

Time to Diagnose the Doctors' Disease

For nearly two decades, the leadership positions in the two main political parties — the Awami League and the BNP — have been above scrutiny, even by the party rank and file. There have been some 'council sessions', held at extraordinary intervals. The parties have gone through some exercise called 'elections'. But all these exercises have always been exposed to be the farce they indeed were.

Time to Talk

The political situation appears to be heating up to the point of boiling once again. The violence that was unleashed in the streets on the first day of the 60-hour hartal called by opposition parties has come as yet another rude reminder that confrontationalism now rules the roost. Each side is naturally inclined to blame the other for vitiating the political atmosphere but, in between the two, governance and the economy have become little more than sacrificial lambs. The people of the country, in whose name every hartal is called and every piece of anti-hartal action is enacted, stand again as the ultimate sufferers. The time to reverse the process of confrontation has, therefore, clearly arrived.

While both sides have tales of woe to tell, a line has to be drawn somewhere. And that line starts where the government's supreme responsibility to govern begins. The government bears the ultimate responsibility to ensure stability and smooth governance, because it was entrusted with such a task by the people through the ballot box. An electoral mandate means a great deal more than 'power', it means 'responsibility'. Unfortunately, the government is currently showing more power than responsibility. This is ironic, since street confrontations only make the task of governance difficult. The power of a ruling party does not increase when it displays street-side toughness. Rather, the government's power decreases when the political atmosphere is vitiated.

The opposition's role in ensuring stability cannot be over-estimated, but the ruling party needs to ensure a conducive environment for constructive political activities. While the BNP certainly needs to recognise the futility of hartals and explore other, more effective and less destructive avenues for playing the role of a constructive opposition, the AL needs to change its current confrontationalist posture. As a first step, the AL ought to stop 'challenging' the BNP in the street, since that is a sure recipe for violence. As a second step, the government should initiate a formal process of dialogue with the BNP. Both the sides have plenty to accuse each other of, but these grievances should be sorted out through serious dialogues in parliament or even outside the House. We expect the prime minister to initiate the dialogue through a formal approach to the leader of the opposition, rather than through speeches.

Live Up to the Accord

The PCJSS cannot fail to acknowledge the fact that were it not for the CHT Peace Accord they would not be publicly observing their founder president Manabendra Narayan Larma's death anniversary as they are doing today. During the outlawed phase of the Shantibahini the occasion had a clandestine ring about it in the perception of governments in Bangladesh. But now the perspective has intrinsically changed with the two-decade long insurgency having been replaced by a covenant for peace entered upon by the political wing of the Shantibahini, PCJSS, with the government of Bangladesh on December 2, 1997. In terms of the accord and closely on its heels, the armed Shantibahini ranks surrendered their weapons to the government, affirmed their avowal for peace and made themselves available for all kinds of listings for absorption in the mainstream. And cases against elements regarded as militants earlier on have been mostly dropped. And any remaining PCJSS grievance on this score is currently receiving utmost attention of the authorities. So, the peace accord has everything in it to mark a clean-slate start in the lives of the hill people.

To our understanding, the public observance of Manabendra Narayan Larma's death anniversary is a tribute to the free and open atmosphere fostered by the signing of the CHT peace accord, so that it cannot admit of being skewed by any quarters as an occasion to stoke any past rancour that has been clearly left behind. Now should it be used to whip up any emotion of discord over what remains to be done in terms of implementing the CHT peace covenant? PCJSS being a co-signatory to it must not do anything or seem to be doing anything which could even remotely present it as an impediment to the peace process.

Manabendra Narayan Larma was assassinated as a result of an internecine conflict in the PCJSS. That legacy needs to be lived down by the PCJSS speaking with one voice and acting in complete unison to pull their full weight behind the implementation of CHT peace accord.

Democracy Day

How should Noor Hossain be reacting from the heavens to what was happening in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh on the day of his martyrdom? The two biggest partners in the three-cornered grand alliance that brought down Ershad are at daggers drawn now with the villain of the 1990 piece having his umpteenth laugh. Has Noor's sacrifice gone in vain?

