

"By and Large Free, Fair and Peaceful"

Yes, there was tension among the voters in Pabna-2 by polls on Thursday. Yes, there were incidents of violence. Yes, in some areas road blocks and other impediments were put up to intimidate voters not to come to vote. And yes there were voters who said they were afraid to return home after voting because the opponents might attack them on the way back. However, all the above incidents were not widespread enough to make any substantial impact on the outcome. There was no firing, no major clash, no any serious injury, leave alone any death, which are not unknown in our elections. The election was not perfect. However, the flaws were within acceptable limits. And therefore, we agree with the observation of the CEC that the polls were "by and large free, fair and peaceful."

We also greatly share his disappointment with our leading political parties. His urgings that ministers stay away from the polls went unheeded. The two ministers, who had virtually set up camps in Pabna, had an impact on the polls. Even if they did not, as they claimed, use any official privilege their mere presence had an unhealthy influence on the election process. The biggest violations of the election code were contained in the promises of development projects and funds that AL ministers and leaders made during their campaigns. BNP should have protested against them more vigorously. BNP also made a vital mistake by not challenging the new electoral rolls, which showed an addition of nearly 20,000 new voters in less than three years time. However all of these were matters to be dealt with prior to the polls day.

Our correspondents visited most of the polling centres where BNP claimed that their polling agents were forcibly thrown out. The fact was told to us by the BNP candidate himself was that in several centres no BNP polling agent was assigned. Why? Because they did not feel safe. We have also learnt from EC sources that for many centres BNP did not send polling agents for training as was required to ensure smooth election.

When politics is reduced to claims and counter claims truth is the natural casualty. The Election Commission had put its full strength behind this one by-poll. In addition to the civil administration and police, the Army and the BDR were brought into service to ensure peace. In the very last minute the Returning Officer was changed. What else could the EC do to hold peaceful and fair polls?

We find BNP's Sunday hartal call most unfortunate. It has lost an election and now the nation will have to pay for it. It is the latest example of the politics of "Election is fair if I win it, Hartal is good if I call it."

Care for the Indigenous Folks

In an attempt to make their presence felt, representatives of the indigenous people from the country's southern and northern regions assembled at the Diploma Engineers' Institute in the capital Tuesday to put forward a nine-point charter of demand. In the wake of the 50th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, their representation should come as a rude awakening for the country's think-tanks. That Bangla-speaking majority of the populace have so far been indifferent, if not negligent, to the tribulation of the tribal minorities can be attributed to our majoritarian attitude. There involvement in the political, social and economical development processes has been marginal and so far we have not shown a decent degree of willingness to accommodate them, either. Why? The time has come to ask the question and raise the issue to the general public.

The indigenous people have so far been silent, expectantly waiting to be assimilated into the mainstream of national life with regard paid to their distinctiveness. Their hopes rest in the basic tenets of democracy — all citizens are equal, irrespective of their caste and religion. In reality, their hopes and expectations have been sometimes belied. Their patience started to wane, our indifference has not. Thus comes the rude awakening.

Better late than never. Our guilt of being indifferent to their hardship, can only be rectified by paying attention to their needs and demands. We hope that the government will immediately take their demands into consideration and address the issues raised according to their merits. Saying this, we would like to remind every conscious citizen that their grievances should not be a fodder for politics and that they should be addressed for the sake of better integration and harmony among all communities in Bangladesh.

Mission Most Important

There's no mission more important than to step into the 21st century with an educated mass of people. The Unicef Progress of the Nations, 1999, launched Tuesday last, focusing on five key elements — learning for life; accessibility, quality and flexibility; gender sensitivity; state as key partner; and early childhood care — has addressed the challenge of child education and suggested that we move from rhetoric to action in that vast realm. There is little room for complacency that Bangladesh's financial input in primary education has doubled since 1990. The drop-out rate in both formal and non-formal orders has decreased, but is yet to be contained, especially in the country-side; and more worrisome is the fact that girls go missing from the classrooms only to perform household chores or work as cheap labour at the urban centres.

While the child-labour-eliminating initiative has witnessed some acceleration of education, private sector motivation to invest only in urban-based schooling is a fact which is denying numerous children of their right to education. The children "deserve" education more than they "need" it. The urban-centred expansion of education is lopsided bearing no fruit as far as Education-for-All is concerned in Bangladesh. Apart from the good role of the non-governmental organisations in the primary education and adult literacy fields it is imperative for the broader private sector to come forward in these spheres in a big way.

