

Leave Out Public Servants

According to press reports, Khaleda Zia has asked government officials and police not to cooperate in the 'wrong' actions of the government and not to always to comply with its orders (sharkarer annay kajey shahajogita karben na, sharkarer ag-gabaha haben na). Is it the former Prime Minister's view that government officials and the police will, from now on, sit in judgement of every government action and decide, after due consideration, whether to obey or not to obey an order? Can any government work under those circumstances? What will happen when she returns to power? Will not the same officials and police sit in judgement of her policies and actions? Is she not putting the government servants above the government, which is elected by the people. Just because she happens to think that the present government is doing everything wrong, can she ask government servants to disobey the elected government? She can, and must make her case in the parliament, to the independent media, and then to the people.

The leader of the opposition cannot be oblivious of the meaning and implication of what she is saying. Then why is she saying such provocative things. We think, because she is allowing her personal feelings about the ruling party to get the better of her judgement. Her statement that she will allow no treaty signed by this government to be implemented is about the most absurd remark any responsible leader, especially a former head of government, can make. The question is where will such provocative political rhetoric take us. As more the discourse gets mired in hyperbole and exaggeration, often verging on the border line of untruth, facts get removed and prejudice and hatred hold sway.

We have repeatedly appealed for the return of sobriety in our politics, but to no avail. We now appeal that please leave the government servants and the police out of politics. We know BNP will say what about the role of a section of government officials during the last days of its rule. Though the two situations are not at all comparable, and with a view to not getting into unnecessary arguments, we simply say, one wrong does not justify another. It never did, and will not do in the future. So, stop doing what you know to be wrong.

Unacceptable

We wholeheartedly condemn the trail of attacks launched on the participants on their way to Khaleda Zia's public meeting at Gafargaon on Tuesday. These sporadic assaults which were carried out with the obvious purpose of scaring away those keen on listening to the speech of the opposition leader left some on-duty newsmen injured, let alone the party activists. Although it is not crystal-clear who or which quarter was actually responsible for those intimidating, undemocratic and criminal activities the general impression is that the undesirable incidents could in no way have taken place without an overt or covert involvement of the ruling party.

The meeting at Lakshmipur was also affected by a similar pattern of violent intervention. There also the venue was kept, through state-provided security, immune to trouble. But people coming to the meeting were harassed, attacked and obstructed at different points. Unlike those who are mastering these disruptive attacks we are convinced that the days for this type of feudal, heinous and repulsive tactic of waylaying opponents are over. We would specially urge the party in power to deem these incidents with utmost sensitivity and care because the onus of giving democracy a firm footing, more than any other party, lies with them as it lay with BNP when they were in power. The government should go all out to activate, if necessary, all its machineries in ferreting out those nefarious elements behind Tuesday's incidents and have them put through exemplary punishment. The point is that any attempt to dodge the responsibility by attributing the trouble to BNP's internal bickerings would not take AL anywhere. Because apart from being a question of its belief in the basic tenet of democracy which is coexistence or tolerance of opposition it tags along that of law and order.

We endorse, in fact laud BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia's sensible statement in a provocative milieu that those responsible for the attacks, irrespective of their party affiliations, should be pursued and brought to book without any fear or favour and hope that the government, for the sake of its own credibility, democracy and law and order, will respond to this call sooner than later.

Long Live May Day Spirit

Labour is at the centre of all that man does and aspires for. It is sad that universally man has hardly paid labour its due and particularly in the Asiatic Mode of development, as Marx loved to call it, he who labours gets the rawest deal from the society.

But modern production wisdom and management techniques have in the meantime come to ensure labour interest much better than ever done by the so-called workers' states and parties. Dickensian sweatshops have now no place in the industrially successful nations.

The worker is in an uncertain condition in the societies that are still to take off economically, such as ours. It's a kind of purgatory they are living through. Inefficiency in management and out-moded entrepreneurship are pressuring labour to remain where they belonged to in the Marxian scheme of capitalist things — all the surplus value created by them being expropriated by the capitalist. The sooner the nation will prosper as a whole, the better will be the worker's lot. Or, conversely, give him a better deal and you will prosper.

