

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S.M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, December 4, 1998

Pabna By-election and Khaleda's Threat

Only five days to go before Pabna by-poll, all roads are still leading to it. One wished a gradual build-up of patient waiting at this stage after an intense campaign work-out — to allow the voters a cooling off period to reach the verdict with informed detachment. Instead, the atmosphere remains charged, much too much on a hype for the congeniality the nation yearns to a point of erring, so it sadly seems. A do-or-die struggle seems waged at the Pabna-2 constituency as if the result of this one-seat contest is going to rewrite the power structure at the national level.

By hindsight, BNP nominee Osman Ghani Khan won this seat in the 1991 general election polling 51.71 per cent votes against his nearest AL rival Ahmad Tafazzuddin who bagged 39.01 per cent. In the 1996 election the table turned with AL candidate Tafazzuddin winning by a margin of 1500 votes against his BNP opponent. It is upon his death that the present by-election has fallen due. So, the by-poll should be wide open to both sides going by their electoral track-record. However, there is no denying that with their vote banks thus evenly composed, the contest could be a pot-boiling close call, a prospect which requires of both sides to act responsibly.

Awami League lost Manikganj and Bogra by-polls, but emerged a winner in terms of public esteem for the well-appreciated fairness of the elections. It is quite natural for the AL to redouble efforts for a break at the Pabna by-poll. This however, should not be at the expense of the prestige they have gained by accepting those electoral defeats quite gracefully. For the BNP's part, there is no reason to lose their cool either; because the result will neither add to nor subtract from their 111-seat strength in the parliament.

Who knows better than Awami League what kind of a danger Magura in the reverse can spell for a party in power? Conversely, the BNP must stay clear of any criticism that they were bent upon making a political capital out of the poll by recourse to a preconceived interpretation of its outcome.

The actual dynamics of the fray make the prospects of both sides appear to be hanging in a balance, too. BNP may be surprised that the voters' list has expanded by 20,000 in two and a half years since the last general election. But the voter increase puts both sides to equal disadvantage. The discomfiture of several hopefuls on both sides who did not receive nomination and their forming of groups may end up under-cutting into the added number. Jamaat's vote seems set to go to the BNP candidate, the former having fielded no candidate at all. On the other hand, AL has weaned away four of the 9 BNP-labelled chairmen of the union parishes tilting the balance there.

The EC is doing its job in earnest. It has issued show-cause notices upon Minister Nasim and State Minister Sayeed for alleged violation of the campaign code on a complaint from some BNP leaders.

The planned massive presence of the law and order forces sounds precautionary with nearly all the polling stations be identified as 'risky'. They will be there to hold all possible forms of intimidation in check.

Opposition leader Begum Zia's post-hunger strike threat of a 48-hour hartal leading to a non-stop one till the government is toppled making room for mid-term elections' if the Pabna polls were 'rigged' rings downright undemocratic of her.

It raises not just the spectre of spurning an electoral result when defeated but another quite serious one of openly courting destabilisation in the country. Election is fair if I win and it is rigged if I lose' amounts to an *ex parte* verdict that is grossly antithetical to democratic and electoral norms. It is an affront to the voters, the EC and the whole system of which she is a part. The nation expects her to set a higher standard in opposition politics.

The planned massive presence of the law and order forces sounds precautionary with nearly all the polling stations be identified as 'risky'. They will be there to hold all possible forms of intimidation in check.

Moratorium on Student Politics: PM Should Ask the President to Convene a National Dialogue

Sheikh Hasina did the country a great favour by making Justice Shahabuddin the President. She can now do herself and her party a great favour by listening to him.

