

## Campus Worries

Student politics has become a major source of worry for those willing to think about the future of the country. Once the vanguard of popular aspirations for political freedom and social progress, the student groups have, over the past couple of decades, degenerated into small factions characterised by a penchant for criminality. Yet, there is hardly any perceptible move by either university administrations or the government to cleanse the campuses of the gun-toting, bribe-extorting criminality that have come to characterise student politics. Political parties, with which these student groups are aligned, have found it convenient to allow things to degenerate this way. The students are now mere pawns in a power game that often involves violence.

One person who seems to have made it a duty to speak out against this degeneration of student politics is President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. In one interesting observation on Sunday, the President pointed out that student leaders were becoming millionaires through their ill activities on the campuses, and asked what impact this could have on young students going for higher studies. After all, if one can become a millionaire, member of parliament or minister by engaging in politics of the underworld, then where is the incentive to study, learn and become a good citizen? But the question is, are the political leaders of the country, who are largely responsible for this state of affairs, listening?

Society can no longer allow criminality such as armed violence, routine extortion, even rape, to continue without legal actions being taken against the culprits. Criminality, of whatever kind and committed by "cadres" of whichever party, should be rooted out ruthlessly. But the point is, who will bell the cat? As long as major political parties continue to nurture their own gangs of goons under guise of "student party", the administrative machinery is likely to remain powerless. The political parties themselves have to take the responsibility by publicly severing links with their groups on the campus. Political parties may even consider putting a 10-year moratorium on political activities on the campus. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has already captured the imagination of the nation by making a non-hartal declaration. Now she can set another example of visionary politics by taking the lead in severing her party's links with student groups.

## Murky BTV Slot

We have been lately observing a BTV presentation trend in which a terrorist or two arrested from a politically surcharged spot would be shown making confessional statements. Their sole point is they were acting under the directives of one or the other leader in the opposition camp and not of their own volition so as to deserve compassion reformed.

The practice reeks of propaganda that is discredibly old and obsolete. The 'former terrorists' reeled off catchy details implicating their former mentors in the crimes they were caught committing.

Without going into the veracity or otherwise of their versions which are a fit subject for corroborative investigation and consideration of a right to reply automatically deserved by the affected, it can be asserted that the whole exercise is fraught with dangers of all kinds. It is aberrant for the state-run TV to be stepping on a territory that is uncontestedly police jurisdiction and a matter ultimately for the magistrate to dispose of according to the standard procedure of the law of the land. Surely the government is expected to stay clear of even any oblique suggestion that what the BTV was doing could be construed as a trial by the media. That's where lies the government's credibility demolition as its professed pursuit of an autonomous status for BTV turns into a cruel joke.

This is a risky slot the BTV has opened. A whole bunch of terrorists on gun-runners when caught might fall for naming names among political or social leaders to bail themselves out the easy way. We want the new BTV 'brain-wave' stopped on the tracks by the highest authority in the government. Let's not open the flood-gate of defamatory suites such shortsighted points-scoring tendency might.

## More Than a Mere VIP

Naren Biswas, the name is enough, died on Friday morning. He was ailing for long. Still until he was hospitalised he attended to his labour of love — pronunciation and elocution lectures at many institutions. In the hospital he was provided a kind of cabin to be shared by another patient. As a university teacher of 22 years' standing he had his peers and even superiors. But as Naren Biswas he was a unique institution by himself. If he was not a VIP, a few ever would be. And he died with the leadership of high and mighty organisations and institutions not caring to even peep in and enquire about how he was faring — not to speak of caring for his treatment at the highest level now available to man. Neglect much more than renal failure seems to have claimed him at last.

The Bengalee people's idea of a nation and their state stand fast on the base of one Bengalee language — used by close to 250 million all over the globe, 13 million of them living in Bangladesh. Here spoken Bengalee is not mutually intelligible among even the literate and professional classes posing a threat to true national integration and is a dangerous snag to all-round development specially in education and the letters. Naren Biswas made it his life's mission to teach the citizens, the young ones in particular, to capably use the one and only standard Bengali spoken form that has also gone to couch all of Bengali literature since the advent of the Twentieth Century. Learning and using the standard, one gets into the company of all in the land and also all that had been here.

