

The Eid Bonhomie

If Ramadan is a month of one's own purification, Eid is something that joins all to all, each to the other and blesses man with the virtue of the collective, the virtue of shared weal and even woe. Eid is a great portal opening up to world pervaded by the thought and care of the many.

Returning after the festivities to the daily chores of the livelong day with a sense of well-being born of surfeit and satiation, how one wishes to the spirit of Eid to touch and colour our world of the collective man — politics and governance, enterprise and sharing of austerity and wealth being the pillars of that world. Why cannot the majority give up wearing its strength on the exterior for effect and those less than a year out of power cool down and take a rest from the relentless push they are exerting to get the other out of power? Who but the nation suffers if its leaders fail to rid themselves of these and related vices. We do not know about their abidance by the virtues upheld by the Ramadan but many a political leader is on record to have mouthed vituperatives violating the sanctity of the holy month and *iftar*, the very plain breaking of the required fast and redolent of no ritual whatsoever, has been made into an instrument of politicking, socialising, conspiracy, gluttony and ostentation, all rolled into one.

The nation however needed of them all to lower their voices as also their hostile posture and come closer to complement each in the charting of a course to national fulfilment. This exercise in bonhomie, in the best tradition of the Eid, could make the sides on either side of the power fence think of the collective weal of all which is the inner meaning of the Eid. After all when the muezzin calls the believers to prayer, he asks them to join in the welfare — *salah* — of all.

We believe these are no idle wishes. This nation cannot march on with one leg travelling contrary to the other. Those who will be incorrigible in their persistence not to cooperate for collective weal will work their own doom first.

To Stay in Business

The readymade garments sector has its back to the wall. It needs shoring up with some interim measures to stay in business right now, pending longer term steps enabling it to survive beyond 2005 AD. That is the point in time when the preferential quota access to the international markets will have completely evaporated.

The RMG sector's present difficulties will have to be sympathetically considered having regard to the hard truth that competitiveness has not been its given, natural strength. Except for the low labour cost, in all other ingredients of production, the so-called competitive edge over other countries has been the hand-maiden of bolstering fiscal doses thrown in amidst assured markets and virtually toll free access to them.

The political turmoil in 1995-96 led to severe losses in terms of productivity and cancellation of orders. No sooner had some of the orders been regained than came the EU's threatened shut-down of the generalised system of preference (GSP) to knitwear exports, the major component of our forex earning from the RMG sector as a whole. The goodwill our garments manufacturers and exporters latched on to in the sequel to the political adversities took a drubbing — first in the hands of the US importers insisting on child labour restrictions and then from the European Commission which detected 'dubious' certification of origin issued by the EPB in respect of knitwear export.

The apparel sector leaders had asked for government subsidy to tide over the present crisis. But Finance Minister S A M S Kibria has ruled this out in no uncertain terms harping on his favourite theme of how all sorts of hidden subsidisation have been ruining the national economy, let alone the dreaded overt form of the same.

If subsidies cannot be given, at least no credit crunch should be allowed to come in the way of the sector's productive operations. Secondly, whatever is needed to be done administratively with the banks, insurance companies and customs authorities ought to be accomplished without any ado. The service charges may be reduced where possible. In two particular areas a reasonable degree of success can be achieved: toll collection and erratic supply of power. If a definite improvement can be effected in these two parameters, coupled with an acceleration in the administrative dispensation, then other demands of the garment sector might, in all likelihood, appear in a mellow light.

Paperless Days

This is possibly a world record. This is a record shouting shrill the measure of our uncivilisation. For ever, since newspapers started publishing daily, on no occasion anywhere in the world all the dailies closed down for four continuous days — to enjoy a festival. Bangladesh has just now been deprived of all its newspapers from Sunday last to yesterday.

For quite some time a three-day holiday was just doing fine for both the Eids. What necessitated the extra newspaperless day this time? What was different this time from the other occasions? A holiday spanning the eighth to the tenth of February could have taken the best care of accommodating everyone's need. Why was it made to start a day later although all the indications very clearly said the ninth would be the day of days?

