

Which Side is the Sacrilege?

Monday's riotous situation in Brahmanbaria spearheaded by fundamentalist agenda by madrassah teachers and students to undermine Liberation War sentiments has been both audacious and conspiratorial. Their dare-devilry is marked by the wanton manner in which they displayed their lethal temerity to foil the Proshika-ADAB organised liberation and freedom rally at the grassroots NGO level in this great month of December. And the conspiracy is embedded in their playing to some hidden agenda harboured and nurtured by the known elements in society who bear rancour to the creation of Bangladesh and all that she stands for.

In an ultimate manifestation of *fatwabaji*, passing of those arbitrary religious edicts over localised social affairs which themselves have been baneful, they have now come out with a latest version of it: memories, sentiments and awareness of the saga of our liberation struggle are "un-Islamic." They are up to putting the basic foundations of our statehood into jeopardy. How dare they?

The extent to which they have come in their bid to roll back Liberation War values bears testimony to a very deep-seated conspiracy we better not gloss over anymore. An obscurantist student force with sectional teacher support at certain universities has been creating havoc of the campus life. They may have been on a relatively low profile lately; but, well, if that is sought to be made up for by the centres of religious studies, then what? Their mentors from behind have been supporting in kind that particular ideological cadre among the students community as an investment in the future which is indoctrinated in theocracy. All this is against the very grain of a secularist, liberal and modern society Bangladesh wants to stay as and prosper with.

We have never tired of saying that the obscurantist agenda is basically contrary to the inherent spirit of Islam. And when it is characterised by violence it is far worse because Islam is the synonym for peace. More pointedly, if somebody questions the very founding sentiments of a country or misinterprets them to exploit the society's religious sensibilities he is being disloyal to his land, something Islam has no place for — at all. Patriotism is an article of faith with Islam.

We find no language strong enough to condemn the Brahmanbaria incident and want the culprits immediately tracked down and punished with a deterrent effect.

A Step to Final Frontier

Astronauts of America and Russia have performed a monumental feat far beyond Planet Earth. The US space shuttle Endeavour has completed the first phase of building an international space station Sunday last by launching the Unity that rendezvoused with the Russian-built Zarya's control module.

This was the first ever "blind" docking attempt for block-building in world's space history, which came with a passionate *that's-terrific* feeling for those who persistently laboured for this. This is more than a mere achievement for them, because the two station-pieces are so huge — 23 metres from the tip of one to the tip of the other with a combined mass of 31,750 kilos — that the spacecrews had to rely on computerised vision system and camera views, rather than direct line of sight. The space station will take its final shape in the year 2004 following 43 more space-flights by astronauts combined from sixteen countries, which reportedly is likely to cost 60 to 100 thousand million US dollars.

This is a cheerful breakthrough in terms of Man's quest for attaining the unattainable, especially the Space — now regarded as our final frontier. It may still sound as wishful thinking to travel to another planet and start living there after turning it into a territory worthy of human domicile. But humans have achieved what in the past seemed like flights of fantasy and near-hallucination. When human "imagination" and "will" are put together, a lot that is impossible can be made possible. With a unified vision and pooling of expertise we can conquer space earlier than many think it is possible.

The creation of an international space station would facilitate inter-planetary journeys. Human settlements on other planets may not be long way off. We rejoice at the present success, and look forward to the golden space era ahead of us.

Another Call for Transport Strike?

We are under the threat of another transport strike across the country from December 12. This time it is aimed to paralyse the road transport sector for 72 hours in contrast to the call for indefinite strike given earlier on. Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation (BRTWF) has called for this to press home their 11-point demand. Only the other day we wrote in these columns against a proposed non-stop transport strike by a section of the BRTWF which was called off at the last moment as the parties concerned agreed to sit around a table and thrash out the issues. We discourage all types of strikes and hartals because they are against national interest at the moment.

The organisers of the latest call for strikes strongly criticised the ministers concerned and leaders of the ruling party for not implementing, as they claim, as many as three previous agreements signed with the government. This is a volatile situation. If their claim is true it is incumbent on the concerned ministries which signed the agreements that they make their position public concerning their purported inability to honour the BRTWF may be playing to their constituency by putting up a brave front vis-a-vis their rivals it must be said in all fairness that the ministers should have lived up to their pledges to the workers of a very important sector of communication at their difficult times. Once again we strongly urge the BRTWF to call off their threatened strike and urge the government to open negotiations with them in time to stave off any unpleasant situation.