The ties between these two were tenuous even on the day of Noor's killing by an Ershad bullet. And soon after the flamboyant autocrat's exit, the two fell as far apart as was possible only for them. Two elections and two parliaments later, have they been able to take to parliamentary democratic ways of tolerance allowing governance to shape up on dual participation? No. All the bad legacies of undemocratic dispensations of decades are still weighing them down. Neither is ready to give up its private armed cadres. Deep-seated mistrust drives each further away from the other. Political rivalry has degenerated into personal animosity, perhaps even hatred, at the topmost levels — something that hardly ever had happened elsewhere in the world.

Noor Hossain Day should be renamed as Democracy Day. And the political parties owe it to him to cry a halt to their interminable mutual vituperations and be demonstrably tolerant of each other. Did the political party which called for the two-day hartal and then extend it for another 12 hours care to know that they were sully Noor Hossain's memory? The memory of his supreme sacrifice for democracy? Perhaps not.

FIRST, the bad news. The Willis International Cup is over and the cricket fever, which swept through the city in its wake, has subsided. Now something worse. With the passing of the cricket fever, the political temperature appears to be going up again. Whether the current round of agitation and counter-agitation is a temporary bout of 'flu' or the onset of a more protracted form of ailment, remains to be seen. The only certainty is that the leaders of both the camps are most unlikely to feel the pulse of the nation, virtually ensuring wrong diagnosis and treatment.

For the patient, getting a second opinion would be next to impossible, since the leaders prefer to turn a deaf ear to anything other than the echo of their own voice. In parliament, both the major parties extol the virtues of democracy. Out in the streets, they repeat the text, but spice it with blood-curdling invectives for extra effect. In both settings, they are only too happy to give 'fitting replies' but not to listen in a befitting manner.

This inability to listen to dissenting views, or the unwillingness to accept the possibility that they might, just, be wrong for once, is a disease in itself. And this disease has weakened the body-politic so much that it is periodically exposed to severe infections, leading to high fever, epileptic fits, internal hemorrhage. At that point, the parties have little choice but to prescribe surgical treatment, leaving the patient — that is the public — to foot a massive bill in terms of lost economic opportunities, social peace and political cohesion.

The two major surgeries conducted in 1991 and 1996 did produce positive results, promising long-term stability. But no sooner had the patient checked out of the convalescence home and got ready for work, did the viral and bacterial attacks begin anew. The political environment seems to have been polluted so much that outbreaks of epidemics have become almost routine affair. The poor patient is once again in danger of being hauled to the

operating theatre, even though he is sure there is still time for him to recover through little bit of prevention and mild but careful antibiotic treatment.

In this strange setting of the Bangladesh democracy, dialogue has degenerated into monologues and discourse has gone decidedly off-course. The disease is contagious, so much so that even seminar speakers take their roles literally, preferring only to speak.

It would have been comforting to suggest that the disease has resulted from a birth defect, which could be traced to the revolution of 1971, or a neurological disorder caused by the trauma of 1975. But such scapegoatism is no longer tenable. Instead, the current disease shows all the symptoms of an extraordinary cardio-vascular disorder, caused by too much puffing on the power-pipe.

This disease should have been an aberration in the body-politic, fit only for treatment usually meted out to gall bladder stones. Unfortunately, it has infected the very heart of the body, polluting the life-blood that is supposed to keep it alive and healthy. Since political parties form the heart of any political system, the degeneration of these parties into power-addicted semi-feudal entities has ensured that the disease would spread to all parts of the anatomy, from the brain to the toes.

There are no shortages of proverbs to illustrate the state of the parties themselves. The Chinese say 'a fish rots from the head', the Vietnamese say 'a house leaks from the roof'. In the case of the Bangladeshi political parties, all the huffing and puffing has made the smoke cloud the head, and the house is certainly leaking from the roof. Take the party leadership issue, for instance.

Election to the top post in a major political party should, under normal democratic cir-

cumstances, raises a great deal of public interest. Even when the incumbent's position in the party is unassailable, there should still be some signs of debate regarding alternatives. This is just one of many ways to ensure the emergence of new leaders and new ideas, through free and open debate. This is vital for the body-politic as a whole, because this helps pump fresh blood into the system and prevents formation of clots.

