

Accord with SKOP

The 12-point agreement between the government and the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) has caused justified consternation among people who keep the interest of the national economy uppermost in their minds. It is the one-sided, sweeping and overly simplistic tone, temper and texture of the accord that make us suspect whether it is an outcome of economic consideration or of short-sighted political expediency.

We are sympathetic of the government's decision to constitute a Wages Commission to determine a national minimum wage for the industrial workers in accord with the price indices. But in setting a deadline for its formation (within a month), announcement of its award (within six months) and its implementation with retroactive effect as from July 1, 1997, the government has not involved the industrialists and employers in the private sector who would be at the receiving end of things. To say that the government is the milching cow and it will go on paying for the public sector till the emptying out of its exchequer, so why should the private sector bother, is a grave error of judgment. It is just not that the private sector sneezes if the public sector has caught cold; it is actually cold and fever both attacking the private sector if the public sector has gone seriously wrong and sick. Mounting losses of the SOES force the government to borrow from the banking system. A credit squeeze throttles the private sector's windpipe as the government draws donor flak for deficit financing.

We fail to understand why the tripartite consultative committee where the private sector employers are represented was bypassed in making those consequential decisions last Tuesday.

The accord is not only silent on the rationale of linkage between productivity and wages, it has some loudly-proclaimed negative elements also to make matters worse. It has been announced, for example, that no massive denationalisation of industries will be undertaken. This and other caving-in concessions to the SKOP could very well send contradictory signals about the government's privatisation or free market policy.

After one and a half years' wrestling with details the government produced new pay scales which it is hard-put now to implement. And when the public sector's earning capacity has dropped, it is thinking of raising the salaries.

Under the circumstances, we think the agreement with SKOP is going to have a serious negative impact on the economy and work as a disincentive for the investors, both local and foreign.

Why Protect Them Then?

Clashes between student groups is a hallmark — dubiously enough — of our times in Bangladesh. Chhatra Dal was a student party that had a different genesis. Its progenitor was in power when he felt the need of a student wing to his party. But it nevertheless had its baptism of fire during the Ershadian autocracy. And came in line with BCL and BCU as a party not only after money and bullying power. But as soon as BNP was saddled in power, the fight that was in BCD was completely lost. They had only themselves to fight against.

On Sunday a BCL activist was stabbed by the student rowdies of a rival BCL faction. As if this was not bad enough, three BCL bullies were given a good hiding when they tried to extort money from a cattle auction at Savar Dairy farm. The nation is now passing through a wave of pre-Eid chandabazi. And one will be too willing to believe that the good name of the government is being used by genuine or fake BCL elements to take a goodly share of that.

BCL or BCD can go to hell for all one cares. But one cannot remain unconcerned over what that would mean by way of a new sweep of youth degeneration. And to come to think of this devilish scenario being fashioned very fundamentally by successive governments. The students were the key force in harvesting an overwhelming electoral victory for the Pakistan issue in 1946. Since then governments have always tended to depend on student support to go to power and keep it. They have been completely blind to the fact that students no more have that power with the people.

We appeal to the Prime Minister, either to bring BCL directly under AL discipline or let it be a truly independent activist group bereft of government backing. Thriving on government protection and caring little for party discipline — cannot simply go on. If the party chief does not put her foot down and stop it, the AL and the government who have already lost much of their credibility, would lose whatever is left of that to the detriment of the whole nation.

Eid Picking Menace

It has now assumed the proportion of a national problem. Nevertheless, extortion as a social evil is perhaps at its afflicting worst during festivals. The business community, more precisely the shopkeepers, feel the torturous edge of this otherwise pervasive malady during the two Eids. It is not any different this year.

Groups of youngmen, a substantial number of whom are students, are visiting shops and demanding merchandise with impunity. Their proud parade at market places and arcades is making a mockery of authorities' so-called 'highest security' alert. Extortionists, it is learnt, no longer keep their hunting ground limited to shops and markets. They have extended their dominion to households too. At a number of areas in the capital, groups of young people have been heard of demanding Eid bucksheesh for no service their prospective givers could think of and threatening them with dire consequences when refused.