We must strive to sow the seeds of "patriotism", "honesty", "morality" etc., into the young people's minds. These should find place in the nationwide curricula. Purposeful and enlightened education is important for this country. There's no time for Bangladesh to remain on the sidelines of the global mainstream.

Of late, Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina declared that her party would never call hartals or use hartal as a weapon of protest in future. Following the unexpected but historic announcement, scolded, sharp reactions sparked off and heavy shells of attack began to pour in. The critics — mostly the main opposition party and its supporters — outrightly rejected her positive position and at the same breath, negated any chance of staging a comeback from the on-going hartal culture that they are pursuing through thick and thin. However, Awami League (AL) supporters, trade bodies and international community hailed the decision heartily.

Before I pass any judgement on this particular issue related to hartal, let me clarify my position first. When BNP was in power and AL resorted to hartal as a weapon of protest, I wrote a piece in this column (December 10, 1993) to bring to the fore (a) the monetary and non-monetary costs of hartals, (b) the ways through which uses of the weapon called hartal could be waned, and (c) some concluding observations. Finance Minister (FM) S A M S Kibria's recent estimate of losses due to hartals, possibly, calculates yearly GDP of Bangladesh and then divided the total by 365 days to arrive at the daily output of the economy. However, I made some strong assumptions on different sectoral output per day even on hartal

This is exactly what is happening in Iraq nowadays. They are groping in darkness in search of a missing 'black cat' when there is no cat at all! But who cares whether the 'cat' exists or not? They are 'authorised' to search for it as part of their mission in Iraq, and they have been doing it for the last eight years or so. Are these so-called weapon experts so inefficient? If so, why they have been put there for such a long time? Perhaps, it is the part of the whole game.

So the UN Special Commission (or should one call it UN Special Commission?) has now come up with a new demand on the Iraqi Government. They now want to examine some 12 categories of documents related to dangerous weapons, which Saddam Hussein, the 'Chief of Baghdad' in western eyes (I) is hiding from the UN weapon inspectors, Iraq is in a fix. What to give when the thing asked for doesn't exist? Iraqi Foreign Minister Saad Saadiah, refuting the allegation, had accused UNSCOM chief Butler of carrying on a 'savage campaign of misinformation' in their latest quest for new documents which are 'non-existent'. He further said that Iraq had already handed over to UNSCOM over two million pages of weapon-related documents. Still they insist on seeing the fictitious documents. That's why, Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, Tariq Aziz said that Mr Butler is trying to create 'a pretext' to continue the unjust sanctions on Iraq, or 'allow America and Britain' for another 'attack' on Iraq. In this context, the less said about the 'pretext', the better. Because Tony Blair is trying to 're-iron' the role played by that 'Iron-lady' Margaret Thatcher during Reagan's time. That British joke is still alive that, when Reagan asked Margaret to jump, she asked, how long. So a 'linch-pin' is always a 'linch-pin'.

A Loony at Large? It is true that what America wants is not the moon. Because they have already 'conquered' the moon. They have jumped over the moon. That is why they sometimes behave like a 'loony'. So during the last eight

years or so, the UN weapons inspectors have been trying to dig out the deadly bombs and missiles and what not from the 'devil' that is left with such weapons! (Of course, America's 'blue-loony' Israel just plays with 'toy' guns and missiles!) They have been running from pillar to post, from Saddam Hussein's kitchen to bathrooms and toilets, to discover the 'hidden' things. It is not ridiculous on the part of the only superpower left in the world to behave like that. But it justifies the means and everything is fair in war, so goes the saying. America follows it religiously to suit its strategy.

But such ludicrous US posture towards Iraq since latter's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, is not a new development. Everytime the question of periodic review of UN sanctions comes up, a well-planned 'storm' is raised in the tea cup on one plea or other, mainly on Iraq's alleged refusal to cooperate with weapons inspectors. So as long as UNSCOM Chief Butler doesn't issue a 'good conduct' certificate about Saddam, UN Security Council puts another 'seal' to continue the sanctions. This disgusting process has been running through the last eight years at the cost of Iraqi people's untold miseries.

President Clinton is, perhaps, carrying too far the 'war game' started by his predecessor George Bush on the plea of freeing Kuwait from Iraq occupation, but more covertly to consolidate US presence in the Gulf to ensure steady and uninterrupted supply of oil. At the beginning, Bush played his 'card' well, but he miserably failed to sustain his reckless adventure.