That is the theory. Unfortunately, this particular theory seems to take a backseat where leadership contests in Bangladesh political parties are concerned. The recent, untested re-election of Khaleda

In the case of the BNP, the party constitution empowers the Chairperson with absolute authority to pick and choose the entire national committee. If this sounds odd, then the scenario in the AL gets weirder still. The delegates at the council 'empower' the president with 'full authority' to select people to fill such posts. This remained the case even when both these parties agitated themselves — and the nation as a whole — into the ground for democracy and the people's right to choose their own leaders.

All these sound rather comical, and would have been treated as a joke, had it not been

democracy in parties which wish to contest parliamentary or local government polls. For this purpose, the EC in Bangladesh may take a leaf out of its Indian counterpart's book.

Prior to the Feb-Mar 1998 general elections in India, the Election Commission forced the ultra-right Shiv Sena to hold its first-ever leadership polls. The EC made the SS hold the elections a second time, when the party tried to get smart by electing Bal Thackeray 'president for life'. Suddenly, the possibility that the once-omnipotent Thackeray could be challenged for the Sena leadership even five years has become real. And Thackeray may even begin to feel the pinch of something he had never known in his long and un-illustrious political career — accountability.

Internal reform also needs to address the question of the parties' accountability to society at large, at all times and not just during general elections. Laws which bar people with convictions on criminal charges, financial fraud, loan default etc., from contesting parliamentary polls should be voluntarily incorporated into party constitutions. People who are dimmed unfit for parliament should also be seen as unfit for party membership.

More importantly perhaps, laws need to be enacted to make party finances transparent. There is a strong feeling in society that political parties have become hostages in the hands of criminals and fraudsters, by taking donations from these elements who have to be 'repaid' in various kinds later on. Financial transparency would be one way to end this particular hostage drama. It should not be a crime for anyone — whether a business tycoon or rickshaw-puller — to donate money to political parties, but everyone should know who is financing

whom. Some reforms also need to take place where the parties meet parliament, because the relation between the parliamentary party (PP) and party central committees remains a grey area. (Those parties which do not make it to parliament are of little consequence, although in recent times these non-entities have come to represent the "numbers" in various "alliances" i.e. Seven-party, Eight-party etc.)

Even in mature democracies, this remains the subject of a tug-of-war. For instance, in the 1980s the British Labour Party rank-and-file had to wage a bitter struggle to wrest some control from the PP over leadership and policy issues. In India, the party mechanism outside the Lok Sabha exerts a strong influence over the conduct of the PP, even though different people usually hold the party presidency and PP leadership.

In Bangladesh, party presidents do not relinquish their posts once they become leaders of their respective PPs, and the party central committee remains the principal decision-making body. Naturally, the PP has to make itself accountable to the party, as much as individual parliament members have to answer to their constituents. But there is a need to clearly demarcate between the party inside and outside the House, with critical decision-making powers resting with the PPs. Ideally, party central committees should keep themselves busy with organisational activities, formulating debate through advocacy and generating policy options for the PPs.

All these are certainly easier said than done, given the high concentration of bad blood in the system and existence of "leaders" whose only chance to exercise "power" may be through extra-parliamentary means. But it is in the interest of the parties themselves to keep the blood circulation good. This would reduce the chances of a cardiac arrest, and the patient would be spared the possibility of another harrowing time on the operating table.



The Outside Story

By SABIR MUSTAFA

Zia to the top post in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) generated little public interest because it was a foregone conclusion. And because it is always a foregone conclusion, the leadership issue fails to generate any debate within the party itself.

For nearly two decades, the leadership positions in the two main political parties — the Awami League and the BNP — have been above scrutiny, even by the party rank and file. There have been some 'council sessions', held at extraordinary intervals. The parties have gone through some exercise called 'elections'. But all these exercises have always been exposed to be the farce they indeed were.

For the simple fact that these are the same parties which have ruled Bangladesh this decade, and look likely to do so for the foreseeable future.