And with what selfless devotion he tried to make his mission a success! A sturdy and athletic type, he never suffered from any illness. His self-imposed linguistic and literary pains and his incurable habit of burning the midnight oil caught up with him in the end. What end? He was only 53. He was on overdrive, and that exhausted him.

Lack of proper treatment closed the file rich with so many achievements and love and admiration of so many. Cultural activists gave gallons of blood for him but could not buy him a furlough from Death, the *Kritanta*.

RECENTLY Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that she will never use hartal as a political weapon when she returns to opposition. Many commentators have praised her for this declaration and termed it timely and statesmanlike. Many even see it as the beginning of a new political era in which sanity will prevail over the self-destructive nature of Bangladesh's confrontational politics. It is only the BNP's refusal to reciprocate Prime Minister's declaration that has put some cold water on such exaggerated enthusiasm. Without going into the details whether the BNP is right or wrong on the position that it has taken on this issue, in this note I will argue why Prime Minister's promise in its present form does not make much sense for two interrelated reasons. First, her proposal is incomplete. Second, it suffers from what is called "dynamic inconsistency".

Looking from Prime Minister's side of politics, the 'no hartal pledge' is an optimal political strategy for at least three reasons. First, if the main opposition party BNP accepts her proposal, this will lower political temperature and then she can rule the rest of her term without facing any organised political opposition. Second, given that hartal has become too crude a political instrument, she wants to disassociate herself from it with an added benefit that in doing so, she may erase her earlier bad reputation vis-a-vis hartal. Third, some forgiving or suffering public with short memory may even give her credits that she has risen above nasty hartal politics for the sake of nation's well-being. Such gestures, if properly tuned and sold to the public, may bring her some political dividends as the day of

Judgement is approaching rapidly. In short, in anybody's language, her strategy of killing many birds by one stone is not a bad idea after all.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister betrays herself without realising that what she now thinks is an optimal political strategy, and will not be a good strategy when the time will come for her to implement it. This can be explained within the paradigm of dynamic inconsistency in public policy. Let me use a non-economic hypothetical example to explain the concept:

If you are a chain smoker, you are most likely to feel bad and be concerned about your health. This does not mean that you are going to give up smoking without a fight! The optimal strategy for you is to promise to yourself (and to your family) that you will give up smoking on January 1, 1999. Such a promise is optimal for you because this satisfies your family's demand while you get about a month's time for smoke without any fear and guilt. You may even believe that you are really giving up smoking from January 1, 1999. But the reality is that, although you are kidding with yourself, not everybody will believe you. Most people can safely bet that you will not give up smoking on January 1, 1999. Why? Because when January 1, 1999 will knock at

## PM's 'No Hartal' Promise

# How Much Sense Does it Make?

by Dr Akhtar Hossain

**Constitutional provision barring hartal can in effect become a binding rule for all the political parties. Without such a binding rule, any whimsical or altruistic political pledge by either Prime Minister or leader of the opposition will not be credible. When there is lack of credibility, institutions are to be built to ensure checks and balances over any discretionary behaviour.**

your door, you will find that the promise that you made about a month ago is no longer optimal for you because giving up smoking means a real sacrifice (!) and you are not at all prepared to make a sacrifice unless there are high costs in reneging your promise. How do you justify reneging a sound decision? It's not that difficult. Simply make another elaborate promise: that you will stop smoking from January 1, 2000, may be that is your nth birthday — a perfect time for giving up smoking. (You can cite many similar real world examples to explain why people have in-built reasons to renege their promises.)

Your promise of 'no smoking' and Prime Minister's promise of 'no hartal' suffer from the same problem: dynamic inconsistency. You had the luxury of making the promise without realising how difficult it is to give up smoking. Prime Minister now has the luxury of making a promise that is optimal for her while she is in power. But, if she returns to opposition, she will find that she cannot afford to give up the political weapon in which everyone believes that she has gained a 'comparative advantage' over her political opponent. That is, one does not have to be a BNP supporter to predict that she may break her promise when time will come to implement it. What does she

need then is an elaborate excuse, not a big deal in politics. (By definition, a reverse situation can be developed for present leader of the opposition. She now finds hartal an optimal strategy, but will definitely denounce it once she returns to power.)

The main reason why such a dynamic inconsistency arises is that Prime Minister's promise is neither binding (legally or morally) nor credible to the public. Given the polarised and divisive nature of Bangladesh's politics, she will not have any problem in reneging her promise without incurring any political costs or penalty to herself or to her party.

Certainly, she has a credibility problem being the major user or abuser of hartals. She can, however, take measures to create some credibility for her no-hartal proposal. For example, she can make her promise credible or dynamically consistent by making it binding or taking a personal position that would be costly prohibitively (political and financial) for her if she ever reneges her promise. She can initiate an amendment in the constitution to incorporate a clause, such that beginning from a certain future date any national or regional hartal by any registered political party would be considered a violation of the constitution. For such an

act, the office bearers of that party would individually and collectively be liable and that will carry a punishment if they are found guilty by an 'independent judiciary'.

These are some tentative suggestions, and there are many other measures that are available to make a contract binding and a commitment credible. As it takes a long time for someone to gain trust and credibility in the eyes of public, the above measures may not be enough in the present context. More fundamentally, Prime Minister is not the only player in the game of politics. To begin with, any effective constitutional amendment would require the support of leader of the opposition. To make any pledge credible to the public, the voters should also be involved in the process.

The difficult part is to convince the opposition to give up hartals. However, it can be done because the opposition has some vested interests in giving up hartals if any no-hartal commitment could be made legally binding. Note that the BNP, being the major opposition party, has a fair chance of returning to power in any future election. If it returns to power, then it will have an incentive to see the Awami League in opposition remaining engaged in constitutional, rather than hartal, politics. As these two parties

can effectively dominate Bangladesh's politics provided they cooperate in the spirit of enlightened self-interests, they should enter into a political dialogue and amend the constitution to ban future hartals. The ball is still in Prime Minister's court. For example, as an inducement, she can bring forward the next parliamentary election in early 2000 (or even earlier) and promise the public that she will include a referendum question on hartal in that election for them to decide. If the referendum question is passed, then it can be inserted into the constitution with a provision that the no-hartal clause cannot be removed from the constitution without a future referendum.

Such an exercise may appear cumbersome to many but it will bring together both the opposition and the public on an important national issue. Any such constitutional provision barring hartal can in effect become a binding rule for all the political parties. Without such a binding rule, any whimsical or altruistic political pledge by either Prime Minister or leader of the opposition will not be credible. When there is lack of credibility, institutions are to be built to ensure checks and balances over any discretionary behaviour. This is true in both economics and politics. Unfortunately, political leaders, largely because of their own narrow and selfish attitude and behaviour, have lost political credibility in the eyes of public. They are no longer highly regarded, although feared, and their words do not carry much weight. Many political leaders also do not have any moral clout because the public see them as corrupt, dishonest, and not trustworthy.

The author is Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

## Demands for Political Reforms

# New Violence Erupts in Indonesia

by ASM Nurunnabi

**When Suharto fell, the world held its breath. Now it must do so again. Reforms aimed at putting Indonesia on the path to democracy have failed to avert a new outpouring of anger.**

The Army, which was both favoured and feared under Suharto as a force for national unity, Muslim leader and opposition politician Abdurrahman Wahid called for a purge of "bad elements" in the armed forces.

The president seemed perhaps the least prepared to confront the chaos. In an assembly speech, he regretted the deaths of student "victims of the reform process". What the recent demonstrations made abundantly clear was that Indonesians have neither forgotten nor forgiven their leaders' membership in the ancient regime. They seemed to demand a truly clean slate, which means that even if the President survives until elections, Golkar party will probably drop him as its presidential candidate. Like Suharto at the end of his towering rule, Habibie may, as some observers feel, find the only popular move left to him is resignation.

Few expect him to surrender easily. Yet, even if troops managed to quell the protests, Habibie and Indonesia face months of steadily escalating tensions. Even before the Consultative Assembly had completed its session, parties had begun to campaign for votes in next year's elections.

As poverty and despair continue to spread, the ranks of those with nothing to lose are likely to swell to dangerous proportions. "People are playing parlour games here in Jakarta. No one is really speaking for the people out there,"

says another Western diplomat. "This is the Jacobin revolution which we haven't seen yet. This is the dangerous part. It's going to be bloody." For an Indonesian that has already seen too much violence this year, past fortnight's excesses may seem like child's play. It was a faint reprise of the burning of Jakarta that brought down Suharto in May. In Chinatown, looters ransacked and torched half-dozen stores. The big loser was Wiranto, the Defence Minister, who had previously enjoyed considerable popularity. "I was so disappointed in Wiranto," said a student leader. "We had hope in him. Now we are back to square one."

The threat to Wiranto could emerge from his own ranks. Even before the recent violence, hard-line Suharto loyalists in the army were fighting hard to stave off demands for military reform. Opposition leaders were pushing for an end to the special privileges Suharto granted his officers including reserved government jobs and seats in Parliament — in return for their loyalty. Suharto loyalists had made no secret of their disdain for moderate reformers like Wiranto. In fact, diplomats and opposition leaders believed these loyalists were orchestrating a dirty game in order to discredit Wiranto's leadership.

The recent bloodshed in Jakarta would surely embolden Wiranto's enemies. In fact, the armed forces had only grown more tentative in the months

since Suharto's downfall, as revelations about their grim human rights record would only prolong the tumult and uncertainty already gripping Jakarta.

The opposition figures many Indonesians would like to see heading a presidium that would take over immediately from Habibie-Megawati. Muslim leaders Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid and the Sultan of Jogjakarta. All the four have however, good reasons to be leary of taking over the helm of an Indonesia convulsed by civil strife.

Nor the members of the consultative assembly seemed capable of holding things steady. The 1000 assembly members were well aware of the tenuousness of their positions: 500 of them were appointed by Suharto, or Habibie, 75 by the military, the remaining 425 won their seats in tightly controlled 1997 elections.

During the last session of the Consultative Assembly, debates were marked by a frankness unthinkable in the Suharto years, as even members of the ruling Golkar party investigated against the former strongman's excesses and the military's involvement in politics. By the time Habibie closed the session, the assembly's most noteworthy decrees pledged only to reduce the military's allotment of seats "gradually", to limit the President to two terms of office, to hold elections next May or June and to investigate corruption. These vague, half-hearted

measures sorely misjudged the mood of the crowds that were fighting pitched battles at that time outside.

Even outside Jakarta, the people's mood over military brutality was virulent. The killing underlined the palpable hatred of the people living also in the outside territories of the country for the Indonesian military and those who worked with it. The hatred is particularly intense in the outside districts such as Pidie, North Aceh and East Aceh, where troops resorted to torture and summary executions. Human rights groups have begun to dig up bodies of victims after identifying about 12 mass graves. While the feeling is strongest in Aceh and in the two other secessionist hot spots of East Timor and

Irian Jaya, antipathy towards the military is widespread in general. Everywhere loathing of its brutal legacy extends from the humblest villager to the highest provincial official.

In the background of the violence which lately swept through Jakarta and other outlying parts of the country and the viciousness of the military response, it is yet too early to say whether President Habibie's approach towards democratic reforms would be really fruitful. Failure of this course may entail a more violent outburst of wrath and frustration of the people in the near future.

It is, however, very doubtful at present whether the students can wait any longer. When Suharto fell, the world held its breath. Now it must do so again. Reforms aimed at putting Indonesia on the path to democracy have failed to avert a new outpouring of anger. Students and others want President Habibie to step down and the military to retreat from politics — a complete break with a discredited past. Their uncompromising mood could trigger new chaos.