THE topic of the week for us is President Shahabuddin's call to restore academic environment in our schools, colleges and universities. He has once again cried out for a radical reform in students' politics and urged all political parties, especially the leading ones, to sever all links with the student bodies. He did so on 29 November '98 in his 7th convocation address to the teachers and graduates of the Rajshahi University. Permit me to quote a passage from his speech (English translation is mine):

There is no substitute for good education if we are to stay in step with the modern world. But the standard of education in our country, at all levels, has deteriorated drastically. Due to widespread cheating in our examinations our educational certificates are no longer recognised in other countries. The main reason for widespread cheating is lack of proper education in our educational institutions. Proper academic environment does not exist there. The main reason for this is using students to serve political ends. Bloody clashes occur frequently in our schools, colleges and universities. In addition, incidents of terrorism and extortion also are frequent. For all these destructive activities student politics is responsible. Student leaders have taken up student politics as a very profitable 'profession'. By indulging in student politics they can become multi-millionaires very quickly. If by not studying and indulging in terrorist students politics an ordinary student can become powerful, rich, even member of parliament and minister, then why should anybody study? The poisonous and vicious nature of national politics is now reflected in the activities of all educational institutions. It is because all student bodies act as fronts for their respective political parties that proper educational activities have come to a virtual standstill in our educational institutions. I have repeatedly said that for the good of the country political parties should sever all links with student bodies and free the students from their clutches. Unless this is done, our future will be bleak.

The above long quote from President Shahabuddin's recent speech could not have been timelier. Only the other day a young boy of Dhaka College got killed from an internecine fight of the students' wing of the ruling party. This is but the most recent of several killings that has occurred within the ranks of student activists of both the BNP and the AL. It is not the

first time that our President has made such a plea. It is also not the first time that he has pointed his finger directly at our political parties. Can our politicians sincerely answer the questions he has raised without agreeing to the fact that he has truly identified the single most important reason for the havoc that has been caused to our education system in general and to our young learners in particular. What do these killings indicate? How can firearms get to their hands? Who supplies them? Who protects them on the rare occasion that they are pursued by the police? Who finances them? Our political

present politics has every reason to feel extremely concerned.

In our view two things must be kept in mind in judging the issue of student politics. First, against which type of government our students waged their democratic movements? And, second, what is the need of the hour?

The most important thing to remember about our past student movements is that they have all been waged against unrepresentative and autocratic governments. We must draw a line between the role of students under autocracy, dictatorships and colonial rule, and under democratic governments. Just

the argument that he gave against hartals. As long as free and fair elections are held on time and under a caretaker government, as long as we have genuine representative governments in power, and as long as we have sovereign parliaments, why should our students need to indulge in politics? Why should they be lackies of political parties to be used as cannon fodder as and when needed? Yes, even under democratic governments there will be periodic need for street demonstrations as there occurs in India, Sri Lanka, and now in Malaysia. Those will occur as and when necessity arises, just as they do

affiliations of so-called students and their so-called leaders cannot but lead to the fundamental conclusion that student politics as it has become now should be immediately stopped. How can we see the reality of today's student politics and still argue in favour of its continuance only because it was glorious in the past?

As a concrete suggestion, we propose that the PM should request the President to convene a dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition in parliament on how to bring about a moratorium on student politics. President Shahabuddin enjoys confidence of all political parties and the society in general. Also the fact that he is Chancellor of the universities, makes this a most appropriate course of action for him to take. We recall that while in opposition Sheikh Hasina once took the bold step of deactivating the Dhaka University Unit of BCL and banning all its activities for a period of time. We urge her to show the same spirit and request the President as suggested above. Will it weaken her? Far from it. It will create such a groundswell of public goodwill that she will get hundred times more public support than what she will lose in the support of a group of self-serving individuals that masquerade as student leaders. Sheikh Hasina did the country a great favour by making Justice Shahabuddin the President. She can now do herself and her party a great favour by listening to him.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

By Mahfuz Anam

leaders know the answers to all these questions. Are the future of our students, or of the country, of any concern to those who do such things? Imagine we have enemies bent upon destroying us as a nation, as a country, as a rich culture and as a people. Could they have had better allies than those who induce our students into terrorism, extortion and violence? Why don't our political parties, and their leaders realise this simple truth. The present type of politics that is causing such degeneration among the young is destroying us from within.