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To the Editor...

bon dioxide emissions from these sources. Automobile and power plant pollution is responsible for many environmental and health problems we face in this country today including breathing difficulties, lung diseases, asthma, to name a few. By cutting global warming from these sources, we can simultaneously address many other environmental and health threats.

U.S. signed a Protocol on November 12th but it hasn't ratified it yet. In order for the Protocol to be legally binding, it must be ratified by a vote of two-thirds (67) of the Senate. This is not likely to happen right away. Many Senators simply do not think this issue is important to their constituents.

If we are going to curb global warming, the U.S. needs to take active steps to cut greenhouse gases emitting power plants and automobiles. However, if we do not begin to take action to cut our emissions of greenhouse gases, this move in the form of Protocol will be nothing more than a cliched gesture.

Police versus Opposition

Sir, Mr A R Chowdhury's letter published in The Daily Star on 28th November, 1998 came to my notice. He deserves thanks for sharing his experience with us. We, the people of Bangladesh have heard and seen enough to doubt about the incident of a platoon of police in riot gear swooping on the peaceful procession of BNP and starting beating indiscriminately with 6-7 feet long bamboo sticks and hurling abusive words at them. A small boy who came to buy some food fainted by police beatings. We are repeatedly being stunned by these

PM's Call and Calls of Critics

By and large, the arithmetic of "for and against" hartal would, possibly, suggest that hartal is considered as "harmful" rather than "helpful". But so long as electronic media is going to be under government's strict control (whoever may be in the government), so long the parliament is not made the focus of discussions, so long opposition parties are not taken with due respect, this "harmful" instrument is going to be there, and possibly for ever.

moment, it is being said that it is her optimal political strategy to secure sympathy from concerned corners and subdue the opposition. I personally thank one of my student M Akhtar for highlighting this aspect in a recent write-up in this paper. Second, since Sheikh Hasina and her party called hartals for 173 days during BNP's time, the argument runs — she should also reap as she sowed. And what kind of shoes would pinch the economy — where and how — and declared unequivocally to give up wearing that shoe. So, it is a movement on her part from the bad to the good. On the other hand, BNP was in power for five years and surely it knew where and how the shoe called hartal pinched the economy. Quite vocally — and possibly logically too — they termed these activities as "anti-state".

Third, hartal is a constitutional right and hence should be allowed to be in operation. There is no doubt that her "no hartal" call is the most matured and well manoeuvred political strategy that she seems to have pursued so far. Just look at the difference: once upon a time, Sheikh Hasina wore the shoe without knowing whether, where or to what extent it pinched (because she was in opposition). Now that she is in power, she quite well realises

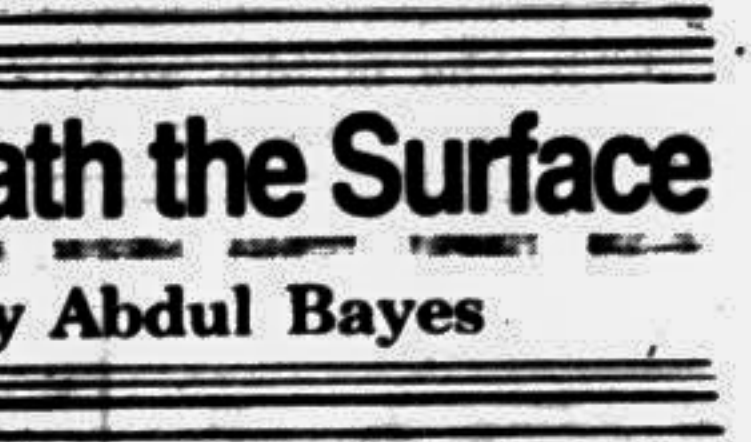
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Beneath the Surface by Abdul Bayes

"anti-people" and sometimes allied them to have been fuelled by foreign powers. Now being in opposition, they began to "love" hartal — the thing they "hated" once. Knowing fully well the costs of hartals — while they were in power — they have dragged themselves into this kind of "anti-state", "anti-people" business. So, seemingly, they moved from a good to a bad situation as far as their political strategy is concerned. Second, if a "no hartal" declaration

is an optimal political strategy while in power, then why did not BNP or for that matter the then PM, Khaleda Zia, stepped into to bag the medal? Faced with this kind of facile hartal, she or her party could also sell the same argument. Unfortunately, that did not seem to have happened.