## OPINION

# 'Justice Delayed but Not Denied'

A Concerned Citizen

Professor Abdul Bayes is an erudite person and being the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University is also a very responsible one. He is an accomplished writer and writes excellent articles on economic affairs and we enjoy reading them. And his position assumable demands from him a great deal of non-partisanship. But unfortunately when one reads his article, "Justice delayed but not denied" (DS 14-11-98) one gets the impression as if one belonging to a particular political party wrote it.

The strange thing about this article is its insinuation that the hartal (and its extension thereof) called by BNP and its allies was to undermine the verdict of Sheikh Mujib murder case. It is certainly not true. It would be a gross misrepresentation of facts. He failed to mention the fact that BNP for more than two decades now has been observing the 7th November as the solidarity day and it was a public holiday during the BNP rule, which was cancelled by AL when it came to power in June 1996. How could one shift the date of 7th November? What then necessitated fixing a date for the verdict so close to the 7th November? Is it to mar the observance of 7th November in the future by celebrating the 8th November as a verdict day? It could have possibly been fixed on a date few days later. May not one ask that question?

The scheduled meeting of BNP at Paltan on 7th November, for which permission was sought and given was disrupted. By whom? All roads, including the one from Kanchpur bridge, leading to Paltan Maidan were blocked by armed cadre to prevent people from attending the meeting organised by BNP, and all the while the police just looked on as if it was not their duty to keep the roads open and in some cases they actively participated in the act of blockading by arresting the people who were on their way to attend the meeting. And finally, the crackers were thrown at the crowd attending the meeting and the police performed their duty by throwing teargas shell at the crowd and also to the podium when the BNP chief had just started to deliver her speech. Why? And who are responsible for it? BNP alleged that the ruling party cadres in

connivance with the police did it.

Certainly, Professor Bayes does not think as some ministers think and say that it was done by BNP itself. And 48 hours hartal was called by BNP to protest against this, what is perceived as preplanned disruption of its 7th November meeting at Paltan but not to undermine or to disrupt the verdict as Professor Bayes insinuated and some ministers asserted.

It was clear from the fact that the hartal was called after the meeting was disrupted and Professor Bayes did not mention it. If the intention were to undermine the verdict the call for hartal would have come earlier. And the extension of the hartal for another 24 hours was announced after what happened on the first day of the hartal namely armed cadres and the police in tandem terrorised the BNP supporters, ransacked BNP offices and even manhandled women supporters of BNP and two people were killed in the process. Notwithstanding our repugnance to hartal, are not all these enough reasons to call a hartal? Professor Bayes's another assertion is that things like these had also happened during the BNP rule. May be so, but should it justify doing the same mischief? Besides, all now know that the voters had punished the BNP for their lapses. Did not the AL pledge to perform better than its predecessor? Or was it only a false promise to get the people's vote? And where is the institutionalisation of the democracy? Professor Bayes has also suggested in his article that there are more cost-effective ways of protest other than hartal, but unfortunately he did not mention them.

One of the duties of intellectuals should be to help the nation to heal its wounds, to narrow the gap between the two sides of the political divide and not to widen it, and not to push the parties toward a precipice. And also to make the people realise that the nation is greater than any one person, however great he or she may be. Whatever happens to an individual the nation cannot and should not cease to function. It should go on, as it must. No individual should be above scrutiny, for no one is infallible.

## To the Editor...

**Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.**

### Antidote to AIDS/HIV

Sir, AIDS/HIV is now a serious threat to the peaceful and meaningful existence of human race. At present the severe moral degradation throughout the world is encouraging widespread immoral sexual interactions which are helping to multiply AIDS/HIV cases in the societies. Reports published from developed countries also indicate that more than 90% AIDS/HIV cases are being caused through sexual interactions. So, to prevent this disastrous AIDS, immoral sexual interactions and its prime promoter moral degradation has to be curbed throughout the globe.