In some places — though this has been more of a problem with commercial or mercantile areas — police and civil officials have reportedly appeared in the role of extortionists. The question that springs up automatically then is, what is the point in making those high flown, ridiculous announcements if government's 'own people' get down in the business of toll collection?

Although it had been announced earlier that in order to curb the menace of extortion, video cameras would be placed at vantage points so those coming for extortion or 'chandabazi' are easily detected and promptly put in the line of fire. But no camera was to be seen.

THE two-party system is still a far cry in India. In fact, if one were to add up national and regional parties, the number comes to around 30. Still, three formations have come to emerge. There is the Bharatiya Janata Party, with 12 regional allies, Congress with six and the United Front retaining the 14-party alliance.

What it means is that no political party will get a clear majority in the next Lok Sabha because they have themselves limited the scope of winning 272 in a house of 543. They share seats with the parties with their allies. The BJP, which once said that it would go it alone, has realised that it has to have the support of other parties.

No doubt, the argument is that this time its purpose is to create a niche in the south and the other non-Hindi speaking states and to fight on its own in the elections that will follow the present one. Yet, it is an admission that it cannot come to power on its own. The coalition, which it ran down in the past, has come to be accepted as the future pattern.

This has naturally diluted the BJP's poll plank. It argues that the party has no other option in the political climate that prevails in the country. This is true. What it does not realise is that when it would want to return to its own agenda, the territory vacated by it might have been occupied by the fanatics. It would be increasingly under pressure to go back to its original stand. But the party is in no position to disturb the set

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up it has so labouriously built in the states, where it does not count.

The question it should ask itself is: Can it pursue the diluted programme without alienating its committed voters? So far the BJP has stood for a strident Hindutva, which has been spelled out in the terms of Hindu Rashtra, the common civil code, the scrapping of Article 370, which gives a special status to Kashmir, and the building of Ram temple at the site where the Babri masjid stood before demolition. The removal of the mosques sharing the premises of temples at Mathura and Varanasi has been deferred for the time-being.

It is no more a secret that the parties with which the BJP has aligned itself are against such demands. Some of the allies have said so publicly. In fact, the very dilution has attracted the parties which were opposed to the BJP earlier. Its leader, Atal Behari Vajpyee, has said that the BJP will not pursue its own programme because it will have to accommodate the programmes of other parties. It is a good statement to cement relations with the allies but is it good enough for the BJP's traditional voters?

When the Jana Sangh, before it was christened as BJP, had a stand which was wishy-washy. Then it never crossed a

Dilemma for BJP

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double digit in the Lok Sabha. It was able to increase its tally to 90 in 1977 after Gandhian Jaiprakash Narayan made them of the Janta Party, which swept the polls in the wake of Mrs Indira Gandhi's authoritarian rule. But then came a stage when the Jana Sangh members had to choose between the RSS, its mentor, and the Janata Party. They left the Janata Party and founded the BJP. LK Advani then announced that they would go it alone.

in the House. It was evident that the stand of Hindu chauvinism won them seats. The voters, who have stood behind it, have a specific image of the party. Can it now turn its back to them and say that it has changed or diluted its policy because of certain considerations? The danger in such an eventuality is that those who have put faith in the BJP because of its Hindu face may feel betrayed and may even distance themselves from

view that it was "practical idealism". It meant the party has adopted a strategy for winning. He went on to explain: "It may also be termed as a tactical act of self-defence." What Govindacharya said was that the situation demanded the BJP to act in a particular way so that it could have alliance with different parties in different parts of India.

But 'practical idealism' is the not a phrase which the BJP supporters in rural areas will understand, presuming that the urbanites will. They have hitched their wagon to the BJP because it held out certain promises, the promises of Hindutva, common civil code, etc.

They may not appreciate the point of strategy, which the BJP emphasises, to get a foothold in the south, Orissa or West Bengal. The diluted stand of the BJP may make fanatic bodies like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) more attractive. However, the only saving grace for the BJP is that the VHP is also an instrument of the RSS. It will set to it that VHP does not come in the way of the BJP.