BY-ELECTION to the Pabna-2 constituency tomorrow comes at a time when the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is searching for a "trigger" with which to launch its long-threatened movement to unseat the government. The anti-government posture is couched in a demand for mid-term elections, while the ground for renewed agitation is being set by constant predictions about rigging in the Pabna polls.

It appears both the Awami League and the BNP are playing for a "heads-I-win, tails-you-lose" situation. In their respective scenarios, they simply cannot lose, no matter what the result.

For the BNP, an AL victory will only "confirm" its predictions of rigging, thus justifying reversion to hartals and other forms of disruptive activities. A victory for BNP would be painted as a vote of "no-confidence" in the government, thus justifying demands for mid-term polls and agitation to achieve such goals.

The AL faces a similar kind of situation. If its candidate wins, then it can claim the victory to be a sure sign of people's confidence in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership. But if it loses, then it can claim a different sort of victory. It will present the election as yet another proof that democracy is safe and sound under an AL administration.

In other words, whatever the result at Pabna-2 tomorrow, both sides would find enough "evidence" of its own infallibility, and continue the current style of confrontational politics that leaves little room for compromise or maneuver.

Over the past year, by-elections have generally produced such heat. In the last few by-elections, such as the ones at Bogra, Manikganj and Barisal, the BNP won the polls but the AL won the accolades for losing. Each time the BNP had warned of rigging, which never materialised. But Pabna does look different from the others, because the political stakes have been

raised appreciably higher than at any previous time.

Under normal circumstances, a by-election provides voters with an opportunity to cast a protest vote, to keep the government on its toes. The government can take defeats in by-elections philosophically and try to analyse what the voters were protesting about. The opposition can also read possibilities in the voters' mood, and thus redesign its own agenda for the general elections ahead. Unfortunately, this happens in a mature democracy, and Bangladesh is yet to attain such maturity.

The BNP had boycotted the first few by-elections held under this government such as the ones in Bagerhat and Habiganj. At that time, it had accused Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena of pro-AL bias, and pledged not to participate in any election conducted by him. The party sensibly moved away from that position when the Manikganj seat fell vacant last year. After all, Manikganj was a safe BNP seat and it would have been foolish of Khaleda Zia not to contest.

Pabna is a marginal seat, which means there is all to play for. But instead of making the election a snap-test of the government's popularity, the BNP has raised the stakes sky-high, by making the election a virtual launching pad for extra-parliamentary assault on the elected government. The threat of non-stop hartal and toppling of the government has put immense pressure on the AL as well.

The AL is aware that either way, the BNP would look for reasons to take to the street. Defeat may make the AL look good in the public eye, but that may not deter the BNP from going for a fresh round of agitation. This may have convinced the

AL leadership that they need to win, in order to take the wind out of BNP's sails. Hence, the nomination of a high-profile candidate and intense campaigning by locally influential ministers. But a victory, even by means most fair, would provide the "grievance" BNP needs to take to the streets.

What is clear, though, is that both the parties want to win this seat pretty badly. In cooler political atmosphere, the results of this one seat would not make an iota of difference to the fortunes of the government. But given the stage that is being set under the cover of this by-election, there is every reason

needs to be based on real, not emergency grounds.

The BNP is rather hard-pressed to articulate the reasons on which its demand for mid-term polls can be justified. Such a demand can be justified only when the government's majority in parliament becomes suspect, or when the economy faces collapse, or the law and order situation goes out of control, or when there is an imminent danger of external aggression. In other words, when either the government becomes unstable, or the socio-political, economic or security situation goes out of control. Even then, the situation has to

country faces an imminent attack (the only "external threat" people feared in recent times was the mega-shower, which turned out to be an anti-climax).

But, the BNP is likely to stick to its demand for mid-term polls, because this phrase has now been turned into a virtual slogan. Given the poor logic behind the demand, the slogan continues to ring rather hollow. But, possibly in order to add some meat to the hollow logic, the BNP and its microscopic allies in the 7-party alliance have raised an additional demand for holding local government elections under a caretaker government. This is even more baffling.

Local government polls, i.e. Union Parishad, Pourashava, City Corporation and now the Upazila Parishad, are held at different times, in different years. If all these polls were to be held under a neutral caretaker government, then could there be an elected government in power? Yes, there could be, but we would find replacement of that elected government with caretakers roughly four times during the former's five-year tenure. When the Zila Parishads are brought into existence to complete the three tiers of elected bodies in the non-municipal countryside, then there would be five changeovers in government.

