

Towards Ending Hartals

In the corridors of power, hartal has now become the subject of one of the most intensely pursued of political issues. Pressure has been evidently mounting on opposition leader Khaleda Zia to make a clear and unambiguous stand on hartal. Being in opposition, Khaleda feels she cannot afford to abandon hartal as a political weapon unconditionally. The problem has been that her "conditions" to date had been too sweeping and generalised to make any sense. But the good news is that she has now whittled down the conditions to five points, which she articulated during a meeting with business leaders on Monday.

Although there are still some generalities in the conditions, this still opens a window of opportunity for a dialogue to start with the government. Out of the five demands raised by Khaleda as pre-conditions for declaring a no-hartal policy, two are certainly too generalised and open to interpretation. She wants the government to stop "anti-people" and "anti-state" activities, which is a demand that no government would want to lend credibility to by having them on the agenda. She wants people's voting rights to be ensured, which sounds like a fine sentiment but since such rights form the bedrock of a functioning democracy, this is something achieved through practice by all parties. But the BNP may well have something to discuss on the other three points.

These demands are: an end to repressive actions against BNP workers, allowing them to protest freely in the streets, and providing adequate time to the opposition in parliament. These demands should not be a bone of contention between the two sides, because these are basic rights to be enjoyed by all political parties. If the BNP feels these rights are under threat, then the government needs to clarify the situation, and make sure there is no misunderstanding in the public mind. To achieve this, the government needs to appoint a high-powered team to conduct negotiations with the BNP in order to identify areas where such problems exist. It is in the interest of both the parties to work out modalities for a functioning democracy where there is no place for hartal, and in which the opposition has adequate scope for voicing protest without harming normal economic activity or security of lives and property.

Early JRC Meet Imperative

Joint Rivers Commission meeting between India and Bangladesh has been long overdue. Eighteen months have elapsed since the last JRC meet in Dhaka which enthusiastically resolved that in future such a meeting will take place every three months. Whatever may be the political compulsions in India or for that matter in Bangladesh at a given time, JRC meetings which form the cornerstone of the implementation policy embodied in the 30-year Ganges Water Treaty must be held on schedule by the two countries. Otherwise the purpose of the treaty could get compromised without both countries wanting it at all.

An early meeting at the ministerial level has become an imperative necessity for several other reasons than a mere stipulation for its frequency. We have stepped into the third year of the accord with enough to talk about its implementation. Bangladesh became entitled to seeking a 'review' at the end of the second year which is obviously due now. The question is, should Bangladesh ask for it? Well, we believe, she should, given the fact that during the first year of the accord's implementation she received much less than her stipulated share of the lean season water of the Ganges. The second year passed off well; but questions relating to the first lean season still remain unanswered even though a study was initiated into it quite some time ago. A joint scientific team was constituted to suggest ways and means to remove the causes of shortfall in the dry season of the treaty's first year. It was given two years to submit its recommendations. The first meeting of this team having been held only a month and a half ago, the availability of its report could be delayed beyond two years which itself appeared to be a loose time frame when originally set having regard to the urgency of the matter. An early JRC meeting can help immensely in that by calling upon the members of the scientific team to produce an outcome on a double-quick basis. It is important to be fully assured that the water treaty drawn up on the strength of 30 years of data collection cannot go wrong in the essence.

Missiles on Iraq, Again?

The American warplanes made fresh missile attacks Monday on Iraqi air defence positions in the north of the country killing four Iraqi soldiers. These attacks follow the US-British pounding of the Iraqi capital Baghdad with hundreds of cruise missiles only eight days ago. The casualties were enormous then. Since the 1991 conflict and the subsequent UN embargo on Iraq the country has been facing tremendous hardships.

Iraq is being subjected to airstrikes by the United States and Britain on the plea of destroying Iraq's capability of producing weapons of mass destruction and biological warfare. Safety of her neighbours has also been cited as one of the reasons for their action. It is very interesting that Butler, the head of the UN inspectors' team, had submitted his report to the American President instead of the UN on 15 December and President Clinton ordered air attacks on Iraq on 16 December coinciding with the day impeachment proceedings against him were to begin in the House of Representatives. For four eventful days Iraqis absorbed more than five hundred cruise missiles and the US-British axis seemed to be temporarily satisfied with their achievements. However, they did not forget to warn Iraq of their intention to come back again. And they did so Monday. This time they fired missiles in the 'no-fly zone'. The leaders of the Western powers, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair best know what purpose has been served by the attacks but, manifestly, they have damaged the consensus that had been reached by the UN Security Council members to contain Iraq without military intervention. The entire process of consolidating peace in West Asia has been set back by the indiscriminate aggression on a suffering people.