It is perhaps clear that the body-politic is likely to remain sick, until the heart itself undergoes a by-pass operation. Reform of the way political parties are run can, perhaps, change the way their leaders think. This is not only a matter of ensuring regular council sessions — as stipulated in their respective constitutions — but also making the internal electoral process a less farcical affair. This should also involve amendment to party constitutions to strip the chairperson of arbitrary powers, so that the leadership is accountable to party rank-and-file.

Here, the Election Commission could have a role to play, by drawing up guidelines to ensure meaningful internal

Dark Shadows over Karachi

by AMM Shahabuddin

It is better to remember that history is not a mere 'register' of 'accidents' that create situations with great potentialities. It follows a track and sometimes repeats most cruelly and vigorously.

one of their activists had been tortured to death by polite to obtain a confessional statement from him.

Mr Nawaz Sharif has declared that he would be able to establish peace and restore law and order in Karachi within three to six months. Only time will show how far he succeeds in his mission. It must be admitted that the horrible situation obtaining in Karachi for the last one year or so is a glaring example of failure and inefficiency on the part of the governments, both federal and provincial, and their law-enforcing agencies, including para-military forces, leading to the present tragic and deplorable impasse.

What is happening in Karachi is just the tip of the iceberg. The 'rut' lies much deeper in the body-politic of whole of Pakistan centering round the Shia-Sunni controversies and clashes between the two MQM factions.

Karachi's History Has a Sad Episode

Karachi has its own sad story to tell. A new chapter in Karachi's history began with the establishment of Pakistan. Karachi being the first choice of becoming its capital. Since then it has faced many vicissitudes of time, both sweet and sour.

As an aftermath of partition

of India, in 1947, millions of Muslims migrated to Pakistan as refugees to take shelter in their new born state. The refugees coming from the Punjab speaking province of India settled down in Punjab of Pakistan. As they spoke the same language, had same social customs, they didn't face any problem in inter-mingling with the locals. But it was different story with the Urdu-speaking refugees who settled in Karachi and some other parts of Sindh. They considered themselves as a separate entity, a compact body and, above all, were in majority in Karachi. They were in a more advantageous position as the first Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was himself an Urdu-speaking refugee from India. And founder of Pakistan, Mr M A Jinnah who became the first Governor General of Pakistan was also an Urdu-speaking refugee. This was not at all a comfortable situation for these who were dreaming of a different scenario. Both Mr Jinnah and Mr Liaquat seemed to be obstacles in their way.

However, for them, the deck was cleared with the untimely death of Jinnah within a year of the establishment of Pakistan, coupled with the mysterious assassination of Liaquat at a public meeting in Rawalpindi, in the Punjab. The mystery further deepened when Liaquat's assassin was killed on the spot by a policeman on duty and the death of the investigating officer in a plane crash on a domestic flight. The real drama then started unfolding on the Pakistani political stage one by one. The rest is history.

Shifting of Capital from Karachi

In 1958, Field Marshall Ayub Khan, an ambitious army officer, came to power after a coup and shifting of capital from Karachi to Islamabad in the Punjab was the most countable hall-mark of his regime. And the Urdu-speaking refugees started feeling the pinches and pricks. They were suffering from a sense of deprivation of the wealth they had been enjoying since 1947. They were looking around like so many 'political orphans', desperately trying to hold on, instead of being thrown over-board.

They seemed to have lost their grip altogether when Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto appeared to fill in the 'vacuum'. It, however, posed a great potential threat to the ruling clique. And there was a way out.

Birth of MQM and its Fall-out

A new political forum, MQM was born with a vow to protect the political and economic rights of the Urdu-speaking minorities. Some 'naughty' fellows whispered that it was a brain-child of the Army rulers to serve as a bulwark against growing popularity of PPP. But as the Frankenstein's ghost always turns on its 'creator', the MQM became a challenge to the

establishment. The MQM was born with a vow to protect the political and economic rights of the Urdu-speaking minorities. Some 'naughty' fellows whispered that it was a brain-child of the Army rulers to serve as a bulwark against growing popularity of PPP. But as the Frankenstein's ghost always turns on its 'creator', the MQM became a challenge to the

Insurgency in the Offing?