What would be the situation if this were to come about? The ministers would get dizzy going in and out of their offices; policy-making would become a nightmare; the civil and police administrations in the districts would be recast five times in five years. The civil administration would become a permanent game of musical chairs.

This looks more like a recipe to make the country ungovernable. One can only hope that the BNP and its allies have raised

this demand as a mere ploy, to be forgotten at a convenient time. It certainly does not look like the product of serious political thinking, even though the BNP chairperson's advisory committee does contain some illustrious names.

On the other hand, if the BNP is seriously worried about foul play in local government polls, then there is another path open to it. Hasina has already announced her intention to call fresh parliamentary polls sometime in the year 2000, and this should be the starting point for making a new start on local government.

First, the BNP can ask the government to postpone elections to city corporations and upazilas until 2000. Then it can propose that, when the government resigns and hands over power to a caretaker government three months prior to general elections, all existing local government bodies be dismissed. The BNP can help to amend laws to make it possible. Fresh elections to all tiers of local government bodies can then be held during the tenure of the caretaker government, either on the same day, or over a period of a month.

This would ensure that all local government bodies go to polls at the same time, during the tenure of a caretaker government. This would require minor amendments to local government laws and it would not cause any disruption to the governance of the country, nor undermine the mandate of an elected government at the centre.

The question, however, is whether the BNP is serious about poll fairness, or is it simply interested in pushing the elected government out of power. The call for mid-term polls, under current socio-political and economic situation, is obviously a non-starter. But it can make its demand for local government polls under caretaker government credible to the public by taking a constructive approach, rather than a disruptive one.

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The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

to be apprehensive about the fall-outs from Pabna.

However, when one looks closely at the small basket of issues that the BNP is currently hawking at the political marketplace, there is good reason to be cynical about the manner in which the stakes are being raised.

Throughout most of 1997, BNP leader Khaleda Zia spoke a lot about having given the government "enough time". This went down well with party activists but did not cut much ice with the public in general. The tactics has been changed in recent months and the term "mid-term polls" has made its debut in the political arena of Bangladesh. The demand for mid-term polls is perfectly legitimate in a Westminster-type democracy. But this demand

be judged on the basis of the country's own reality.

The current situation in Bangladesh does not tally with anything that might be construed to be an "emergency" requiring a fresh mandate for the government through mid-term polls.

The government has a comfortable majority in parliament and its stability is guaranteed. The economy has taken a battering in the floods, but the fundamentals are still pretty sound and the word "collapse" has disappeared from the vocabulary of even the most pessimistic analyst. The law and order situation is not exactly brilliant, but it is being managed well by normal Bangladesh standards. As for the security situation, not even the BNP has suggested that the

Some Thoughts on the Upcoming By-election

by Dr AR Chowdhury

Both parties should make a sincere effort to make the Parliament the focal point of national attention where issues can be debated on the basis of its merit, and not emotion. As a nation we have come a long way from the dark days of occupation and tyranny. Let's not turn back the wheels of history.

cadres had created a reign of terror in the area and had hijacked the election results. Readers, it's not putting mistake. Neither am I trying to be cynical. It's simply the reality in Bangladesh. If you don't believe me, check the headlines on Friday morning newspapers.

The point is, as a nation we have not yet learned to accept defeat in grace. Be it the Awami League, BNP, or any other political party, the notion of self-criticism or accepting responsibilities for our failure is foreign to us.

Why would losers in a democratic election accept the outcome? After all, there will be winners and losers, and it is not intuitively obvious why those who fail to win power will continue to abide by the rules. The answer is simple. Political forces will comply with present defeats only when they believe that the institutional framework that organised the democratic competition will permit them to advance their interests in the future. In other words, a time dimension can become important in the calculus of politicians in a democratic setting. By playing by the rules, they can improve their relative

position in the future, compared to the consequences of rejecting the rules entirely and seeking other means to advance their interests.

It is through political action that trade-offs among competing values are made in societies. And it is through political institutions that the rules for acquiring and using power are established. Political development may involve debate and persuasion; it may involve elections and mass organisation. Whatever the method of political contestation, the participants have their eye on gaining power over the state apparatus. More commonly politicians of whatever background continue to believe that the state is the means by which the ills of society can best be fixed.

The answer to the question 'who governs?' is therefore seen as a matter of utmost importance in our country. Not surprisingly, political competition in such circumstances will be intense. There is nothing wrong with it. However, the unwillingness of the political parties to play by the rules of the game is breeding intolerance, distrust, and hatred. These at-

tributes seem to dominate our political spectrum. After twenty-seven years of freedom, we are still a long way from learning to play fair in our political arena.