Beneath the Surface by Abdul Bayes

The second argument relates to 173 days of hartals — allegedly — called by AL during BNP's tenure. The figure seems to be fat but could also be fictitious. In calculating the number of days one should exclude those that followed the election of 15th February election since those two elections upset the whole calculus of a electioneering process and thus left no other window to ventilate the rots. However, for the last two and a half years rule of AL, BNP and her allies have already — locally and nationally — come close to the 173 mark. The constitutional question is not clear to me. As far as I can understand, the constitution provides the right to freedom to pursue one's own protest but does that allow the freedom to impinge on others' freedom? I don't mind calling hartal by any party but I should be given the chance to move freely, talk

freely and do whatever I like without encroaching upon others' rights or state secrecy. By and large, the arithmetic of "for and against" hartal would, possibly, suggest that hartal is considered as "harmful" rather than "helpful". But so long as electronic media is going to be under government's strict control (whoever may be in the government), so long the parliament is not made the focus of discussions, so long opposition parties are not taken with due respect, this "harmful" instrument is going to be there, and possibly for ever.

The election lies in seeking those effective alternatives to hartals. The optimal political strategy of the opposition would be, I suppose, to accept PM's call on principle and then sit to set certain preconditions so that government is bound to follow. Even if for the sake of argument we assume that the present government can be unseated through hartals — as opposition leaders tend to harp on this line of reasoning — the spectre of hartal could do the same to them also. We do not expect that BNP would say — what PM said — after regaining its lost seat of power. In fact, both the leaders of position and opposition should say something at the same time and in the same manner. Let time of time narrow the existing gap, not widen it. Time is too short to allow politics of hartals. Let good wishes be dawned on politicians.

US-Iraq Stand-off

Searching for a Black Cat in the Dark...

by A M M Shahabuddin

Just as the US Defence Secretary had recently said that the US and its allies' "patience is wearing thin", with the arrogance and obstinacy shown by Saddam Hussain, similarly it can be said that the patience of the peoples of the world is also "wearing thin" at the continued militancy and aggressiveness shown by America to the innocent Iraqi people.

In 1991, Bush had 80 per cent approval ratings in his favour, whereas, in one year, in 1992, the approval ratings dropped to just 30 per cent. And his election debacle was disastrous. Clinton walked over humiliated Bush more as a "domestic" president, rather than a world leader. But Clinton, in order to give a dazzling picture of him to his nation, gradually changed his colours and took up the unfinished task of Bush.

Bush and Clinton: Where They Meet?

When Bush was "bowled out" by Clinton, a well-known columnist of a Canadian national daily said: "If Bush had been re-elected President, he might very well have been impeached within the year, as his lies and illegal acts around Iran-Contra and Iraq gate came spilling into public views." Forecasting a possible follow-up by the new President, the columnist said: "Failing that, satisfaction (impeachment of Bush)... We ought to impeach his remaining policies as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, instead of impeaching this (Bush) remaining policies," Clinton seems to have given an added dimension to Bush's "remaining policies." Perhaps with more aggressiveness. "Of course, the Republicans are after him for impeachment not for his new Operation Desert, but Operation Monica." A President may lie. But history never lies.

Lies do not live longer. They face their natural doom making room for the truth to triumph. Although public memory is proverbially short, but certainly the people have not yet forgotten the naked lies that

were spread throughout the world against Iraqi brutalities in Kuwait and perhaps to hide Bush's own atrocities on the innocent Iraqi people. Who can forget, a Western columnist ask, the "horror stories" circulated in those days by Bush gang about "Kuwaiti babies being flanked from their incubators by beastly Iraqi invaders". But the cat was out of the bag within no time. It ultimately turned out that these "horror stories" were "blatantly phoney, fabricated by a public relations agency" (perhaps hired by US administration or CIA). Iraqis "killing fields" of yesterday, have become to-day vast graveyards of thousands of children and old and sick men and women dying for want of food and medicine due to continuation of the inhuman sanctions, "imposed" on Iraq by UN, acting as the "willing servant of George Bush," as has been put by a western columnist. Even this much-abused world organisation, couldn't admit, in a report that Iraq had been bombed during the Gulf War, "back to a pre-industrial state."