Dr. Zakia Khatun  
Dr. Rahela Begum  
Dhaka Medical College Hospital,  
Dhaka-1000

### Why "one"?

Sir, According to the ruling party, the country was in the hands of the anti-liberation force for the last 23 years. If so, one wonders how come we were still a liberated and sovereign nation till they came to power three years back? Not only that, we were democratic enough to allow an election, through which they could come to power. Would that have been possible for any other party had the country been in their hands for the last 23 years? Now, anybody who is not an Awami League is an anti-liberator! Strange indeed. For at that

time, not one party but the whole nation fought for the liberation. In fact all parties and the citizens had united to gain force. Even those living abroad, belonging to no political party had contributed in their own way. So why now give credit to one party only?

Many army officers had left their families behind, at the mercy of the Pakistani forces, to join the liberation war. It was a great personal sacrifice. Likewise everybody contributed as best as he could and still is doing so for nation building. So why give credit to only a few?

So many people lost their dear ones, so many lost their property and many lost most of their belongings. All of them are not affiliated to the AL or any other political party, for that matter. But that does not mean that they are anti-liberation.

A Citizen  
Dhaka

### Yawning seminars

Sir, I have been attending meetings, seminars etc., on "women". In the beginning, I used to attend with great interest but now I try to avoid them. What I see is women, and only women, in these seminars. Where have all the men gone? They are very much in each house, in the streets, in offices, in the universities, everywhere — but while women talk about "their rights", "violence against them", "divorce law" etc., they go talking on and on. I see women making speeches at the

top of their voice to let other "women" know what men do! Well, I yawn. Because no man listens to these.

We all know what men do and what they don't. We also know, that these women may talk a lot in these events, only because men are not around! In the 8th March processions, women with yashmaks go on marching (some of them terrified that their partners may see them here), not knowing why and for what they are walking. When they go home, they will be as they are, beaten by men, abused by men (often in-laws) and harassed by men. They can't recall a word said during the procession. It's not only the women with yashmaks, but also others, who go on shouting in the march. When they are back home, they either behave the same with their poor husbands, or become the opposite. Everything is excess in these women.

Why don't we invite the men in these seminars? Why don't we invite some of the "abusers" (as many of us know them, of course) too?

Moushumi Nasser  
ActionAid Bangladesh  
House 41, Road 8  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### Land of hartal

Sir, I want to mention my two recent observations about 'hartal' in Bangladesh, which I believe speak for themselves.

An American colleague of mine, who is an IT consultant with vast experience, both at home and abroad, while I was working as Senior Systems Analyst at Bell Atlantic, made the following comments couple of years back he had been to Bangladesh as an IT consultant on a World Bank Government project. He worked in many other developing countries. I am using his words, in making his observations: "It was a total

waste of time and money, as we were stranded in the hotel during most part of our stay in Bangladesh, due to hartal. We finally couldn't really achieve anything but had to return, scrapping the whole project. If in future, I ever again offered an IT consultancy overseas, I might accept it, but it has to be except in Bangladesh."

Presently I am working as Systems Integrator at National Rural Electric Cooperatives. It may be noted, the Rural Electrification Board of Bangladesh is assisted by us in various ways and NRECA works with them in many areas. The other day an official from our international division came to see me at my office. I am quoting about his experience in his own words. "We had been to Bangladesh to visit some of our projects for a week. We were stranded in the Sheraton Hotel for three days, finally was able to get out at the last two remaining days and could barely go visit some projects around Dhaka, had to cancel our visit to port city of Chittagong and return, without really achieving anything."

Kaiser Ahmed  
Maryland, USA

### Let us know

Sir, The trading of the share of Orion Infusion in the DSE has been suspended by the SEC almost a year ago due to non-payment of dividend for two years to its shareholders within the regulated period and the SEC imposed fines on it and asked to regularise the matter. We presume that the matter has not yet been settled, since we see no trading of such shares in the DSE. Should the SEC, DSE and the management of Orion Infusion clarify the latest development of the matter and remove the agonies of the poor investors like us.

Biplab Kumar Saha  
Savar, Dhaka