Dial P for Privatisation in Telecom Sector

If the TTB itself enters the mobile market, it cannot but be disastrous for the private operators. For the mobile users, it would only bring the "qualities" associated with TTB, such as corruption, extortion, consumer-hostile management practices, suffocating bureaucracy, harassment of subscribers, poor maintenance and services etc., to this dynamic area of telecom business. Is this what the government means by "people-oriented" policies?

where the government appears to be faltering.

At present, the telecommunications sector in Bangladesh is in an unhygienic mess, and heading for even more contradictions. At one end, corruption within the state monopoly Telephone and Telegraph Board (TTB) has reached extraordinary heights, with auditors unearthing hundreds of crores of taka worth of irregularities.

For some years now, telecommunications has been regarded as an opportunity by most countries. Since the mid-1980s, marriage between telecom and computer technologies has revolutionised the global economic scenario. So much so, that the impact of this revolution has been compared to that of the Industrial revolution of the 19th century.

Over the past couple of decades, telecommunications has transformed itself from a utility service provided by governments, into a mass consumption item and business essential driven by private investment. Telecom has emerged as a global industry capable of billions of dollars worth of profits and trigger business opportunities in a wide range of areas. But while IT has opened up a massive window of opportunity for developing countries, telecommunications appears to be presenting policy-makers here in Bangladesh more with a problem than an opportunity.

Reaping the benefits of the IT revolution would not be possible unless the telecom sector also went through a quantum leap in technology upgrade, product diversification, management innovation and staff efficiency. But even without a thrust on IT, there is every reason to focus on the development of telecommunications. The question is how, and that is

their own direct overseas dialing facilities, which do not have to be routed through TTB's dilapidated exchanges. At present, TTB is working more as an obstacle rather than a facilitator in the growth of private sector mobile services.

Now, if the TTB itself enters the mobile market, it cannot but be disastrous for the private operators. For the mobile users, it would only bring the "qualities" associated with TTB, such as corruption, extortion, consumer-hostile management practices, suffocating bureaucracy, harassment of

Union for developing countries. The government, however, says expansion of basic phone facilities will bring the main line penetration rate to one per cent by the year 2000, four per cent by 2004 and 10 per cent by the year 2010. With population likely to grow at an average of two per cent over the next 12 years, this means the government will have to ensure more than 15 million extra telephone lines by 2010.

Now, given that it costs roughly 100 million dollars to install 100,000 lines, the government would have to generate

hardly be expected from a state bureaucracy infamous for its failure to grasp the new realities of the business it is in. It is simply too much to expect such a bureaucracy to be innovative and imaginative in product diversification and management practices.

All these problems are threatening the development of telecommunication in Bangladesh, and these knots cannot be untied by maintaining the status quo. It is apparent that, unless the telecom sector is thoroughly restructured including dismantling and privatisation of the TTB, the thought of Bangladesh marching into a new dawn of IT-driven economic growth would remain just a pipe dream. The debate is no longer about whether or not to privatisate the TTB. It should be about what shape the post-TTB telecom sector in Bangladesh would take.

There are some views which suggest that TTB should be retained as it is, while allowing full private sector operations in main line telephone services including voice, data, graphics, video etc. Others feel that TTB itself should be broken into regional companies and then privatised. Either way, the days of TTB as it exists today should be numbered and the count down should be of a very short duration.

The logic behind privatisation would not only be to attract private investment, both foreign and local, into the telecom sector. Neither the government nor the TTB can afford to make the 15 billion dollar-plus investments necessary over the next 12 years to reach even



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

subscribers, poor maintenance and services etc., to this dynamic area of telecom business. Is this what the government means by "people-oriented" policies?

On the other hand, the TTB continues to fail to deliver on its principal mandate, that is to develop the basic phone services and ensure extensive coverage of telecommunications products across the country. According to official statistics, there are around 560,000 main line connections in Bangladesh. This works out at something in the region of 0.4 per cent of the population, which is well below the five per cent target set by the International Telecommunications

something like 15 billion US dollars to achieve the target by 2010. This calculation is, of course, a rough guesstimate but it is far from a wild one. Besides, it does not take into account the enormous investment that would be required in upgrading exchanges, installing new digital exchanges and other essential infrastructure including satellite link ups.

It is not clear exactly from where this huge amount of money is going to come. The money here is only the capital investment that would be necessary to expand telecom services. But what about other services, that add value and expand the choice and opportunities of consumers? These can

Pabna By-election: A Synthesis

by Dr Mozammel H Khan

It would be wise for the BNP leadership to carry out soul searching to find out the causes of their candidate's failure in the by-poll by such a wide margin. People not only evaluate the government's performance, they also scrutinize the actions of the leadership on the other side of the aisle.

