kidnapped minor girl rescued, tea garden manager murdered, injured IU Shibir activist dies, 4 held for alleged kidnapping sent to jail, trowler looted in Barguna, arms recovered in Ctg, 1110 bottles of phensedyl seized, attack on poet Abdul Hye Sikdar condemned, 201 arrested on various charges, microbus carrying smuggled saarees seized, 70 year old man killed in road accident, passengers travelling in night coaches are frequently robbed, minor girl allegedly raped, 40 more hurt in Sirajganj AL faction clash, agitation develops among tribals and non-tribals, arrest warrant against 5 for misappropriating wheat at Bhairab, abducted fish sellers yet to be rescued, seven found guilty in murder, villager copped to death, one allegedly murdered etc.

These are the captions of one day's one daily while a total of 296 dailies are in circulation in the country. All these headlines are related to criminal activities of capital as well as other parts of the country. It is needless to say that all the news items do not appear in the newspapers. At the same time one cannot dream a

crime-free country too. But we cannot imagine such alarming number of crimes that are seen in Dhaka, city where the headquarters of law-enforcing agencies are located. Now question arises whether the failure to control criminals is a failure on the part of law-enforcing agencies or someone else's. What are the reasons of increasing crimes day by day? The failure indicates that we are living in such a state where there is no existence of law-enforcing agency who can control criminals.

As a peace loving citizen I expect that our government will do the best to reduce crimes at any cost. We desire to see a crime news-free newspapers in the days to come.

A M Kays Chowdhury, Masdar Ghorshani Road, Narayanganj

Monowara Hospital

Sir, I visited Urology section of Monowara Hospital at Siddeshwari on 25th August 1996. As soon as I entered, three attendants ran towards me and started saying 'test, test, what test do you want?' That annoyed me very much. The consultant urologist (MBBS: D. Uro, Australia) Dr M Hasan Akhter was sitting by the side making telephone calls. I said to the attendants that I want to see the doctor first. 'He is the Doctor', they showed me. I entered into his chamber. I talked to him ex-

plaining my difficulties and showed him my previous papers. I had in my possession every individual. It should not be wasted waiting unnecessarily at a doctor's chamber. I hope physicians will be conscious on this aspect and will carefully maintain their schedules.

Nur Jahan, East Nastrabad, Chittagong

quite a lot of money in a very short time but in one's own way, time is precious to every individual. It should not be wasted waiting unnecessarily at a doctor's chamber.

I hope physicians will be conscious on this aspect and will carefully maintain their schedules.

Nur Jahan, East Nastrabad, Chittagong

Administering justice

Sir, I was totally horrified on 18 September '96 while visiting Muktiyodha Museum at Segunbagicha area at about 11am as law enforcing people were demolishing — rather destroying — all the shops cum hutments located there all around Segunbagicha. There was panic all around and I was disappointed while passing through footpaths of Motijheel area. Hundreds of cars were parked all around Motijheel area as owners attend their work-places leaving these cars on DCC footpaths at no cost. The air conditioners were just making the footpaths wet causing nuisance to passers-by or so. In Segunbagicha evicted people were struggling for survival while those owners of cars at Motijheel are just enjoying free parking area throughout the whole year.

Under the above facts it is justified to administer justice equally in the context of justice, equity and fairplay. We must not forget that many of those evicted at Segunbagicha are children of farmers and their hard toil developed the city.

Ahmedul Alam, 14 Eskaton Garden, Dhaka 1000

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

In Love with Snakes

It requires all kinds of people to run a presidential election campaign. It takes men and women who believe in their country and who want to make it a better place. It also takes venomous snakes who do all the dirty work behind the scenes. In the past no one knew the true identity of these snakes, but recently they have begun to appear on talk shows and now want full credit for adding sleaze to the race.

The snakes write the dirty commercials, plant negative rumours about the opposition — sometimes even about members of their own party — and spread garbage about the candidate's family.

These men (to be politically correct, I will not discuss the women) fit a particular profile. They all resemble the Unabomber, but have less of a conscience than he does. The longer they talk to the press, the easier it is to see that they all suffer from a Pinocchio complex.

Brainedad, a political attack specialist, told me that his tough advertisements should be airing any day now. 'The negative stuff is ready to fly. We'll have the opposition screaming foul' before Halloween.

'Do the candidates approve of the attack ads?' I asked. 'They're not allowed to say so, but secretly they loves them. They don't care what their negative campaigners do as long as they hit their opponents in the groin. Even when advisers like Dick Morris get the boot, the president, Hillary and Al Gore called him to say how sorry they were. Presidential candidates start by doing this men.'

'But it still takes money for the snakes to put on sleazy ads, doesn't it?' I said.

'Lots, but it is there. You go to a donor and tell him that you want to run a respectable ad and he'll turn you down. You ask for money to dump mud on the opposition and he'll open up the safe.'

Brainedad then told me, 'The voters claim that they also don't approve of negative electioneering, but just watch their eyeballs dance when the dirty commercials come on the screen.'

'What do the attack handlers expect in exchange for spreading the word that the opposition candidates is a drug dealer?' I wanted to know. 'An office next to the president, a good job in the Cabinet, an ambassadorship to Paris or a position in the law firm that lobbies the Food and Drug Administration to declare tobacco a health food.'

'I guess that you can't have a presidential election without mudslingers.'

'You could, but it wouldn't be any fun. And it wouldn't give the political well-poisoners anything worthwhile to do.'

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB