

The Consensus We Need

The worry of every sensible citizen over the present depravity in our political culture which has been the burden of every speech President Shahabuddin Ahmed made in the recent times was echoed again yesterday in his call for consensus among the political parties.

Taking a cue from the latest instance of presidential exhortation we urge both ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP to go by the rules of the Constitution which require steadfast commitment and allegiance to the parliament. There simply cannot be any second thought about making the parliament of the country as the centre of all political activities. The parliament belongs to the people. As people's representatives politicians are morally bound to register their agreement or disagreement at the JS.

Regardless of what the government does, the BNP from sheer obligation to its electorate should go to the parliament. In fact the incentive and urge to go to the parliament on the part of the opposition should be stronger for every deterioration in the government behaviour vis-à-vis it.

In the prevailing political culture both the government and the opposition seem to believe that parliament belongs only to the ruling party. This crippling mind set has to be forsaken. By avoiding parliament as a tactic to oppose the ruling BNP in the past AL had made a mistake. But BNP cannot, if it claims itself as a responsible party, emulate the mistakes of its 'rival' because for every new wrong the country is made to pay more than any time before.

Consensus on two particular issues has become absolutely essential for us. The ruling party and the opposition have to forge some sort of understanding to ensure parliament as the hub of all political thoughts and activities. Secondly hartal has to be replaced as a tool to register protest; Bangladesh's economy cannot take any more hartals.

We believe as the party in power the onus lies more with AL to create the atmospherics to make BNP play its due role in the Jatiya Sangsad. We urge the government to forget hammering opposition into shape as an option and work sincerely for creating a conducive milieu.

Jettison This Baggage

When top thinkers and men of action from the region exchange views like they did in a CPD dialogue on 'Prospects of South Asian Cooperation', held in the city on Tuesday, their minds invariably converge on one point: the moth-eaten mental fixation of the South Asian countries on servicing mutual distrust in domestic politics and social mores, has become a road-block towards a fuller realisation of the regional potential for collective growth in a highly competitive global market. This should hurt our sensibilities even more when other regional cooperation bodies, some of them even younger than SAARC and not without a track-record of conflicts at bilateral levels, have forged right ahead, well into the mainstream of globalisation while we languish on the sidelines.

How are we going to change the mind-set? The overwhelming presence of India in the region demands a statement of commitment by her leadership that they will strive to defend and honour the rights of smaller nations not as a matter of altruism but as an article of faith. As a confidence-building measure India should not only be prepared to err on the side of generosity but must also be seen to be actually doing so. The regional outlook has changed for the better with a series of initiatives taken by Indian Prime Minister IK Gujral for a rapprochement with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. If the two prime ministers who vibrate positively between them can initiate a process whereby Indo-Pak relationship will be guaranteed a smooth sail through vicissitudes of political fortunes in both countries, they will have built a bastion of durable peace across South Asia. It is Indo-Pak confrontation that has been the invariable staple of regional scenario and as between the two countries it is the Kashmir question that has dominated their relationship.

The key to equilibrium in the regional equations is held by Indo-Pakistan relations. And there the two countries need to reach a stage of understanding where the over-all peace imperative takes the centre stage.

A Life Extraordinary

For fifty years and more the world brooded over the question whether communism could have a human face. We are fortunate in this part of the Bengal Society to have lived with and learned from a communist who was the most human of us all. In fact there are many — thousands possibly — who believe there seldom were any among the liberal intellectuals and writers anywhere in the West or East to excel Ranesh Dasgupta in catholicity of the heart and broadness of vision and utter selflessness that filled an 86-year life span. Liu Shao-chi could have written his classic 'How to be a Good Communist' modelling the whole tome on him. Unawares to all, his was the same case of being sidelined by the party as a big stream of very renowned intellectuals in the subcontinent were. Ranesh-da was special among them all in so far as he did not make a case of it and continued in royalty to the party to his last day.

Ranesh Dasgupta born in the Bikrampur of the legends, lived a life given completely over to two things — society and the arts and letters. Politics came to him early in the shape of incarceration by the British for anticolonialist activity. He didn't ever look back to a sedate life of raising a family and making a career. A generation and a half in Bangladesh of the Pakistan times was infected by his ideals of life and literature, politics and personal bearing and above all his fine delicate taste in everything. In a society of Bengalees coming to hate Urdu, he picked and cultivated Urdu in the jails and became the best translator of Foyez.

He may have spent a fourth of his life behind the bars, Pakistan was very biased about him that way. And towards the end of that nightmare of persecution, he came to believe in the ultimate triumph of culture over politics.

He very much wanted to return to his homeland, which he loved to distraction, from his self-exile in Calcutta. Now his body will return to a mourning that will bring all of Bangladesh intellectuals together unmaking the hundred walls that they have raised among themselves.

Discords in Our Politics: Is Amity Possible?

by Monirul I Khan

Amity is possible only when the two parties will come to understand that the existence of the country and their existence are interlocked. They do not have alternative place to belong. Their temporary victory in a violent manner is the tip of an irredeemable loss.

lent transition spawns serious discontent in society. Neither Awami League nor BNP is the proponent of extremist ideology, then why they both take recourse to violent method of political agitation like hartal? This plausibly stems from some discordant issues which now require urgent attention.

Gap of Discords

One fundamental discord between these two parties is with the definition of nationalism. We all know that BNP calls it 'Bangladesh' and AL 'Bangalee' nationalism. The composition of the former is driven more by the elements of geography, religion and history while the latter by cultural and political ones. It is alleged that BNP's version smacks of parochialism/communalism while AL's of vassalage. Now the question is, how does the definitional divergence matter? One important use of the ideology of nationalism is consolidating and safeguarding sovereignty. Is that at stake? While it is true that ideology shapes the destiny of a polity in the long run, that is not possible without any concrete basis. We need objective condition to witness that a certain brand of ideology predominates over others. For example, the political history of Bangladesh reveals that it has its own dynamics developed through different political events over a period of time. Once it embraced religious identity to take a certain course and shook it off to traverse a new direction. Therefore, what we refer to as objective basis is very much evident. The inner urge for having an independent entity is the objective basis of our politics, no matter how is nationalism defined. Another sordid element in

the list of discords is, how do the two parties perceive relationship with India and Pakistan. It is increasingly taking a critical shape. BNP persistently murmurs that AL is pro-Indian and indifferent to national interest. Stretching it further they allege that the eventual goal is to make Bangladesh a vassal state. On the other hand, AL maintains that BNP is out to overturn the cultural and political achievements of the war of independence, rehabilitate the collaborators and install a pro-Pakistani regime. Again both parties take blind eyes to the innermost feelings of the people of this country. Whatever the position two parties maintain with regard to the relationship with India and Pakistan, it would finally be decided by more tangible elements.

Nowadays state to state relationship is evaluated more in terms of economic outcomes than others. Several previously hostile countries are rubbing each other's shoulder to pursue common economic interest. Political rhetoric gains upperhand in the short-run but fizzles out in the test of time. If diplomacy has some functional value then preserving political and economic interest is the foremost one. The relationship with India and Pakistan will be considered more in economic terms than the satiation of cultural choice. Moreover, striking a convergence among cultural choice, political interest and economic values is a difficult task. Thus often diplomacy requires keeping eyes selectively shut at the less prioritised agenda. Incidentally the rhetoric used by the two parties regarding their relationship and association with India and Pakistan is directed at the internal political gains than meeting diplomatic ends.

Current Irritants

The list of current irritants exemplifies that the irreconcilable issues between the two parties are superficially designed. When the hiatus is real the possibility of convergence is minimum. For example, this is difficult for 'theism' and 'atheism' to converge politically and ideologically. But that is not the case with BNP and AL. Both subscribe to free-market economy and multi-party democracy. Differences have surfaced on the issues like, identifying the hero who declared the war of independence, who would be the political cult or what names would be assigned to different institutions and organisations. The extent of the disputes on these issues might make it difficult to draw parallels in other countries. One may endeavour to twist and play with history but that does not last for a long. We all know that history is made up of cumulative events logically connected. The number of 'big bangs' in history is comparatively less since man makes history. Its recording may be biased and erroneous but that cannot change the logical basis of history.

Nowadays we see two versions of history — 'official' and 'academic'. Noticeably, official version gets tailored to a motivated goal. Of course, doing history has a goal but that is more to do with revealing truths than creating truths. Ironically, the very project of creating truth turns into political rhetoric and becomes an object of political satire while what is produced in academic arena comes to be taken seriously by the people concerned. However,

one cannot always firmly dispel the motivated linkage between 'official' and 'academic' versions of history.

Now what is the use of making a political cult? Generally, traditional politics guided by the norm of charisma derives its driving energy from cult figures. Its basis of legitimacy comes out of it. Different ideologies charged regimes draw on political cults but with the expansion of rational politics events are measured more on perceptible than imaginary things. That cult statues in different countries have been subject to people's wrath and eventually tumbled down, is not minimum in number. In our context also such examples should act as eye-opener.

Unfortunately, new frontier of irritants are unfolding almost in a regular manner. But there is a commonality in terms of source. When attempt is made to discredit each other's politics things ensue discordantly. But often such deeds are carried out to pull political muscle and divert attention. So overtures are also made to patch up things. Although these are strategic it does not go without incurring cost to society.

Is Amity Possible and Indispensable

If society is taken to be a mechanism and treated like a system then its institutions require interacting linkages. Politics, economy, culture and other sub-systems will be greatly influenced by each other. The conflicts and violence what are now coming out of embittered relationship between AL and BNP are considerably affecting societal functions. More alarming is the consequent schism among different

professional and occupational groups. Students, teachers, doctors, lawyers, artists, poets, singers, workers and others are divided along party lines. Such divisiveness is producing anarchy. Education is thwarted, justice is at stake, treatment is at peril. A person even with a minimum sensibility will understand that this is the most dangerous threat looming over society. Economy had paid most dearly for the political violence stemmed from the rivalry between AL and BNP. Thus amity and reconciliation are indispensable. Is that possible? Will both parties abandon their ideological differences? Convergence to that extent is not required for a functioning democracy. For instance, pro-worker Labour Party and pro-capital Tories operate within the purview of the same political system in the United Kingdom. It shows that even without sinking certain differences sharply divided political parties can co-exist. To that end a common goal has to be established.

Interestingly, both AL and BNP claim that their violent actions are for the interest of the country. Hartal, for example, is said to secure the interest of the country. The point is how do they interpret the term 'country's interest'. Do shutting down shops, factories and offices mean securing country's interest? It shuns economic progress but not the political rivals. Unseating a party from power does not mean permanent victory. Rather it begets a culture of political violence.

Still we have not answered the question, how amity is possible. This is possible only when the two parties will come to understand that the country's and their existence are interlocked. They do not have alternative place to belong. Their temporary victory in a violent manner is the tip of an irredeemable loss.

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Major Indian Parties are Thinking of Early Elections

by Zaglul A Chowdhury

The Indian national scene is already agog with speculations that the country may face mid-term polls as the UP events have sent clear signals that political development will only advance the polls.

THE melodramatic development in the Indian political scene centring the survival of the Bharatiya Janata Party government in the largest component state — Uttar Pradesh — has sent a clear signal to the major political parties in the country that they should prepare for elections. The polls may not be imminent but the developments in the recent days made it amply clear that the largest democracy of the world is very much moving towards new elections which will be in every likelihood much before than the normal five-year expiry period. The polls will be crucial for all the major players of the political spectrum of the country and none wants to lag behind should a mid-term election take place in not too distant a future.

The complex calculus of the Indian political scenario is getting increasingly complicated and the recent events in the Uttar Pradesh is a pointer to what extent alignment can take place in democracy for expediency and how quickly such alignments can fall apart much to the astonishment of the political analysts.

The developments in the biggest state of India against the backdrop of what has happened there in the last few weeks cannot be construed as something that involves only a state but has far-reaching effect on the national scene. All the major political forces sought to play their role in the UP events since the state is not only at the centre of the Hindi heartland but its turn of events engulfs the seat of power in the federal government in New Delhi. Finally, the coalition government of prime minister Inder Kumar

Gujral and its backer to keep it in power — the Congress — had to swallow a bitter pill for the time being as their main adversary — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — staged a bizarre coup in the state in the democratic pattern that took many by surprise. This has sent tremors through the coalition government and the Congress and led them to assess things in a more pragmatic manner keeping their eyes as to who would be in power in the South Bloc next time.

So important and crucial were the events in the UP that prime minister Gujral had to call off his scheduled trips to France and Germany and his arrival at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Edinburgh was also delayed. "We thought at one stage that the prime minister possibly cannot make it to this conference," said Indian journalist Sumit Chakravarty at the conference. As the heads of government began arriving in Edinburgh, words went round that the Indian prime minister's participation in the summit appeared uncertain owing to serious political developments at home. As we sought to vouch for the authenticity of the news at the media centre of the conference, it reminded me that late Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi failed to turn up to the similar Commonwealth summit (CHOGM) in Kuala Lumpur in 1989 due to political developments. The then senior cabinet minister and external affairs minister Narasimha Rao

deputed him. Here, however, Mr Gujral did arrive and played his due role in the affairs of the meeting but left for home sooner than the conference was over. "The prime minister has to devote more concentration in the domestic scene because of sudden flaring up of things that were not within the calculations," said Chakravarty, who had come to cover the CHOGM but was more keen to follow the development way back to home.