The release of the power of women's labour has been a wonderful event for this nation's development. It will do many good things at one stroke. This was brought about by necessity. And perhaps necessity will again take care of the second major development — rapid growth of landlessness pushing traditional peasantry to go for the labour market in a very big way. Mishandled, this may lead to disaster. Managed well, this will lead to the true coming of the economic Bengal Tiger.

Long live the spirit of the May Day.

Resignation of the CEC: Why or Why Not?

The post of the CEC is not only a highly respected and sensitive post, but, possibly because of that, it is safeguarded by the Constitution. No government can remove an incumbent from his office without his or God's will, except through a measure of constitutional amendment.

THE BNP has demanded resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr Abu Hena, and his replacement by a judge of the Supreme Court. The incumbent had been appointed to his post before the 12 June election last year. As far as one knows, his appointment had received prior consensus of the major political parties. Mr Hena was perhaps the only CEC, who as a civil servant held a post which had a post which had hitherto been manned by distinguished members of the high bench of judiciary.

The post of the CEC is not only a highly respected and sensitive post, but, possibly because of that, it is safeguarded by the Constitution. No government can remove an incumbent from his office without his or God's will, except through a measure of constitutional amendment. Then, why should the CEC resign from his post, not even at the behest of the government, but in consequence of allegations preferred by an opposition political party, however large that party may be? Let us explore.

BNP alleged that during the last June election, at various places, the CEC had shown partisanship attitude, did not take appropriate measures to prevent rigging and irregularities, ignored BNP requests for justice and redress and demonstrated failure to carry out the heavy responsibility that was entrusted upon him. They demanded his resignation and boycotted all bi-elections since October last. There had, indeed, been 15 bi-elections since October last. There had, indeed, been 15 bi-elections before October, but those seats represented the ones vacated by the winners returning from more than one constituency during the June 12 election. The BNP held that election to these seats as mere extension to the 12 June election and, therefore, participated.

Defeated political rival in an election generally makes such allegations, whether justified or not, that the election had not been fair. BNP has complained of rigging after 1996 election, as the Awami League had done, of 'fine rigging', following the 1991 election. It, therefore, calls for a careful examination as to whether or to what extent their claims are justified.

BNP made strong allegations that bi-elections in Lakshmipur-2 and in Mirersarai constituencies, originally won by BNP candidates, had been heavily rigged. Bi-elections to these two seats took place under the Awami League government who had already taken over power and controlled the administrative machinery. In Lakshmipur, the seat originally won by Begum Zia by a wide margin of 35,000 votes was lost to a new face by Moudud Ahmed, an erstwhile Prime Minister and Vice President, who had worked all his political life for promoting welfare of the people of that area. The main allegation was that the Awami League, with direct and indirect connivance of local authorities, forcibly occupied many polling centres and rigged the election. The CEC went by helicopter and inspected a centre there, by previous arrangement, and before the polling completed gave a clean bill of fair voting.

The Mirersarai constituency also had similar stories. The polling there was completed by noon, as stated by the defeated candidate at a press conference shortly thereafter. It is not physically possible to complete such massive polls without resorting to extra-procedural means, it was alleged.

Earlier, in the constituency of Lakshmipur-4, Abdur Rab Chowdhury of BNP lost to ASM Abdur Rab of JSD. The former alleged that areas around the home of the latter were virtually made out of bounds for BNP supporters, as was evident from the fact that Chowdhury, while obtaining over 60 per cent of votes in most of the areas, polled only about 10 per cent votes in the so-called protected area, thereby causing a heavy and inexplicable tilt in the result in favour of his opponent. These and about 60 cases have been filed for adjudication and are resting for long with the CEC, without redress.

Some other serious allegations made by the BNP against the CEC lay in his inability to change Deputy Commissioners of about 7 districts who had publicly expressed solidarity with the opposition parties in have to be replaced. The BNP agreed to it as a matter of principle that any officer objected against by a major party would be removed. The CEC failed to implement the agreement without advancing reasons. These are many more cases that BNP can describe in detail.

What we are interested to learn is that despite findings of a large number of international observers in favour of a fair poll having been conducted, how could BNP sustain its stand on rigging. BNP, on the other hand, claims that it is difficult for international observers, in their pre-arranged tours fortified by detachments of security personnel, to detect the nature and extent of the various forms of rigging taking place out of their sight in far-flung places in the country. Of course, a number of measures need to be taken to reform the election procedure. Among these, introduction of identity cards, which has already been taken in hand, is important.