The most lightning reaction has come from Pakistani opposition leader and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto who said that she feared an "insurgency" in Karachi as a result of the imposition of direct Federal rule in Sindh, adding that it was "another attempt to establish dictatorial rule" which, according to her, would be "most unfortunate". Perhaps the violent anti-government demonstrations, launched by MQM, protesting against the crack-down on their activists, and death of one of their 'comrades' in police custody, is the precursor

of coming events. The dark shadows are already visible on the horizon. Undoubtedly, the situation is volatile. The hay-stack stands there. A mere match-stick is enough to cause a bonfire. So the Pakistani authorities would have to be doubly sure that they don't commit the most ignoble and disastrous blunder.

What is happening in Karachi is not an isolated event. Rather it is a part and parcel of a larger scenario covering whole of Pakistan. It shouldn't be, therefore, treated as a mere law and order situation. They would have to go deeper to remove the 'roots' of discontent and resentment of the people in Karachi and other cities. Instead of blaming other countries for their 'mischievous' hands in the prevailing 'terrorism' in Karachi and elsewhere, they will have put their own house in order.

As they say, 'the bread never falls but on its buttered side.' The unfortunate event has happened with Karachi. The federal government can't just shun its responsibility of the routine killings and murders that have gripped not only Karachi, but other cities of Pakistan, whether in Shia-Sunni sectarian feud or fighting between two factions of MQM. The hit-men are ruling the roost under the very nose of the law enforcing agencies. Hence, mere 'first-aid' to the 'deceased' won't help. The "physicians" will have to 'heal' the 'wound'. Otherwise, the 'rut' would corrode further.

It is better to remember that history is not a mere 'register' of 'accidents' that create situations with great potentialities. It follows a track and sometimes repeats most cruelly and vigorously. Hence a wolf for the wise is enough. They shouldn't throw the baby with the bathwater.

To the Editor

Back with a vengeance?

Sir, It seems that the hartals are back with a vengeance! Don't these politicians realise what they are doing to this country? They are not the ones who are being affected by such political unrest, it is we the people whose daily lives are being disrupted because of these meaningless hartals. How are we students benefitting from sitting at home twiddling our thumbs when we should be in an institution working towards a better future for ourselves and our country? These so-called politicians have their wards settled in some nice colleges/universities abroad, but what about us — those who don't have the means to go to the U.S.A or any other foreign country to achieve such a degree?

We have to make the best out of what is being offered to us in our own country, and if that is being hampered, then what are we going to do in future?

So my request to the politicians is please Sirs/Madams settle your differences amongst yourselves and don't kill our future, understand that we also have a right to a decent life.

Zeenat Zaman Independent University, Bangladesh Dhaka

The home truth?

Sir, The 48-hour hartal was called before the judgement on the "Bangabandhu Murder Case" was passed. Thus, this hartal had absolutely no connection with the verdict. The Opposition parties even refrained from making any type of comment on the legal outcome.

The foreign media also

clearly mentioned that the hartal had nothing to do with the verdict of the historic case. But we are now seeing that our PM is making an attempt to say that hartal has been called because the killers have been sentenced. Is our PM so much obsessed with the past that nothing seems rational to her?

An Anxious Observer Chittagong.

Time for tolerance

Sir, After two years in the gaddi, it is time for the voters to have a closer look at the modus operandi of Awami League — for its own good!

The party stalwarts are too much obsessed with their own ideas as to how the party and the country should be run. There may be some scope for outside contribution of ideas. The scope for reviewing feedback from outside observers and critics are not reflected to the public as often as expected. What is the difference between a static party and a dynamic party? Adaptation.

There is a reason for this stultified complex. The huge image of Bangabandhu shadowing every thinking and act of AL — another obsession which has been overdone during the last two years, presumably to make up for the lost time and absence of publicity since 1975.