Democracy has the disadvantage of being defined by the rules it provides rather than the ends that it promises. No one can credibly say that democracy guarantees good government, economic well-being, an end to corruption, equality, or justice. Democracy is the solution to one major problem in politics — the problem of autocracy and tyranny. Democracy, if it means anything, means that people can rid themselves of truly bad government without going to the barricades, without revolution, and without the gun.

An important corollary of this central point about democracy is that people have the right to change their mind. They may make a mistake — elect a tyrant or an incompetent — but that should not deprive them of the right to choose again and to oust a leader that they previously embraced. People may not always be able to articulate exactly what they want from their government but they can usually be counted

on to know when they do not like what they are getting.

The precise institutional arrangements that can guarantee these basic rights to choose one's representatives and to hold them accountable for their acts can take many forms. But central to the exercise of democracy is the holding of free and fair elections. This is the primary means for the expression of popular sovereignty.

There are two key issues in evaluating democracy. The first one is the dimension of participation. Do all citizens have equal access, in a legal sense, to the political process? The second issue deals with contestation. What issues in society are resolved by competition? Does the elected parliament have real control over the issues affecting the general masses? Generally, the more issues that are open to contestation, the more that can be debated and decided by deliberation and voting, the more democratic a political system can be considered.

This nuanced understanding of democracy — of the appreciation for its openness, of the value of rules and institutions — does not develop overnight. The perception of fairness and openness, and the existence of institutions and atmosphere that ensure a second chance to losers are crucial. Without

them, democracy has little chance to win over the skeptics.

On the eve of another Victory Day celebration, our political leaders need to come to grasp with these ideas. The party in power has to show its tolerance for opposing views. The use of the state machinery for extending the arms of the governing party has been an age-old tradition in this part of the world. Awami League deserves our kudos for breaking with that tradition during the earlier by-elections at Manikganj and Bogra, respectively. We can only hope that it will continue with its hands-off policy in Pabna.

The BNP showed commendable restraint during its recent march towards the Parliament and the hunger strike. However, its latest verbal threat of non-stop hartal can only fuel skepticism among those who are wary about the success of preserving democracy in this country.

Both parties should make a sincere effort to make the Parliament the focal point of national attention where issues can be debated on the basis of its merit, and not emotion. As a nation we have come a long way from the dark days of occupation and tyranny. Let's not turn back the wheels of history.

I wish my pre-conceived ideas about the party responses to the election results prove to be wrong. Let the two major parties show restraint and allow the voters, and only the voters, decide the fate of the candidates. Hoping for a violence-free, fair, and impartial election. Let the deserving candidate win!

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.

Kelvin, not degree Kelvin

Sir, While waiting in a doctor's chamber around 5 pm on 30-11-98, I was casually watching the Open University Programme on BTV, which was about units of length, mass, time and temperature.

The gentleman who was introducing the subject mentioned (and this was also displayed in writing in the TV screen) that the unit of temperature is degree Kelvin ("K"). I would like to point out that the correct version is only Kelvin, not degree Kelvin. For example, 27°C is 300K, not 300°K.

K A Latif
Dhaka

What a 'hartal-accompli'

Sir, After a long interval the people have heaved a sigh of relief following the wise, valourous and historical declaration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that her political party Awami League now in power if reverted to opposition would never enforce hartal in future.

Why, under what circumstances, what persuasion, with what aims and objectives in mind and political strategy and motive in hand has the PM made such dramatic announcement all on a sudden?

Everyone knows that her number one political rival is BNP chief and leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia. They do not see eye to eye. They hardly meet each other, greet each other and talk to each other.

Let us call a spade a spade.

Singing for the sword

Sir, The pen or the sword, which one is mightier? According to the famous proverb, the pen of course. That is why a man got on a train with a bunch of pens in his hand. When asked why he was doing so, his reply was confident. Since the train was often attacked by robbers, and he had heard that pen was mightier than the sword, he was taking them for self-defence!

But regrettably, in the third world countries, the proverb doesn't hold true. There the sword is mightier, and the pens are all subservient to it. For whoever has the sword in his hand, the pens will all 'sing' his praise and nothing else. Even if a few dare to do other than this, they have to mask it first with praises; otherwise they'll be in hot soup!

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We don't seem to have improved much from the medieval ages of kings and rajas when this was the trend and the only way. In USA what the law did to one of the most powerful office in the world, is a shining exam-

ple of this proverb, which has sadly no place in any third world country. We wait for the day it will, for it is a basic human right too. The responsibility falls on those with pens — the sooner they act, the better for everybody.