There exists ample scope for advancing arguments and counter-arguments. Our purpose is not to be embroiled in that exercise. What is needed to examine is whether, in the midst of so many allegations justified or not, the CEC should stay in office or go voluntarily. Even if these allegations are not fair or just, it would be in the interest of all that he goes. The CEC is a post which must command confidence of major political parties, who represent the people, otherwise he must vacate. This was also stated clearly by a person no less than the President of the Republic himself at a conference of Commonwealth Chief Electoral Officers held in Dhaka on the 7th of this month. The President said and I quote, "If, for some reason or other, people have got no confidence in the Election Commission, the election held by it, even if it is held in a fair manner, will not be accepted by them." The CEC should comply.

What could then be the possible scenario, if the CEC refuses to tender resignation? The BNP may continue to boycott all polls. They may start a country-wide movement for compelling his resignation. There can even be violence in some future polls. Violence will breed more violence. The atmosphere in the country will be vitiated. Stability and consequently economic growth in the country will greatly be hampered. All quarters will sustain loss and none will gain. All these developments constitute a possible scenario which can be avoided only by the resignation of one person from office. Our hope is modest. We do not aspire for a Seshan of India, who produced nightmare to his government, nor even a De Silva of Sri Lanka, who conducted elections for long 11 years to the entire satisfaction of both the ruling party and the opposition. We simply want someone, who is above controversy.

If the CEC is truly a patriot, which we all assume he is, he should voluntarily step down. This will in no way be considered a stain on his otherwise unblemished and distinguished career in the civil service. On the contrary, this will be construed as a patriotic gesture of a conscientious citizen in a bid to promote peace, stability, understanding and above all, democracy in his land. If I were him, I would have done so. But he is not me. He is better, hence the expectation.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

The Blair Team Every One Untried in Office

Britain is about to see the most sweeping change in political faces since 1945. Nearly 100 MPs have retired, most of them Conservatives, and today's election is bringing in a huge array of new MPs. Furthermore, reports Gemini News Service, Labour's Cabinet-in-waiting are all untried in office — an unprecedented situation since the Second World War. Derek Ingram writes from London

BRITAIN looks like being ruled for the first time since the Second World War by a team of ministers who have never held Cabinet office.

Labour Party leader Tony Blair was only 26 and newly called to the Bar when the last Labour government, led by James Callaghan, was ousted by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Blair became an MP in 1983.

Prime ministers in Britain nearly always graduate through what are seen as the great offices of state: Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Home Secretary.

When Thatcher became prime minister she had been only minister of education, but her post-war predecessors, Attlee, Churchill, Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home and Callaghan had sat in Cabinet in several capacities. Harold Wilson had been President of the Board of Trade at 31 under Attlee, but nothing else until he became premier.

To the Editor...

'It is insulting'

Sir, I refer to your piece, "It is insulting", regarding peregrine's letter to the Prime Minister. I am entirely in agreement with you. Mr Tose's letter to the PM comes close on the heels of peregrine's "Open letter to the people of Bangladesh" which was carried in the form of an advertisement in your daily on the 10th of the instant.

While Mr Tose is entitled to believe that his employees are innocent of the charges brought against them by the Government of Bangladesh, I object to the outrageous and unacceptable manner in which Mr Tose had chosen to address the issue and influence the wheels of justice. Or has he been made to believe by individuals in Dhaka that by embarking on such a course of action, he can browbeat the authorities here? What does Mr Tose mean that that "the inclusion of his employees among the arrest list is an act of gross injustice" or "that it is quite clearly for politically motivated reasons". The only matter that is quite clear to me

years out of office. No-one, including himself, had government experience.

But in Britain, the last time a Cabinet of entirely new faces took over was in 1924 when Ramsay MacDonald formed Britain's first Labour government.

A change of this kind throws an unusually heavy responsibility on the civil service. Months before a general election, officials in even ministry prepare with great thoroughness alternative policy scenarios for implementation after polling day. These have to be based on the policy statements and speeches of the two parties before and during the election campaign, as well as on informal talks with opposition leaders in the months before an election.

In Britain, a government can call an election at any time within five years, provided it is not defeated on a confidence vote in the House of Commons. So senior officials often have to cope with a long period of uncertainty.

