

We Reject This Politics

Negative politics has been taken on to a new plane of morbidity. The opposition led by BNP have stretched their dawn-to-dusk hartal up to midnight tiding. This comes as a mischievous counterpose, with a somewhat laser efficiency, against the EC's extension of deadline for submission of nomination papers for municipal polls from 5 to 10 pm tonight to keep out of hartal hours. The message blaring out of the opposition's bitter move reads "We won't participate in the elections, nor shall we allow these to take place at all".

On top of hartal being imposed on people we now have the scenario of an electoral boycott getting foisted on them. This thoroughly overbearing politics has additionally taken on the character of not merely going ballistic against the government but also being unsparing with the Election Commission, an independent statutory body better left alone to conduct elections.

Even though the AL is reaping the whirlwind it had sown, such a naive political statement cannot exonerate them from the charge of making the entire people ransom to their feelings of bitterness against the ruling party. What about my personal rights to both participation in the polls as well as pursuit of my normal avocations? If the opposition feel so confident of their popularity and the justness of their cause then there is all the more reason why they should let the local polls take place to yield a solid evidence of their approval rating among the people. BNP, or any other party, may have a right to refuse to participate in a particular poll, but it cannot deny others' right to do so, except by ridiculing their own democratic professions. In fact, each time this happens, BNP's credentials as a major political force goes another notch down.

Elections ought to be highly welcome things because they produce new leadership, release new energy and create new visions of growth. People normally enjoy exercising their right to elect their leaders but increasingly this has come to be vitiated by bitter attitudes. Democracy is not sustainable with electoral boycotts.

While we find no word strong enough to decry the negative politics of the opposition we are nonetheless aghast over the continuing lock-jawed silence of the ruling party on the question of initiating a trouble-shooting dialogue with the opposition. It is extremely impolitic on their part to underestimate the gravity of the situation which is fast engulfing us.

Law on the Highways.

The Dhaka-Aricha highway is probably the most important stretch of road in the country. Despite the opening of the Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge and consequent diversion of northwest-bound traffic away from the ferry port in Manikganj, the highway remains a critical artery in the overall anatomy of the national economy. Yet, this highway has long been the target of some of the most obnoxious disruptive activities by a whole host of hooligans, from university students to transport workers to transport owners. The opening of the Bangabandhu Bridge was expected to reduce pressure on the highway and thus lead to a reduction in barricades and blockades. While such incidences in recent months have been few, the propensity to engage in such activities among a section of people has apparently not waned.

Over the past three days, passengers travelling on the Dhaka-Aricha highway have been subjected to intolerable harassment as transport owners took to blocking the road at several points. It appears that a dispute between owners and workers, which boiled over into violence, has led to this action by the former. As usual, it is the ordinary highway users that have borne the brunt of somebody else's petty quarrel. Economic loss in such instances is hardly ever calculated, but there is no doubt that it is considerable. The strangest aspect of each blockade episode is that the disruption is allowed to go on for hours and days without any intervention from law enforcing agencies.

The situation has come to such a pass that blockades and barricades on highways are viewed as just another of those "actions" that organised labour, business or political groups can take with impunity. But this cannot be tolerated. Such blockades are plainly illegal in character and terroristic in nature. The only response to such actions should be immediate and effective police intervention. While dispute between two groups may continue in whatever form, the police must ensure that highways are clear and open to smooth movement of traffic. There is no legitimacy to highway blockades and the police must enforce the law by removing barricades, with force if necessary.

Trained Canine Bite?

When a dog bites a man it is no news. It is only natural that a dog will bite a man or any other animal. But when a man bites a dog (if it ever happens) it is news because it is unnatural and highly improbable. And to prove this rule there should be exceptions like the one which was provided by a leading Bangla newspaper Monday. In a front page story the paper said five imported dogs of the police dog squad bit and seriously injured five policemen who were being trained, along with the dogs, by designated foreign trainers. Last November, government imported 25 pedigree dogs at a great expense to strengthen and modernise the police investigation and detection capabilities, particularly against drug peddling and other crimes. Along with the dogs have come trainers who will impart training to local policemen. Forty of them are being trained alongside the dogs. After the incident, the five culprit dogs have been 'suspended' from training and three of the injured are still being treated at the police hospital. We believe these canine sleuths were properly injected with anti-rabies serum and the injured will not suffer from hydrophobia as happens without such an immunity cover. But even then a certain period of time is critical and the biting dogs have to be kept under proper watch lest they show unusual signs during quarantine.