The BJP — now the largest political party of India in terms of strength in the lower house of parliament — had earlier suffered setbacks at the national level by failing to win a vote of confidence after it formed the federal government following elections last year. But it came out with an unexpected triumph — at least temporarily — in the UP, signalling that it threatens to regain power at the centre. Now appear more stronger than when it lost power in New Delhi. It is not because it stands any chance to form government at federal level in the context of its current strength at Lok Sabha — the lower house — but for the fact that it is forcing a decision by developments in UP and other areas that would warrant a snap poll before many can expect.

The UP scenario has been confusing and difficult to keep track of even for regular India watchers. The state was under federal rule in the form of state governor Ramesh Bhandari looking after its affairs as no

single party or group could form a government in the face of conflicting claims in this regard. When the BJP succeeded in forming a government with an unusual ally — the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) — it raised eyebrows in different quarters for the simple reason that the organisation known for its communal stance could come in collusion with the BSP — a secular party with avowed adherence to causes of the downtrodden and minorities. The BSP explained this by saying that it wanted to prevent the Samajwadi Party (SP) of defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav from forming a government in the state.

Interestingly, both BSP and SP too similar political ideology like secularism and are working for the weaker sections of the society and had once allied to form a coalition government in the state much to the chagrin of major parties since these two parties are mainly confined in the UP. But later on rivalry and recriminations led to the fall of their government and they have since treated each other as the main opponent. When BSP supreme Kanshi Ram decided to form a coalition government with the BJP and his close associate Ms Mayawati became the chief minister, it was obvious, who to the liking of Mr Yadav, who is a key figure in the federal government. And also not to any partners of the coalition government and the Congress which too was opposed to such a

development. Because the BJP is a kind of pariah to all of them.

At a later stage, Ms Mayawati made way for BJP's Kalyan Singh for the post of chief minister under intense pressure from the BJP. BSP agreed but soon announced its withdrawal of support from the BJP-led government which made the collapse of the government certain since BJP had no chance to survive on its own. Here, the BJP played its cards so skillfully that many were caught unaware. It succeeded in getting support from the most unexpected quarter — its bitter enemy Congress, whose large chunk of members sided with BJP at the moment of strength in the house defying party high command's whip. The BJP government survived shattering all calculations and sending wrong signals about the predictable alliances that are possible in political milieu. The federal government was convinced that Congress leader in the state Nareish Agarwal had engineered the defection after being lured to bribery and other unethical means by the BJP. The federal government and the Congress on whose support the government exists, both asked for dismissal of the UP government under relevant provisions of the constitution. But president KR Narayanan did not agree to the dismissal as the ceremonial president thought there was no such reason to warrant a sacking of the UP government. This happens only seldom and made the 13-party coalition govern-

ment — of centrists and leftists — and the Congress quite predictably, called the development as a "remarkable victory" and pronounced that days are not far off when it would be in the seat of power in the country.

The UP events in one hand underscored that political alignments are totally unpredictable and political defections with fairly large group of members are possible and on the other alerted main political organisations that shape of things are shrouded in unforeseen developments. The Gujral cabinet wrangled for the decision to deal with UP situation and rescinded its earlier recommendation for dismissal of the government. Braawling in the state assembly and defections were not enough to send the government packing. The Congress which also wanted the state government to go, differed with the government and consequently, their differences widened.

The development also cautioned the major political forces that no support or alignments can be taken for granted for certain degree of timing and any eventuality may emerge to alter the political scene. The Indian national scene is already agog with speculations that the country may face mid-term polls as the UP events have sent clear signals that political development will only advance the polls. The major political parties have already asked their workers to slowly prepare themselves for elections. An early election is not exactly on the cards as this may be too early for the five-year parliament but this is unlikely to be too distant.

It is an insult, but did we not deserve it?

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It is our failure to build bridges with those with whom we differ that ultimately does us ill. The tragedy of it is that there are so many examples of this happening over and over again, and we still do not pay heed to such lessons of history.

President Shahabuddin is literally crying himself hoarse saying the same things — political parties must co-operate with one another according to democratic norms; there should be a consensus on major social and political issues; political parties must not repeat the mistakes of one another; competition to pull each other down must be replaced by a competition to take the country forward.

This newspaper has relentlessly expressed the same message. We do not see any future in the confrontation type of politics that is now going on. We would like to clearly state that we consider totally unjustified and even provocative the police action that has recently been unleashed on the opposition, especially the BNP. The way police repression has been let loose on this

party, it gives rise to legitimate questions of violation of fundamental human and political rights as guaranteed in the constitution.