Sabrina
Dhaka

Government support to DCC

Sir, Mayoral election of DCC will be held before March 1999. Present Mayor Hanif accused the past government of BNP for not helping him. Now that Mayor Hanif's own party Awami League is in power for the last 30 months, he could not obtain all cooperation he needs from the government. He proposed the creation of "metropolitan government", but unfortunately PM Sheikh Hasina personally opposed the idea completely. But model of metropolitan government system exists in all developed/democratic countries.

Under this system all departments (police, school board, medical assistance and other government departments) will be under the direct control of this metropolitan government. Central government will have no control. Central government can suggest to implement their programmes and allot special grants from time to time.

The metropolitan government system truly exists in Washington DC. People of this city elect their representatives to run this city. Federal US government has nothing to do with their city's day to day affairs. But if Federal government thinks that the city administration is not functioning properly they can appoint a "control board" to guide the city with the approval of the Federal Government and the Congress.

Mohiuddin Anwar
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The Death-road

Sir, The recent devastating flood of the century left the Dhaka-Tangail road dilapidated and ruined. Most of the one-way bridges is ramshackle and the vehicles are plying taking risk. The three identical bridges at Dheora point are about to collapse. Innumerable pitholes have been developed at different places of the deplorable road.

The Roads and Highways Department took some steps to make the road payable for the vehicles but that was insufficient. The road journey to Tangail is now a loathsome and disgusting experience for the passengers. The narrow and worn-out road deprives the passengers of the northern districts to get advantage from the BJMB. It was expected that the bridge may curtail 3 hours to reach Dhaka from trans-Jamuna terrain but the ruined road equals it to previous journey by ferry through Aricha.

So people are being deprived of advantages of the BJMB.

Government should concentrate in this regard to mitigate the untold miseries of people and road accidents. Emergency steps to improve the road communication between northern districts and Dhaka.

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Dhaka University

Judge faces threat!

Sir, According to a newspaper report, a judge of Jessore Court is facing threat to his life from some terrorists following a judgement in a dacoity case recently. After the judgement, the convicts being infuriated started threatening the judge.

The police are reportedly taking no security measures for the judge though they have been informed of the matter.

Mostafa Sohel
Dhaka

OPINION

Polls Rigging : BNP's Bugbear

A H Dewan

Since the announcement of date and the nomination of candidates thereafter by by-election of Pabna-2 constituency BNP is kicking up no end of its myriad allegations against the government including that of polls rigging to be carried out by AL. But as is given to understand the Election Commission have made 'all set' to hold a free and fair election, far better than they had done in past two by-elections. Measures are supposed to be there for apprehending or punishing the wrongdoers.

The country heaved a great sigh of relief to see both the seats in earlier-held by-elections retained by BNP. Otherwise BNP which has only one thing in its head how to topple the AL government, could resort to any sort of violence to precipitate the fall of the former has already steered its movement towards that end. Now it has repeated its ultimatum that non-stop hartals will be called if rigging is committed in this election by the party in power.

I wonder at BNP's pre-conceived conviction that there shall be rigging and it will be done only by AL. And on the part of BNP to put the word into action is, as if, quite unknown and unholy, and they were never used to it. But none has forgotten its large scale rigging in Magura by-election where ministers stayed to conduct the foul game and the CEC was made to leave the spot.

Although we find little to speak against EC's role of neu-

trality and the arrangements it made for the past and present, we cannot rule out the possibility of vote rigging or ballot snatching. But from that apprehension on one should conclude that the EC will ignore or connive at vote rigging by AL supporters at the expense of their image and that BNP will have no clout to use that method! Who does not know that both the parties have strong bases of their own and have their men too, quite apt to get round what they want?

Now what is inferred from BNP's utterances is that if BNP nominee gets set-back even after there is no report of reasonably acceptable rigging, BNP is 'all set' to make it an issue and use it as a plea or pretext for non-stop hartal, and let the country go under the travails of anarchy and economic malaises through its movement and agitation. BNP is seemingly wound up with self-brewed misgivings and its leaders being carried away with that are making reckless comments against the government and hurling threats which are really bad omen for the ongoing efforts to salvage the flood ravaged area. I could not help mentioning Mr. Mahfuz Anam's quotation "Election is fair if I win, hartal is good if I call it".

In fine it may be said that the government which is not clean in its governance, must also keep it away from indulging in what BNP alleges. The government also knows it very well that rigging in Magura by-election set in BNP's ill fate.