This monomania reached its peak in August when a natural competitor appeared on the scene to overstay the prolonged floods — it was not sudden — and it was the worst in living memory. It was a nasty disappointment for the public as far as good governance was concerned. A party may be biased, but a government must be neutral, and elected governments are not excepted. The heart and

the head must be kept separate, on all occasions. Why we Bengalees are ruled more by the heart than by the head, although the latter is second to none? (The party is not being blamed for our cultural drawbacks.)

The party is suffering from the denial effect — being out of power for two decades. The imbalance shows, as it does in the case of a very thirsty desert traveller who spots an oasis. There is only one solution: increase the capacity for absorption of the good and the otherwise.

The tolerance factor of AL is not very high, and it is rather unimpressive. Its behaviour pattern tends to be too aggressive and provoking, causing irritation and resentment in others. The 'others' count, as they are the rest of the citizens, and majority at that! This is a simple point which is overlooked time and again, against critics political or otherwise. The critics are not members of the state, and should not be treated as such. Over-sensitivity is a political liability, applicable to any party, anywhere. Tolerance will never be condemned, as the benefit of the doubt will always be there.

Another drawback is the display of patronising attitude towards the non Awami Leaguers. This will boomerang when the party is not in power. Watching the faces and body language of the political leaders during public speeches, what stands out is the constant flow of hatred in profusion. Why look down upon the fellow beings? The coin will be returned. Goodwill and benevolence are in short supply; while there is oversupply of malice.

An Observer Dhaka

OPINION

Western Non-transparency Leaking

When the times are tough, maintaining non-transparency becomes a problem, even by the analysts and the media services within the Western camp. Now the ISS (the International Institute for Strategic Studies) has come out expressing doubt about the way the North is conducting its diplomatic offensive against weaker nations backed with less and less military hardware and human resources to back up its firmness or promises to 'peace' overtures.

Air offensive threats are doled out repeatedly against micro territories such as Kosovo, and huge B52 warplanes are displayed to disable (not kill) nonentities like mosquitos, excluding the Yugoslav president, who, it appears, is above international sanctions, and escapes from the torn net every time he is chased or confronted.

The mighty surface forces are not being committed, after humiliating experiences in Korea, Vietnam and Bosnia during the span of half a century of onemanship. Now military might cannot be backed financially in view of the depressing and fluctuating global markets, triggered by the Asian debacle (masterminded by themselves). The world is in a recession, and so is the diplomatic offensive by the North. But the problems

remain, unhurt and untouched. Why peace is so elusive, realising that it humans against the humans, and the fight is not between heterogeneous species. Jewish backed United States cannot get out of the Palestine conflict even after two decades, to seek better pastures in rising Asia, in spite of daily 18-hour meetings in and around Washington. Who do not want peace after one generation of hit and run?

India and Pakistan are blocked markets, and sagging badly for playing the nuclear game. So the Congress has given the US President extraordinary power to use less power and more bait, for more fishing prospects (future burdens are worse than current headaches). The Kashmir issue has some similarity with the Palestine one (religion), and the lone super-power is expected to live up to its reputation for opening or closing the festering wounds.

Some analysts suspect the Monica net was intentionally thrown upon the US president for leverage by some vested group with international agenda. The stalemate against Saddam is making no headway, because military power cannot be used for the second time. It is all

bombast, not boom. Is the US going to be the most powerful terrorist group, snobballing its mighty military armour? What an irony! Non-military Japan is tearing itself at the seams. The Nomura disclosure of USD 1.5 billion dollar losses has to be taken in its stride, noting the no-business mood in Moscow. Now it is the gun vs the dollar game (the yen has powered to 114).

In Afghanistan, the international right of way has to be established quickly, for ensuring bread and butter to the West through fuel pipelines. Pakistan must be saved from political anarchy, now at its zenith. The BJP days appear to be numbered in a country of one billion hungry mouths. Bangladesh has to watch the US make up its mind: whether the countries to the West and East of India are to remain too friendly with the big brother hooting religious horns. The US needs levers also.

Diplomacy in the Third World has to come out of the secondary chairs and push across the global tables. In this age, Nation comes before race. The value of the wait-and-see days are gone. Clear the table of domestic problems and face the foreign negotiators for a slice of better life ahead. It is self-service; no waiters.