We take the occasion to contest even the wisdom of a three-day newspaper holiday. Pakistan, the Islamic Republic, allows a two-day Eid holiday for newspapers. Malaysia, another Muslim majority state, lacking nothing in Islamic piety and a greater devoted nation to religion would hardly be found, has a one-day Eid holiday for newspapers. If newspapers cannot but be shut down for 72 hours at a stretch — and all newspapers at that — why aren't electricity and water and the conservancy services shut down even for one day? The essential services have a way of allowing holidays and still not shut down. The newspaper is an essential daily feature of the national life, indeed of all civilised life. They should be able to do what the electricity people do. They can do it. In fact they do it on occasions, unknown to its readers. The popular word for it inside the industry is 'however-holiday' — because in spite of a holiday being declared, arrangements are however made to bring out the paper all the same. This way we may not at all need to close the newspapers for more than one day on any occasion.

An extra day's closure doesn't benefit any quarter. The industry, the hawker, the reader, the advertiser, the nation and the world abroad. Let us do away with this practice the soonest we can.

MANY political scientists regard the evolution of a two-party system as the ultimate in a modern democracy. Citizens sharing democratic values and norms exercise their free choice to allow their respective political parties to implement their own policies and programmes. The success or failure of their actions constitutes the principal determinant of their performance in the next polls.

In the present-day world, issues that divide the two major political parties in a mature democracy are more often minor and marginal than substantial and fundamental. This becomes more perceptible with the debacle of the socialist system following the collapse of communism in the erstwhile Soviet Union and in East European states. The United States, as the bastion of democracy, has perhaps attained the excellence in so far as the evolution of a two-party political system is concerned. Britain, Canada and other European countries trail behind the USA in this domain.

The situation in an infant democracy, such as Bangladesh, appears less than congenial for implanting a two-party political system in its body politic. This assessment is expected to hold good for quite some time in the foreseeable future. Let us explore the current state of affairs in the major political parties in the country.

To start with, let us choose the Awami League, the ruling party. The founding father, Shaikh Mujib, is indisputably a great man in the history of our nation. Under his banner the freedom-loving people of the country got together in 1970-71 to break off the shackles of the Pakistan regime. In his name, the War of Liberation was fought successfully. But Bangabandhu, the king-pin of a na-

Is a Two-party System Possible in Bangladesh?

Despite the limited and specific role the other political parties are likely to play, people are expected to veer round the two existing major political parties, who might in the distant future form the nucleus of a two-party system. Who knows? Qui Sait?

tional movement, was unfortunately a miserably poor administrator. The post-independence Awami League misrule bears witness to that. Irrespective of whether he was ill-advised or he acted with conviction, he committed the gravest mistake of his life by instituting one-party system with the establishment of BAKSAL. He paid the heaviest price for this folly by his own life and with the lives of his near and dear once. To err is human; only the angels are perfect. Bangabandhu was also human and should be accepted as such. A great similarity is found in the life of Mao Ze Dong, the founder of modern China and who was also the perpetrator of the so-called cultural revolution, the greatest man-made disaster the Chinese nation faced in this century.

However, the present Awami League, claiming succession to its pro-Liberation as well as post-Liberation predecessor, regained power in June this year after long 21 years. The Awami League got about 37 per cent of popular votes in contrast to the BNP's 33. It is an improvement over its own 1991 performance of 37 of the popular votes which included those belonging to its allies, the Left Front and others.

It goes to the credit of the Awami League leaders who had undertaken painstaking and relentless efforts to devise and implement a well-chalked out election strategy, which was eventually crowned with success. The Awami League's vast and well-knit nationwide organisational set up became the

most important tool in carrying out the grand design. Both leaders and workers were fully aware of the great disaster the party would face in the event of an electoral defeat. Their stake was high. The were desperate. They put their heart and soul towards achieving success. The intellectuals, who proudly associated themselves with the Awami League during the liber-

ation even with the support of other political parties. Anyway, the BNP is generally regarded by people as the party treading the political path on the right of the centre.

The Jatiya Party has done remarkably well in the last election. It owes its success to the personal charisma, dogged perseverance and selected good deeds as well as, strangely enough, misdeeds during the long 9-year rule of its leader, General Ershad. An exceedingly fine gentleman with perfect manners, aptly manifested by his ingenuous way of dealing with wealth and women, he is, according to many, the most unscrupulous of the leaders ever born in this land. He is a past master in the art of hypocrisy and has the way about to please men also. Otherwise, it was not possible for him to break the record in history to be elected from 5 constituencies by insulating himself, sitting behind jail bars. In spite of his personal straits and resources, his party is not embedded at the grassroots, except perhaps among some well-sustained industrial workers. The party being devoid of a meaningful philosophy is expected to be dissipated ultimately with the eventual disappearance of its leader from the scene.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, as all know well, draws its strength by exploiting sensitive religious susceptibilities of ordinary folks of the land and comes somewhat close to what may be termed as fundamentalist. Despite its anti-Liberation role, it has brought into its fold a siz-

ation period, were, by and large, extended their support for the Awami League, hoping that the latter would shun the principles and practices of the monolithic BAKSAL. The minority remained the mainstay of the support for the Awami League, for historic reasons. Notwithstanding its policies and actions at different periods of time, the Awami League has been and will be regarded as one with policies veering to the left of the centre.