In an established democracy, by-election is considered a barometer for judging the endorsement or rejection of government policies and performance since the general election. But, in Bangladesh, it has been always a bountiful question how far the by-election is free and fair since it is always taken place under a partisan government. The degree of fairness, to a great extent, depends on the depth of independence being enjoyed by the Election Commission whose authority is largely exercised by stewardship of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). It is the election codes and the will of the CEC that determine the extent of fairness in a by-election. Since the inception of Bangladesh, the post of CEC was occupied invariably by the Justices of the High Court or Supreme Court. However, performance of many of them as the guardians of the most crucial step of the democratic process was far from satisfactory. During the illegal rule of H M Ershad, the election process was degraded to a humiliating farce with consequent absolute annihilation of the people's trust on the system. It was shameful to observe that the whole process of electoral desolation took place under the leadership of an honourable Justice of the Supreme Court.

The caretaker government under Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed appointed Justice Rouf, a Justice of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court as the CEC. He was able to conduct a very credible election that not only resulted in a democratically elected government, but was also able to bring back the trust of the people on the electoral process which was systematically demolished and rendered during Ershad regime.

The disappointing utterance of the Awami League chief about the election result (which I always consider an impulse of the election debacle) never cast a single iota of shadow either on the neutrality of Justice Rouf or of the administration of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. The

porter, "Khaleda Zia came to power through a democratic process but ended it today with its complete destruction". Ironically, that so-called election generated a great deal of satisfaction (at least publicly) among the rank and file of the BNP.

The caretaker administration, installed after the down fall of Khaleda Zia administration at the head of a mass upsurge, appointed the present CEC M Abu Hena, an illustrious bureaucrat of the land. His appointment had the concurrence of all the political parties, including the BNP. As a man of integrity and a superb administrator, the first ever non-justice CEC of the country took the centre stage in conducting the general election and used the caretaker administration as the supplementary force to achieve its end. He went with the proposition that the caretaker government was formed to aid the CEC in conducting a fair election, not the other way around. The general election was lauded with unreserved commendation and lucidity at both home and abroad. However, the BNP chief had altogether different stance no matter how ludicrous it might have echoed to the constituents. She not only accused the AL of rigging the election, but went as far as inventing the Indian involvement in the process.

Her allegation was the mere reflection of her insistence at the pre-election press conference in which she categorically uttered that there was no question of her party losing the election. Her subsequent pronouncement about the alleged irregularities in the election was not an impulse of the moment as it usually happens after an election debacle, rather an element of consistent intrigue as she and her lieutenants are ceaselessly repeating the same

allegation every now and then. Coming back to Pabna by-election, the CEC did all what he could to create a congenial atmosphere for a free and fair election. At the last moment, even the returning officer was changed at the insistence of BNP. It is true that the people of the area were not left alone to cast their votes. The BNP chairman along with her 80 odd MPs and a dozen of former Ministers were constantly tented in the area. On the contrary, the ruling party had only 30 per cent of that strength of the Parliament Members and two local ministers there in the constituency. How far the presence of these dignitaries, on either side, directly or indirectly influenced the outcome of the by-election is a matter of prolonged synthesis. As advised by the CEC, the Prime Minister did not visit the area (neither she did in any other by-election) and that must be considered a significant departure from the practices indulged by the BNP chief while she was the Prime Minister.

Commensurate with her earlier avowal, the BNP chief, a few days before the by-election, declared publicly, "BNP candidate will surely win the by-election if it is free and fair". The statement categorically undermines the democratic values of the electoral process where no one has been bestowed with the prophetic omnipotence of calculating the wishes of the people in such an unresvered term. I am in no position to guess the public reaction to BNP chief's vouch to "send Awami League to India like in 1971".

The Awami League candidate in the by-election is a reluctant politician but a thorough gentle and humble man in his own right. Second-in-command of the Mukti Bahini, A. K. Khandoker never bragged about

his historic role as a hero of our great liberation war. I have never seen him using the honourable Bir Uttam in his name, although he is very much entitled to do so. Unlike many, he joined the liberation war not because of the circumstances, but due to the inspiration of his own firm conviction which he has carried all through the ups and downs of our tormented history. Being a sector commander's wife herself, Begum Zia had delivered the following castigating sermon castigating the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Mukti Bahini. "This man has no principle nor ideological mooring. An opportunist, he (Khandoker) was with President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, played stooge of Khandoker Mushtaque Ahmed, was ambassador during Ziaur Rahman and a minister during Ershad regime. Now he has joined Awami League to make fortunes" (The Independent, December 8, 1998). A. K. Khandoker, in line with his much-known serenity did not fire back, although he had a lot of ammunitions in his arsenal. Flanked by some well-known faces of the country's incoherent political arena, where allegiance of politicians is a very dynamic phenomenon, Begum Zia's bigoted castigation of a thorough gentleman was not supposed to play very positively with the neutral constituents.