The reasons for these animals going berserk against their co-trainees could not be gathered immediately. Why after about three months of 'coexistence' they should decide to revolt in a body is anybody's guess. We suppose they are being trained to detect criminals and defend themselves if they are attacked but are they smelling rat in their own company? Same side, isn't it?

ACCORDING to reports published in *The Daily Star* (dated 11 January, 1999), petroleum reserves worldwide rose to 140.6 billion tons by 1998 although consumption has been increasing, particularly in developing countries, at a very rapid rate. In fact, commercially exploitable oil reserves can be increased to 5.5 trillion tons provided prices are higher and expected future discoveries as well as technologies come on stream as fast as development and the big oil companies are planning to market such cars by 2000. Research on super conductivity will reduce loss of electricity from 15 per cent to almost zero. Lastly, nitrogen as a source of fuel is available in atmosphere in limitless quantity.

At present, world oil market is suffering from a situation of excess supply. As a result, prices of crude oil today is two-thirds of what it was one year ago. The 33 per cent decline in prices took place in spite of rising consumption. It is expected that the present rend of both rising supply and demand (but supply more than demand) may continue.

At the same time, higher consumption of oil remains a fact of life in developing countries. India, for example, is looking forward to oil and gas demand increasing at the sustained rate of about 8 per cent a year compared to the world average growth in petroleum demand at 1.5 per cent per annum.

It is true that developed countries are the major consumers of petroleum and there the demand is hardly growing, in fact decreasing at many places due to fuel efficient technologies and shift to industries, for example, information industry which consumes very little.

Do we want that our gas re-

serves should meet the same fate? This is because we may not be dealing with 15 TCF. The gas reserves are likely to go up to 40 TCF or more. Its total value is still quite attractive but we must exploit the reserves as our capital for development TODAY. Time is running out for traditional fossil fuels.

I know of a young Bangladeshi MBA from the United States whose parents decided in early 1980s to sell the small piece of land they owned in Dhaka in order to finance the education of their el-

dest son. If they had waited, the land would have fetched a much higher price today. However, it would not have enabled not only the education of one son but the future of all their children since all of them eventually secured American education, citizenship and employment.

Therefore, it was not the price but timing of the sale was of much more critical importance to the family.

The sale in early 1980s at a price much lower than what it is today, enabled the investment in human capital development and attainment of

cover. Unless we export gas, we do not generate funds for investment in development and in not-too-distant future, we may not find the market to export and our natural gas meet the same fate as coal mines of Europe today.

Our over cautious experts have pronounced times without number, that we possess limited reserves which we need for our own consumption. Export of natural gas should be totally ruled out. It is true that if the proven reserves of 15 TCF is all that we will ever have then the experts are correct in their pronouncement. However, proven reserves is a function of

gas exists in India — our next

door neighbour.

The negotiations with oil companies are difficult to proceed further unless export of gas to India is allowed through a pipeline to be constructed for the purpose where all the investment costs will be borne by oil companies. Gas exploration and drilling is an expensive business and once the reserves are discovered, investors are immediately interested to sell the gas and Bangladesh does not offer an unlimited market. On the other hand, the potential market in India is huge.

For example, export of 500 million cft of gas per day to India for the next 20 years would involve 3.65 TCF which we may find from only one single discovery, provided exploration and drilling are pursued in right earnest. The alternative is to convert natural gas into various petrochemical products for export. This calls for billions of dollars worth of investment which oil companies are reluctant to make since there are surplus capacities elsewhere in the world. Please remember that the existing supply of energy-based products are facing a shrinking market. It's only because of the rapidly growing demand of India that there is a unique as well as a rare opportunity to develop gas fields of Bangladesh.

Pakistan fought three wars with India during the last 50 years. Yet the plan to export electricity to India is already off the ground. What is our problem with India? Nothing, unless it is the determination of politicians to deny the nation of the critical investment resources and we remain poor ever after.