The other major political party, the BNP, owes its origin to a soldier, who through sudden and somewhat uncontrolled turn of events, found himself saddled at the helm of state affairs. He later legitimised his rule through election. Most of the nationalistic

their leader, Khaleda Zia, who had bagged in the election the maximum votes with maximum seats an individual candidate could aspire for.

BNP's strategic imprudence was appalling. The political will of Jamaat was totally alienated; little and ill-planned attempts were made to befriend the unfriendly media and inept handling of the civil service became the order of the day. The cadre was found more often than not in a disarray. Besides, the general public thought it could be worth their while to give the other party a chance to prove its worth. Had only the defeated national leaders of the party been able to evade the electoral catastrophe, it would not have been easy for the Awami League to form govern-

The Internal State of the Federation

Mian Nawaz Sharif has a wealth of human resources available to him, he must utilise them to get the best use of the material resources remaining, the vultures having stripped this country bare.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

THE easy part for Mian Nawaz Sharif was to win the elections hands down after almost three years out in the political cold. Among lessons learnt, the first must be that 'pragmatism' does pay, the second must be that 'naivety' does not.

In the order of priorities the

economy has pride of place. The good news is that the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), it being

time we dropped the 'N' symbol,

has a full spread in all the Provinces, a strong base in two major Provinces and a moderately useful one in the other two. Even better was the fact that though there was a tilt for regional parties, it was nowhere near a majority. Whenever

there is unfair sharing of an already inadequate economic pie, regional tendencies tend to surface. Instead of shoving issues under the carpet, they must be addressed on a national basis in order to adequately satisfy all the partners in the federation, economic disparities and perceived discrimination have had unfortunate consequences for this nation before.

The first and foremost task is to

put together an effective eco-

nomic team led by an exper-

enced person having an inher-

ent command of an overwhelm-

ing bureaucratic machine eng-

aged in choking the economy

instead of running it. 'Kitchen

Cabinet' insiders may prefer

someone amenable to their

beck and call, if that should

happen, Mian Sahib would

have lost the battle for econ-

omic Pakistan before it even

begins. The 'Asif Zardari Syn-

drome' would come back with a

vengeance with a change in

name and style only. The chosen

Economic Czar has to ensure

accountability is dire neces-

sity to rid this country of very

real demons.

Institutions that have been

destroyed have to be restored

and rejuvenated. Instead of de-

pending upon the FIA, the exor-

cism must be put in the hands

of a focused team of professionals

capable and motivated. Along

with accountability, national

census is most important on an

urgent basis. While it could be

deferred for some time because

This concept of PR and MV is

to be carried out till each dis-

trict, not more than 1 million

people, have an elected mayor

on the basis of adult franchise.

This devolution of power at the

very base of the democratic unit

must include the authority to

not only impose and collect

taxes, but to spend as per the

need of the community, the di-

rect relation between taxation

and spending thereof will allow

the people to physically see

what their taxes do for them.

The present abstract system at-

tracts lot of cynicism from the

electorate and unless the public

perception is changed to being part of the budgetary pro-

cess in some manner that cynicism will only become deeper

and revenues will remain pro-

portionally small as time goes

on. This leads us into direct

vote for every accountable post

from the President downwards.

Even the Senate must be voted

for directly so that the many

ills of indirect elections being

manipulated by vested interest

can be avoided. Ms Benazir

Bhutto is only making the right

noises because she realizes that

the masses have given her a

stinging rebuke, there were too

many international observers

and foreign journalists around

to be fooled by her initial out-

burst about widespread rigging.

This despite the best effort of

BBC to contrive controversy

about low turnout. The sudden

silence from her previous

histrionics points to a realisa-

tion that since she cannot

negate the obvious, it is replaced