In any case, Govindacharya's observations should be a warning to persons like George Fernandes and Ram Krishna Hegde, still parading as anti-communal in their approach. They say that the BJP has changed. If it is a strategy,

then how? The RSS ideologue argues that it is 'practical' to pursue the line which the party has taken at present. To read anything more than that is foolish. Fernandes and Hegde are seasoned enough to know that.

By associating with parties which, till recently, had secular credentials, the BJP expects the percentage of votes (20.29 per cent as against 20.80 per cent by Congress) it polled in the last election to increase. People sitting on the fence or those who have weakened in their faith in secularism have already begun to feel that the BJP is after all not that communal when people like Fernandes, Hegde and MGK Menon, the renowned scientist, have joined hands with it.

The real danger that the BJP faces is that in an effort to win the non-BJP voters it may lose some of its support. Its appeal is on the basis of clothes of Hindutva it wears. By putting on some other clothes, it may be found acceptable but it may lose the people who have stood by it for years.

The fielding of LK Advani, so far saying 'no' to the Lok Sabha, is meant probably to sustain the hopes of hardliners that all that the BJP is doing is to get a majority. If, by a quirk of circumstances, it attains 272 seats in the Lok Sabha on its own symbol, Advani would be the prime minister. If the majority is through the allies, the soft Vajpyee would occupy the chair. And, in any case, Govindacharya has made it clear that Vajpyee is only a 'mask'.

The Latest Clinton Scandal: Death Wish in the White House?

Naeem Mohaiemen writes from New York

Clinton's problem is — whether the allegations are true or not, once the charges have been made, the courts have to investigate until he is cleared. And it is in that arduous process of investigation that real political damage can be caused by his Republican opponents.

political enemies were overjoyed when the latest sexual scandal hit the press on Thursday last — allegations that the President had a brief relationship with 24-year-old White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

Even more damaging are the allegations that the President instructed Monica to lie about it when questioned by federal investigators.

On the surface, these seem to be fairly unlikely charges. Would the sitting President of the United States really put his entire career in jeopardy for a briefing with a 24-year-old?

However, Clinton's problem is — whether the allegations are true or not, once the charges have been made, the courts have to investigate until he is cleared. And it is in that arduous process of investigation that real political damage can be caused by his Republican opponents.

Today, Thursday, the Lewinsky scandal has hit all the newspaper front pages. It already threatens to be a firestorm that will consume the White House. Even if the allegations are not true, the President's friends and aides will have to spend the next few weeks furiously battling the charges. Independent Prosecu-

tor Kenneth Starr is in possession of 17 tapes secretly recorded by Linda Tripp, a former White House aide. The recordings of conversations between Tripp and Lewinsky reportedly have the former intern speaking of a relationship with Clinton. As the probe continued, FBI agents began interviewing other interns assigned to the White House.

Earlier in the day, the president forcefully denied the allegations. Just before a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Clinton said to journalists, "The allegations are false, and I would never ask anybody to do anything other than tell the truth." During an interview on the PBS programme "Newshour", he also said "I did not urge anyone to say anything untrue." First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton told reporters on Wednesday that she believes the allegations are part of a "concerted effort to undermine his legitimacy."

Journalist Thomas H. Moore explained on Thursday that "having an affair with an intern is not a federal crime, but lying about it, or asking others to do so, is... Allegations so far involve possible perjury, suborning perjury and obstruction of justice." Clinton's potential legal problems may go beyond the courtroom. Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said if the charges of asking Lewinsky to lie are verified, Congress could consider impeachment.

A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll reported that 54 per cent of Americans believe Clinton had an affair with Monica Lewinsky, but only 39 per cent believe that he asked Lewinsky to lie about the matter. SALON magazine conducted interviews with some noted columnists — the divergence of their views on this matter reflect the wide variance of opinion among the American people. They also reflect a growing cynicism and loss of faith in political leaders. Here are excerpts from some of the more revealing comments:

Camille Paglia, controversial feminist, author of *Sexual Personae*:

"My attitude is, I don't care what men or women in public office do in their private life. As a strict libertarian, I believe that's entirely their own business. But what we don't want is a kind of mixing up of the private with the public. Therefore if you're in a position of leadership, you shouldn't be having affairs with your subordinates."