This newspaper and this writer have long been advocating a total ban on student politics in the form that it exists now. Of course university students will and should take part in national affairs. But they should, and must, do so on their own. Nothing prevents anybody above 18 to become a full-fledged member of a political party or to run for election and be its activist. But he or she cannot, and should not, do so under the banner of any student organisation. We cannot allow front bodies of political parties to operate in the form that they do now. We are not against student politics as such, but against the form in which it exists now.

We often hear arguments that we have a great tradition of democratic struggle in our student politics. Hence any attempt to stop it will be a step against democracy. This argument is only half-true. Anybody who knows even a little bit about our student politics has every reason to feel proud about it's past. And again, anybody who knows anything about our

as in the case of hartals so also in the case of student politics it must change on the basis of the type of government we have. Leave alone deny student politics in present day Indonesia, we welcome it because they are fighting for democratic rights, for election, for representative government. This was precisely the fight of our students against the Ayub regime. Yahya regime and most recently against the autocratic regime of General Hossain M. Ershad. We can rest assured that in the future also our students will take up movements for democracy if it is interrupted.

Here we are obliged to repeat

in any and every democratic country. Why do we have to be so rottenly different?

As for the need of the hour, it is unquestionably the task of nation building. We repeat what we said when arguing against hartals. We are too poor, too malnourished, too uneducated, too poverty stricken, in fact too backward in almost all aspects of modern life to even waste a minute in anything other than nation building. Under these circumstances it is suicidal to use our students for partisan political ends.

The gradual rise in criminality among our students which can be directly linked to political

Hartal: No Need to Trust Hasina, Just Tie Her Hands

A few words on the topic of last week — hartal, or better still opposing it. Following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's timely 'no hartal, ever' declaration there has been a spurt of articles on how, if at all, the opposition should respond. One that has come over and over again is that "Hasina cannot be trusted". The argument here is that Hasina is now pledging no-hartal only because, being in the government, she does not need it. Moment she will be in the opposition she will forget what she promised and call hartal as frequently and as recklessly as she did before. If it suits her purpose. In support of "Hasina cannot be trusted" thesis many examples are cited of her 'deviousness' including how she pledged no-cooperation with Ershad and then participated in the elections in '86 in an overnight turnaround.

For the exponents of "Hasina cannot be trusted" thesis we would like to propose a formula. Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that truly the PM cannot be trusted. So what should we do. The logical course of action is to leave her no option. In other words to tie her hands. We can do so by creating a legal framework, which will force her to conform to what she is pledging

now. What we are proposing is the enactment of a bill outlawing hartals against all democratic governments as long as elections are held according to the Constitution, i.e. every five years and under a caretaker government.

This bill can be fine-tuned to see that such a law does not infringe on trade union or workers rights for industrial action, and only prevents hartals of the type we are so weary about, the ones that cripple the society in general. This bill can be proposed by BNP itself. Given PM's no-hartal pledge AL will have to support such a move, and we have a situation in which BNP will no longer have to 'trust' Hasina on the hartal issue. It will just be illegal to call one. Our suggestion, we think, sufficiently responds to the worries of the opposition. If BNP is sincere about its avowed distaste for hartals, as it said a thousand times during its tenure in government, then it should have no problem proposing such a bill. If it does not, then we will have to conclude that its "Hasina cannot be trusted" posture is just a ploy to hide its true intention, which is to do exactly as the AL did when in opposition — call hartals when it suits its purpose.

The Night of Nights

WITH the mid-Shaban sunset, the night-long prayer begins seeking blessings of God. God's benediction is meant for self-reform with introspection of one's past record; how well one fared in terms of religion and as a good human being.

The popular notion, evangelised so far in Bangladesh is that "engrossing in one night-long prayers is exceptionally important in seeking forgiveness for the sins committed in the last one year, and for that matter, the past years." This night is, says the holy Qur'an, definitely a 'night of nights', but how far the prevailing practice is true deserves elucidation by the learned doctors of religion.