We would also like to categorically state that we think the opposition is guilty of betraying its voters by its continued absence from the parliament. We said so before and repeat it now, parliament belongs to the voters and NOT to the ruling party and much less to the government. We repeat that the worse a government, the stronger should be the opposition's presence inside the parliament to expose its ineptness and whatever else it is guilty of.

We also say with all the vehemence in our command that hartal as a political weapon should be given up for the foreseeable future. It amounts to stabbing ourselves every time we want to protest a wrong doing of the government. Just as the parliament belongs to the people and NOT to the government, so also the ECON, OMY belongs to the people and NOT to the government or to the ruling party. It is true that we said the same thing to the present ruling party — when

it was in the opposition — and it did not listen, just as the present opposition party is not listening to. There are hundreds of statements of Khaleda Zia terming who call for hartals as "enemies of the country, of the people and of development." Are we to understand that BNP leadership is willing to commit the same "crimes" that it accused the AL of, now that it is the opposition? Has evil become good just because the tables have turned? It is this disgustingly opportunistic politics that is pulling us down, and which opens up opportunities for the international community to humiliate us the way it just did.

The question of the moment is "Do we really want to grow up as a matured people and be seriously counted in the affairs of the world, or do we want to carry on with our infantile, inflicting self wounds that are increasingly debilitating us, and as such pave the way for our marginalisation in the future of vast potential, which is just around the corner? To put it more bluntly — do we want self-respect or pity?"

The choice before us is as fundamental as that.

To the Editor...

This Blood Has No Witness

Sir, With keen interest, I have gone through the thought provoking article by A Z M Obaidullah Khan which appeared in the DS of the 31 October under the title 'This Blood Has No Witness'.

It is revealed from the write-up that many people in the past had to shed their blood in defence of their forests. It is expected that all the quarters will pay due attention on the protection of men's natural right to enjoy the natural forest resources and put special emphasis on the conservation and development of the forests.

I like quoting of the following slogan of the Chipko movement by the author which I am sure has universal and eternal implications:

"What do the forests bear
Soil, water and pure air".

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Dialogue

Sir, It was so heartening to hear about the AL-BNP meet to prepare grounds for formal talks. With bitterness remaining in the hearts of both the party chiefs, nothing will succeed in bringing them closer. One cannot have talks in an atmosphere of congeniality while continuing to give vent to venom day in and day out. So condition number one is to stop slandering each other, for at least a week, before the talks take place. Nothing can be a

success unless the top leaders with their respective party henchmen be humble and sincere and stop public mudslinging.

The politicians of yesteryears and also some in the western world where democracy is flourishing, never took their political bickering as their personal rivalry, were bold enough to own their mistakes. Their ideology was built on the basis of tolerance, humility, sincerity and forgiveness. These are also the principles preached by all the prophets. After the victory of Mecca in early 7th century AD, examples were set by victors in respect of their behaviours to the vanquished. The example was reset after a lapse of 1400 years by the greatest statesman of the time Nelson Mandela of South Africa whom we were honoured to have amongst us as one of our guests, at the Silver Jubilee Celebration of our independence.

The man who was languishing in jail for long 28 years, going through unthought of miseries forgot all about it when he came out of the prison. He was a different man. In return for hatred he gave love. He believed that clinging to bitterness postpones happiness.

Tolerance is the key word for democracy. It is warm and it radiates goodwill. It unites men in spite even though they are ten thousand miles away in their own convictions. We talk of dialogue and negotiations. How can it work without change of heart?

We should, on a starry night, stand under the sky and meditate on our insignificance com-

pared with vast reaches of the galaxies and lie prostrate in front of our Lord in all humility. It will shatter our ego and pride and we will learn to be humble and our hatred will evaporate into the thin air making place for love.

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CHT: How's That?

Sir, I don't understand a proposal made by a political leader (DS, Oct 30) that for peace in our CHT, a peace pact should be signed with India, a foreign country.

How's that?
A Citizen
Dhaka.

The Dustbins!

Sir, In Bangladesh, you'll find the dustbins are cleaner in inner portions than their surroundings. The reason is very interesting. When a dustbin is installed, at the outset, some people throw their wastes. They throw these from quite a distance from the dustbins, so those wastes don't lie exactly inside the dustbins. Therefore, those fall outside of the dustbins. In the process, most of the garbage fall outside. By seeing that whoever comes do the same thing. For that the garbage gathers and increases outside of the dustbins.

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