Over the past few months, Treasury civil servants must have been scuttling about like rabbits in springtime because

Labour wants to bring in a new budget with weeks of coming to office and change back the annual financial timetable. Only four years ago, the Tories broke with long tradition and switched Budget Day from April to November.

One reason for the immediate change is Labour's plan to introduce immediately a "wind-fall tax" — that is, to cream off excessive profits from former state industries that have been privatised. But Blair and Gordon Brown, who would be Chancellor of the Exchequer, think the old Budget schedule was more sensible.

All the signs are that Labour policy changes generally will be nothing like as drastic as those which marked the labour victories in 1945 and 1964 or Thatcher's Tory triumph in 1979.

It was once said of a certain British prime minister that he never made any promises and he never broke his promise. Apart from his plan for devolution in Scotland, the Labour Party's 1997 campaign has been notable for the very few specific promises made during the run-up to polling, although at the end, there were a number of confusing signals.

Labour has been simply terrified of making promises. It has been accused too often of suggesting costly reforms without satisfactorily explaining where the money was coming from.

The British public has come to be tired of politicians making large numbers of promises during the campaign and then breaking them. Many were made by the previous Labour Party leader, Neil Kinnock, in his 1992 campaign, and too many voters simply did not believe they would keep them.

As it was, the Tories were returned with promises to cut taxes, but soon increased them. Tony Blair was determined to keep any detailed promises to the minimum, and, under his strict discipline, Labour politicians were ordered to be on guard when they made any commitments, especially if they involved spending any extra money.

The inevitable result was a Conservative counter-attack, accusing Labour of not coming clear on what they were really going to do. This gave the Tories plenty of scope to suggest that New Labour (under which title Blair's party was so skillfully



Tony Blair and John Major: Change or continuity?

marketed) was really still old Labour and once it came to office it would be following the left-wing dogma of the past.

Both main parties are now the victims of a public perception that all politicians are charlatans and that nothing they say is to be believed. Each says you cannot trust the other and the public trusts none of them.

The votes for Labour will prove to be anti-Tory rather than enthusiastically pro-Labour. Many voters want a set of new faces in charge.

The result is that this election is the first for a long time in which the ruling party has not tried to bribe the electorate by making the economy temporarily look good and offering financial concessions in the year before an election.