The Qur'an is also interpreted here, as: "on this auspicious night, every matter estab-

Boon of Laila-tul-Barat

lished, the fortunes of nations are determined. Those who overlook the value and importance of the night of power are either doing it out of ignorance or are unfortunate."

Barat, in Arabic, means some kind of release, but in Bangla, it has come to mean "fate" or "a predetermined another year" for an individual, which, however, has its origin in a certain pronouncement in the Qur'an.

Lailat-ul Barat, however, gained identification in this part of the world in its Persian version *Shab-e Barat*. It is so universally observed by the Mus-

By Ekram Kabir

lims that in many countries, it's a holiday with holiness. Of the Islamic days of religious importance, only this occasion falls on a full moon. And the whole night is spent in prayer, in visiting graves of the prudent or the near and dear ones, while the full moon focuses on us with the milieu in heavenly light, which is something that elevates us all to another worldly feeling — a feeling of intense religiosity. Even for the lesser religious, the night is beautiful in a way that they turn to God and good thought — and making a paradise of this turbulent wild-about world.

By Kazi Aulad Hosain

formal prayers ("Salat") during the month of Ramadan.

According to Mohammed Marmaduke Pichthal (the first English Muslim translator of the Holy Quran) he is a Muslim who surrenders to the will of Allah. The definition is undoubtedly meaningful and significant law and order, peace and harmony, bliss and happiness will prevail in the society and society will be an ideal place to live in if a Muslim surrenders to the will of Allah. And surrendering to the will of Allah means a Muslim must be honest, pious, sincere and dutiful. Surrender to the will of Allah means that a Muslim shall not be a thief or dacoit, nor he shall be a terrorist or a hijacker. Surrender to the will of Allah, among other things, also means Muslims as a nation or a

Friday Mailbox

community must honour a treaty executed with another nation or tribe or community (Sura Bani Israil, Ayat-34). Laila-tul-Barat is an auspicious occasion which reminds a Muslim whether he has been faithfully following the Quranic injunctions in deference to the commandments of Benign Allah.

It may be stated here that Laila-tul-Barat is observed every year in the night following the 14th day of the lunar month of Shaban with due solemnity. On this auspicious occasion of Laila-tul-Barat let us give more importance to self-purification through prayers and complete submission to Almighty Allah than preparation of various kinds of delicious dishes. It may not be irrelevant to state here that Islam does not sanction unnecessary and random use of cracker and fire works. On this occasion deafening sound caused by sudden burst of such crackers and bombs do disturb the devotees engaged in offering prayers and recitation and reading of the Holy Quran in the nearby mosques besides the patients suffering from various kinds of ailments. Our considerate guardians may kindly take positive and effective steps for restraining their young children from such boisterous merry-making. Let us cry halt to such frivolous pastime causing senseless and unnecessary expenditure of their guardians' hard-earned money.

It is said that prayers can move mountain. In other words, if one's prayer to Almighty Allah is sincere and earnest, earnest to the core, if the supplicant supplicates to his Lord Creator with all his heart then Benign Allah surely answers to his call. In our scheme of things, that is, in our Islamic way of life, as has been indicated above, there are certain blessed nights earmarked for special prayers and for such special prayers offered to Lord Creator bounties are conferred by Merciful Allah on His servants ("bandas"). Laila-tul-Barat is certainly one of such blessed nights and as such, let us not miss it, let us take fullest advantage of its boon.

"Democracy Demands..."

Sir, I totally disagree with Mahfuz Anam's insinuation (Commentary — Democracy Demands that Government Treat Opposition Better, *The Daily Star*, November 11, 1998) that judge KG Rasul's decision to announce the Bangladesh-murder verdict on November 8, is a part of Awami League's plan of opposition baiting. Mr Anam has perhaps made this insinuation very casually without realising the implication of such a hint. This was, to put it mildly, a serious slur against the judiciary. Mr Anam is equally wrong in stating that "over the last 18 months — of the trial, there was not a single action or demand that can be construed as helping or protecting Bangladesh's killers".