The by-election was watched by more than 300 observers of a wide spectrum. Every one concurred with the view of the CEC that the election was by and large fair. BNP's allegation against the irregularities are incoherent in nature and there arose different versions from the polling agents to the party chief. Surprisingly, the allegation did not emanate from the polling agents, who were supposed to know the real

truth being in the election booths, rather from some one sitting at the Minto Road. The CEC himself toured the election centres along with the BNP candidate and did not observe any noticeable inconsistency. Failing to entice the people, the BNP chief has resurfaced her demand of 'impeachment' of the CEC as he did not comply with the BNP's demand to annul the verdict of the people of Pabna-2 constituency. BNP chief branded the CEC as a 'trusted associate' of the ruling party.

However, it is her solemn obligation to augment her accusation by concrete proof which the nation has yet to hear from her. Even during the mass upsurge against the short-lived BNP regime in the aftermath of the so-called election of February 15, when the 35 secretaries of the government met the President to pronounce their solidarity with the national demand for an early formation of caretaker government, Abu Hena was not one of them. It only reaffirmed his long commitment to neutrality and declared his distinctness from the most who are easily swayed by the tide. It would be wise for the BNP leadership to carry out soul searching to find out the causes of their candidate's failure in the by-poll by such a wide margin. People not only evaluate the government's performance, they also scrutinize the actions of the leadership on the other side of the aisle.

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instead of two. How on earth could a cricket match be presented with the help of only two cameras?

I think the time for making amateur approaches by the BTV authorities towards cricket has passed a long time ago and now it's time to take a more professional approach.

A Viewer
Dhaka

T&T Line-map

Sir, Recently my out-of-order telephone along with many other's was not repaired when it was informed to the authority. The local T&T camp, however, managed to change the damaged cables and restore the dead telephone lines within two weeks.

Well, my request is, if it is too difficult to keep coordination and cooperation between various public departments which need earth-digging should at least maintain a 'line-map' of their own showing the location of their cables, pipes etc. And before digging, the department should collect the line-map from other relevant departments to avoid causing possible damage to other underground network. The digging workers should also be briefed on the line-maps before starting the digging work.

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To the Editor...

Abuse in DU

Sir, I am extremely shocked to learn that DU teachers are being criticised for a heinous crime like sexual abuse. The nation's conscience gets amazed at such unimaginable aberration of the best educational institution of the country.

Student resembles the child of the teachers who are both their guardians and saviours. But, the savours now appear in the role of infillers. I cannot even imagine a dignified teacher of DU would be tried under the same rule applied on an ordinary sadist!

Arun Kumar Biswas
Dhaka University

Give the DU its due

Sir, The whole nation became disappointed at the evil incidents that occurred at Jahangirnagar University. The same syndrome apparently has afflicted the nation's highest seat of learning, Dhaka University.

Unfortunately, we find that two groups of students have suddenly raised different views centering the issue, apparently partisan interference is taking shape and the consequence is unpredictable. Regardless of the consequences, in my view, unless and until proper investigation is carried out in our sacred constitution is adhered to can only

lead to a just and fair solution. It is, therefore, hoped that a strong enquiry commission under the leadership of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court should be set up immediately to establish the facts and the offenders should be given exemplary punishment.

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68, Agrabad C/A, Chittagong.

"Death comes so easily?"

Sir, While going through a news published in the DS, on 24th December '98 under the above heading about an ill-fated passenger thrown out and run over by a minibus in front of the National Press Club, I felt afraid to live in a country where death comes so easily and so suddenly.

This barbaric deed again proves that no one is secured here and we, the general people, are captives even in the hands of bus conductor.

Shauib Ahmed
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"BB bows..."

Sir, A news item was published on 28.12.1998 in the DS under the heading 'BB Bows to Beximco'.

It was mentioned in the news

that Bangladesh Bank has got no authority in sanctioning of a loan or re-scheduling of a loan. This can only be done by Bank Companies Board of Directors. The Bank Companies Act, 1991 and various amendments made by the government give enough power of Bangladesh Bank to approve the sanctioned loan or reject the sanctioned loan, but they cannot under any circumstances suo moto re-schedule any loan or sanction any loan or remit any part of Directors loan. Bangladesh Bank ought to have been cleared about Section 107 (B) of Companies Act, 1994 where Directors are debarred to remit any debt due by Director.

Here, Bangladesh Bank's remission and changing the original sanctioned (unauthorised) loan shows lack of knowledge of