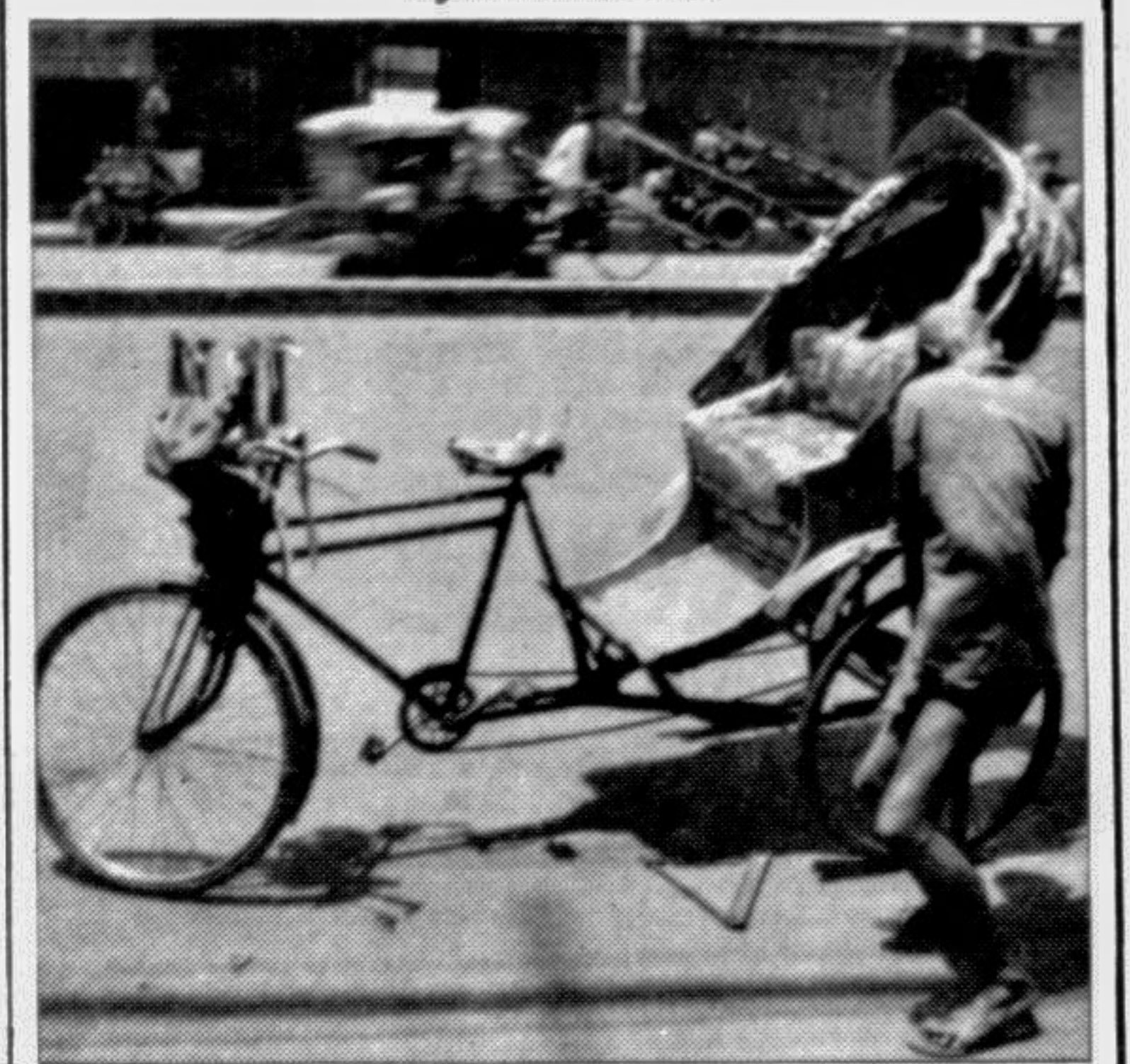
The British economy is certainly looking healthier than it has done in the earlier years of the Major regime but this time it looks genuinely better, and Labour has not tried to make out that it has been dressed up to win votes. The Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, has resisted any pressure from his colleagues to take short-term economic measures for electoral reasons.

The weakness of democracy is that the easiest way to win votes is to promise jam today. It may be that this time on coming to office, Labour will say it has now seen the books and they are not as good as everyone was being led to expect. In which case they will be able to say they were wise not to make any expensive promises. And Blair will be able to say he did not break his word.

The writer was editor of Gemini News Service for 28 years and is now its Consultant Editor.

Dhaka Day by Day  
The Essential Fixers

by Ekram Kabir



Fixing a Dhakai Dola — Photo: Suvash Kumar Barman

"When one of the tyres of my rickshaw went flat in the middle of the Manik Man Avenue, I had to walk the vehicle all the way to a rickart near Lalmitia," said Khalilur Rahman, hailing from Gaibandha some fifteen years ago, who lives at Khilgaon. According to Rahman, the number of these rickshaw repair-men would be at least 4,000 or so over the city. "These mistris are essential for us, the rickshawallas, as we are to you," Rahman further added: "We sometimes have to seek their services thrice a day." But according to another rickshaw-puller, the number of these mendors would be 12,000.

Does this send a worried signal to the people who already consider rickshaws as the major constituent of the bad-guy phenomenon for Dhaka traffic? Yes, a section of city-dwellers are voicing against the rickshaws to ply on, for "their" sheer waste of time, energy and money in this vehicle-clogged capital city of Dhaka.

"But more than ten thousand people will find themselves jobless if the rickshaws are pushed off the roads," said Muhammad Asaduzzaman, a rickshaw-puller for six years in his mid-30s, adding: "These mistris have come to the capital city, like me, with no hope of retracing their footsteps to villages; well, I am not too sure about their number, but I think they do need to stay in Dhaka for no other reason than to feed their families."

The mendors of rickshaws normally sit to work on the edge of pavements, but their presence is hardly felt by the passersby unlike it is the case for roadside hawkers and motor-vehicle service shops. They usually go unnoticed by the "clean-traffic" campaigners because these mistris never pose

any problems like blocking the walkways and roads. And this is true in the backdrop that they sit quietly, although in large numbers, in less-crowded places of the streets and toil over from dawn to dusk.