Last, but not least, Mr Anam's claim that he spoke to the organisers of the Will's Cup who told him that staging the so-called mass hunger-strike at the Paltan Maidan would in no way pose any problem to the preparation of the games. May we know who were the members of the organisers he talked to?

Hard to prove

Sir, I find the recent announcement made by the PM for not resorting to hartal ever is very hypocritical.

I agree with the DS comment that it is very difficult to prove it unless they become opposition party again.

But what everybody failed to identify is the insincerity already seen in the announcement. Instead of apologising for their disgraceful behaviour by calling unprecedented number of hartals while in opposition, Sheikh Hasina was justifying her previous actions in the same announcement.

So, here you go again. Always opposition will find a reason to justify it, no matter what.

M Chowdhury
USA

The Uni part-timers

Sir, It is high time the government and the university authorities take severe measures against teachers who have been doing part-time teaching and part-time jobs. As a result, the standard of university education is fast deteriorating the effects of which are believed to be the root cause of student politics and violence on the campus.

Some political parties have been using the students for their own interest to create disorder and indiscipline with the active support of these teachers belonging to different political parties. It is very painful to learn that some teachers do take money from the rich students who are given extra marks to get first class in the final examinations. When such students are sent to foreign countries for higher education, they prove themselves unfit. Even some young university teachers are sent back for the same reason.

Keeping this in mind the government and the Ministry of Education should take appropriate steps in order to maintain better education standard in the country.

Abdul Majid Kahn
45, Mohakhali (1st floor), Dhaka

OPINION

DOCTORS get blamed for so many things in our society. Poor doctors! For most of the time they try their best to do good to the patient. It is difficult to believe that a doctor will intentionally hurt his patient or do something that can be detrimental to his patient's health or well being. Patient's complaints against doctors are endless. I'll try to answer some with my limited knowledge and experience.

Firstly, most patient's complain, "Why don't the doctor talk to them?" We try to, but this leads to endless problems. First of all, our patient's general knowledge and knowledge about health and human body is so meager that they mostly cannot understand the doctor's explanation and draw their own odd conclusions. Thus leading to unnecessary anxieties and worries. Also they repeat their misunderstood interpretations to their friends, relatives and other doctors, thus creating a lot of problems. Then when the doctor starts to talk to them, they continue to ask endless odd questions, even repeating the same question again and yet again. Sometimes they repeat it up to three or four times. Even each of their relatives repeats the same questions again and again. Thus wasting valuable time and making the doctor annoyed

In Defense of Doctors

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid

(any body would be under such circumstances). That is why most of the doctors avoid starting a talk with a patient, especially the very busy ones. At times they are also too tired to get into long discussions. Patients who would like to have a discussion with the doctor should go to those who are less busy and can spare some time. Though I do agree that doctors should make time to explain the problem briefly at least.

Asma's case is also going against doctor's popularity in our country. But as far as we know, when a surgeon opens up a patient's abdomen for any surgical procedure, he/she as a rule looks around to see if there is any other problem in the vicinity of the main pathological site. If any other problem is found then that one is also got rid of. Just to avoid a second operation on the same patient, which will be difficult for the patient to bear both physically and financially, not to forget, emotionally too. For example, if a surgeon while operating on gall bladder finds the appendix pathological, he removes it. Likewise if he is operating on the appendix and finds an ovarian tumour, he removes that one too in one go. Saving the pa-

Open on Saturday?

Sir, A renowned English medium school will remain open on Saturday (5.12.98), because the Year-end Examinations are going on. I know this, as my ward studies there. The day is a government holiday; and more so this year, it's holy *Sabe-e Barat*. I think it's unfair to keep the school open. Hopefully this won't be repeated in the future.

A Guardian
Dhaka

Is hartal hurting?

Sir, So finally hartal is hurting the Awami League and its government. Although Awami Leaguers are making propaganda that hartal is hurting the country and not their party, we have

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.