Bush on Dock

It may not be out of context to mention here about the "verdict" given by a 22-member official War Crimes Tribunal, which held its sessions in New York, where the former US Attorney-General Ramsey Clark, who travelled Iraq during and after the Gulf War, pleaded the case of Iraq. The "verdict" said that "Bush and others of his Administration were guilty of 19 charges of war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity, for US conduct before, during and after the Gulf War." Unfortu-

nately, this "historic", though unofficial "verdict" was "blacked out" by the entire US media for reason best known to the champions of democracy and human rights. But history will one day unfold the myth and will judge Bush "guilty of monstrous crimes". And Clinton, as "torch bearer" of Bush in Gulf affairs, may not be an exception.

America has a Dream?

May be, America has a dream, a dream of making the whole of the Middle East a pleasant "gold-ground" for itself and its western allies and "hire" some Arab leaders as "caddies" around them. Beginning from the Gulf war to this day, America seems to have succeeded to a great extent to fulfill its mission. The Gulf area is now throbbing with US war machines and necessary "exercises" and with every threat to Iraq for its alleged non-cooperation with the UN weapons inspectors, more fighter and weapons are being piled up there. But how long will the conscience of the world will tolerate such a show of force? There is no doubt that this will ensure a smooth flow of oil to

Coiled-coil Power

A Husnain

My amateurish attempts to put on the mask of an intellectual turned into a practical joke. During the period of the last cyclone warning, I demonstrated the cyclone model to the family with the help of a mosquito coil. Moved the coil slowly over a large wall map of Bangladesh, the spirals at the centre of the coil depicted the progress of the cyclone, and the change in the wind direction from clockwise to anti-clockwise as the eye (calm and windless) passed over an area.

After the weather had subsided, in a flash of misguided inspiration I placed the mosquito coil on a nail on the drawing-room wall. The effect was novel, surrounded by other works of 'art' (an international post-amped painting of a scroll from Beijing, 3-D claywork of a cat waiting for the master at the door slightly ajar...). Impishly I awaited the next batch of guests.

Curiosity might have killed the proverbial cat, but the hanging coil turned the guests on, and acted as an ice-breaker. When the inevitable question cropped up, I offered the explanation with a solemn face.

The coil, I submitted, gave a general idea about our country and the people. The first image was of the mosquitoes, impervious to the political change of Mayors, and the UNDP town-planning devolution exercises. The second image visualised Bangladesh as a cyclonic zone. The third depicted the Bengali way of brain storming. On the insistence of the family, a fourth image was added — the juicy and delectable Jilapi, the coiled power energy delicacy of Bangladesh.

After this opening bait, the host could relax, as the debate warmed up, and the ginni (the wife) could disappear for a while to look after the refreshments. As the majority of the guests are old-timers, I have to lubricate the flowing tongue and stretch the thinking cap. Our minds are as unpredictable as the progress and behaviour of the cyclone.

The speed and direction of the mind are changing all the time, and it becomes a problem to keep track of the mental warning signals, in addition to the track of the cyclonic mind. If there were to be a comparison

between the weatherman and the politician, the bet would be about even, with the difference that while one earns his living with inaccurate forecasts most of the time, the other lives off the earning... Since the predictions are wide off the mark, the communication gap cannot be narrowed.

The thinking process also matches the wandering and changing course of our deltaic rivers, with all the characteristics of jowar-bhata (the tides) and the sand banks. Or take the creepers in our tropical jungles and the back gardens. Luxuriant overgrowth. Not a term as disparaging as the waterless desert; but someone has to remove the weeds, before the light can shine through. The tiger has his stripes, the leopard his spots, and the politician his miscalculation for the bait and the bite.

Since we always seem to have plenty of time in hand to encourage the devil, seldom are the deals straight. It is not straight like the light-cut jeans; but it is more like the spiraled saree. There is a tendency to spiral towards the centre; spraying fertiliser along the way.

Without a living wage, one has to wage wars for a decent living, revelling in queer skirmishes. The tender of the heart tend not to be harsh on the sources of supplementary income. As straight, it is has started floating. It will take some time to settle down; as would the floating lives of yesterday and today, with no bright tomorrow in sight. The eye of poverty is on the Present.

Liberated from the age of leisure and hurled into the world of competition, our pilgrim of fortune finds the transition difficult from the winding path of the garden to the high-speed super highway of open-market. The politician-pilgrim, armed with a solitary ek-tara (local single-string guitar) tries to jazz up the sleepy electorate, but succeeds only in turning the break-down into betad (detuned) actions such as hartals.

Mount a mosquito coil on your drawing room wall and contemplate on the next cyclone to be unleashed by our netas (leaders). Perhaps not — none can predict the rough weather.

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