Says Abdul Halim: "Are you trying to make arrangements to be abolished at the power echelons; if they are not let to exist, consequently, the same fate, I am sure, is waiting for us."

Halim came to Dhaka some ten years ago from Faridpur, where he was a landless farmer. The money he used to earn there could not even serve the purpose of living for him and his wife. For a couple of years in Dhaka, he worked mostly as a building construction proletarian and other doable chores around the city.

As a letter-perfect man, Halim said: "All that I had done at that time was seasonal labour; during the lean period, unemployment and borrowing money from others were my options of necessity. Now that I am working as a rickshaw repair-man, I don't have to worry about employment for me, and for the schooling of my two daughters. This is a round-the-year job — although my income fluctuates everyday — and I earn Taka 100 per day in average."

Everywhere around the city, they charge flat-rates for each repair-work — Taka ten for working on one wheel, Taka three for fixing a leakage in the tube etc. According to Halim, it takes Taka 3,000 to start this trade of service giving to rickshawallas. Though rickshaw-mending is one of the most arduous businesses in the city, the rickshaw-pullers seem to enjoy a bond of friendship and the best consumer satisfaction.

OPINION

Dialogue Can Sustain Democracy

Liaqot Ali

Democracy is viewed as something prismatic reflecting diverse colours. Democracy is a symphony of many views, many sides. It is a not one-way but a two-way traffic. Democracy is not a monologue, but is essentially a dialogue. In democracy, people are the ultimate judge — they alone have the right to decide which side is right and what is good for them as well as for the country. This is why a great sage of the West said: "No better substitute of democratic dispensation has been found till today."

Viewed in this context, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's invitation to the Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia for an open dialogue on critical national issues, preferably on the television, is a welcome move. Reiterating her call in a public meeting in Bogra recently, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that the Leader of the Opposition would respond to her call in a positive manner. The Prime Minister said the agenda is open in that the entire gamut of issues before the nation would come up for debate and the people, by and large, would then be able to form their opinion and pass judgement on the respective roles of the ruling and the opposition parties vis-a-vis the national interests.

Since, 1991, and to be precise since the anti-autocratic movement in the eighties, the present Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are playing determining roles in national politics. They have together metamorphosed the country's political spectrum by restoring the long-cherished parliamentary democracy. In reference to the verdict of the people, their roles today stand redefined and changed: the former Prime Minister is now the Leader of the Opposition and the previous Leader of the Opposition is presently the Prime Minister of the country. Constitutional obligation of holding elections under a neutral non-party caretaker government was designed to stabilise democracy and ensure peaceful transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people. After the turmoil and turbulence of the last few years, the people now naturally expect that the leaders would behave

in a responsible manner and the country would graduate to a stable democracy.

But, barely nine months could go after the present government assumed office, the main opposition party has publicly declared that no more time could be given to it. It has, in fact, given an ultimatum and stern programmes including hartal to unseat the government. Much heat has already been generated in the political arena and a confrontational situation is being fast created to the dismay of all and sundry. Incidences of anarchy in the country and the government side is blaming the opposition for the same. Side by side, the atmosphere is being vitiated through mud-slinging and smear campaign.

All these are against the very spirit of democracy and negation of the sovereignty and supremacy of the people, faith and trust in their judgement and flouting of the constitutional provision. Constitutionally, the government is set to rule for a five-year term if it enjoys the support of the majority in Parliament. Before that, it cannot be unseated or forced out of office. If there is any genuine grievance against the government, there are appropriate forums to ventilate it. Act of sabotage or anarchy cannot go parallel to democracy.

Against this backdrop, the need for a dialogue appears to have become all the more imperative between the ruling and the opposition sides so that the issues can be discussed amicably and possible confrontation can thus be averted. Such an open dialogue would also provide the people with an opportunity to be informed of the roles of the two opposing parties, who, in their turn, will also be able to better project their viewpoints and thereby dispel all misconceptions and vile propaganda. This way democracy will have a smooth sailing to the advantage of both the sides. The advent of a new century is heralding with newer opportunities for us.

A summit level dialogue between our two top leaders should therefore be held immediately. The Prime Minister's proposal reflects the wishes of the enlightened segments in the society.