The negative implications for the nation are disturbing. The ruling party appears to be keen to debilitate the very existence of the powerful opposition (the preceding regime), while the opposition seems to be bent on denying the other party to complete five years. The former is not possible, and the latter is a nuisance. But it is difficult to dissuade the opposition from pursuing its goal of tit-for-tat. Now all sectors of the society are sharply divided, and the opportunists would be making hay while the sun shines dividely.

It appears the society has to be a witness to this gladiators' fight, taking the country backwards. This time the operation may not last for two years, as other forces and groups will be active for a piece of the pie. There is another risk of a third force joining the fray. Out of this triangular battle, only one can survive, as the public would abhor the return to the existing state of confrontation.

Hence the closing part of this century might bring decisive changes in the governance scenario of the state, and the state of politics may also change for ever. It looks like that the coming outcome may be a turning point after 1971, and we may see a new Bangladesh emerge from the coming sentimental sacrifice at the altar of patriotism.

Looking at the whole scenario philosophically, what is the bit issue in this internal conflict?

A Husnain Dhaka

The political confrontation

Sir, as a citizen, I take a dim view of the confrontational build-up between the two major political parties, which is escalating day by day, led by two popular leaders, who have deliberately planned to run their respective parties based heavily on the historical past, and have so far shown no inclination to stand without props, to lead the nation positively forward at a reasonable speed, the way the common people wish it, towards fast economic development, sans chimerical political overtones.

Why politics, development, and governance cannot be kept reasonably apart, as we find in other countries? There is too much pressure of politics on the society. How this polarisation could be reduced, and the sensitivity brought down to normal level, so that each citizen could follow his own pursuit of profession and pastime, as dictated by fundamental rights?

To the Editor...

Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, Mr Nawaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, has announced that all the Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh would be repatriated under a time-frame as soon as sufficient fund is available. Last time some of the stranded Pakistanis were repatriated with the help of Rabita Al Islami who raised funds. We hope they will come forward this time also. The following suggestion is therefore offered for consideration of Rabita Al Islami and Government of Bangladesh:

Every year a large number of Muslims go to perform Hajj from Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia by air. After completion of Hajj their national airlines go to Jeddah for bringing them back. These airlines while going to Jeddah remain almost empty. Rabita and Government of Bangladesh may perhaps take a move to utilise these flights for taking the stranded Pakistanis from Dhaka to Lahore or Karachi on payment of landing charges in Dhaka and Lahore with some incidental expenses.

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The Rickshaws'

Sir, Ms. Jahanara Saba's letter was printed in the DS on the 12th of January under the heading 'The Rickshaws'. I can see that she tried real hard to sound as emotional and scientific to save the Rickshaws from being extinct. I agree that the motive is quite commendable, but when the reasons behind that is down right ridiculous, that is when I start objecting.

Rickshaws do create traffic jams and slow other motorised transportation down to a small like speed, whether you agree or not that is the fact. If you don't believe me then simply go to places like New Market and Elephant Road in the rush hours. Because of their 3 wheels in front, they become a nuisance when it comes to ordered queues, because they just fill up whatever gap they find in front that deteriorates the condition of the traffic that much more.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak.

Flame as a symbol

Sir, I refer to Mr Abu Imran's recent letter on the topic. A large section of the Bangladeshi Muslims would not like to accept and associate themselves with the use of flame as a symbol of public remembrance, and the same should not be imposed on the public by a section of the politicians or the state.

Why create a controversy

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'Can a country be sold?'

Sir, I share the views with Nawrin Samrina expressed in her letter 'Can a Country be Sold?' published in your esteemed daily of 20 January.

The piece was a timely one and an eye-opener to us. Every day should keep in mind that we, the idiot electorate, are important at least once in every five years or so.

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OPINION