Fuels for Growth

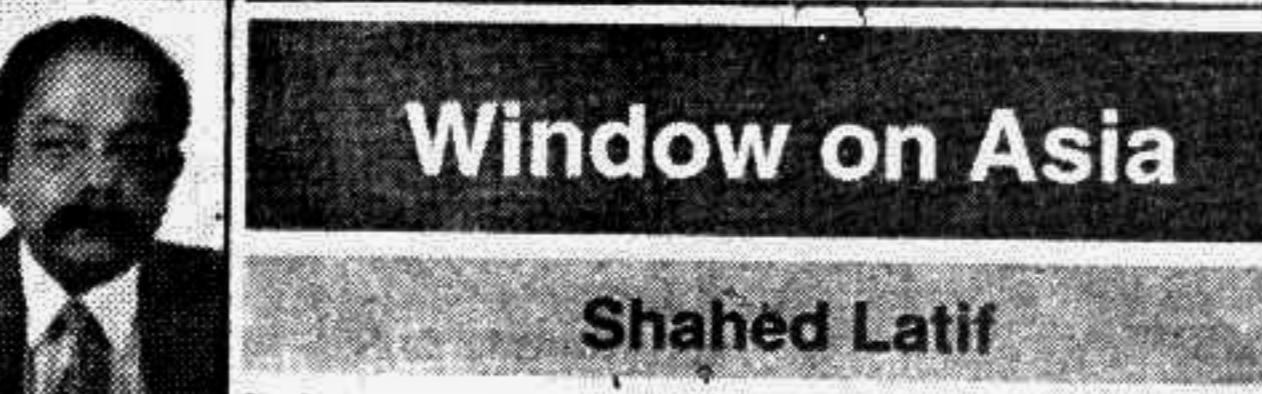
What are the consequences of the decision to export natural gas? We have to find a market outside the borders of Bangladesh and the best way to market is to transport gas through a pipeline and deliver it to the user's point of consumption. We should consider ourselves extremely lucky since potentially a huge market for gas exists in India — our next door neighbour.

the volume of investment we are able to mobilize for exploration of natural gas. In 1997, the proven reserves were 11 TCF and very limited exploration increased those reserves by more than one-third to 15 TCF.

Further exploration has now practically stopped since proposed blocks are not being allocated to interested oil companies. The interest of multinationals firmly establish the fact that the potential reserves claimed to be as high as 80 TCF may be an overestimate but at least half of that should prove to be the total recoverable gas reserve if the desired level of exploration activities are undertaken.

I would urge all concerned to consider that let us not be over-concerned with possible exhaustion of our energy resources. At the present rate of consumption, our existing reserves should last over 80 years. Since consumption will increase, even then it should last for at least the next 30 years. That should be good enough. Therefore, any further addition to the existing proven reserves of 15 TCF may be allocated to export.

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Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

The Politics of New Polarisation

by M. Rashiduzzaman

Most opposition leaders are counting that the combined voting strength of the centrist BNP, the JP and the Islamic groups outweigh the supporters of the Awami League. They are also hopeful that those who seriously dislike the Awami League rule had no better choice but to support the new alliance for a change of guards.

overnment. As a counter measure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina decided to hit back at General Ershad's JP by wooing Anwar Hossain Manju to stay in the cabinet, and tried to create a pro-Awami faction of the JP. The patronage-power of the ruling party will come handy to allure the JP and the BNP factions and dissuade them not to join the opposition bandwagon. Yet the JP leader Ershad has emerged as one of the principal actors in the 3-party pact, and may become the key power player in the future.

As of this writing, the 4-point opposition demand has not ignited such a political firestorm that would soon bring down the government or even force an immediate election. In fact, the anti-government mobilization will initially be an uphill slog for the diverse opposition forces. The current year may be over just in gathering momentum to mount a full assault on the government. If the incumbent Chief Election Commissioner steps down simply because his credibility is under fire, it would remove at least one sting from the opposition bite. Even on the rest of the issues, I detect some Awami flexibility including withdrawing a few cases against the opposition leaders and their troops. Sheikh Hasina will not concede on the Mujib killers most of whom have already been tried and convicted, and they were undergoing further judicial process. The government seems eager to go ahead with the trial of the alleged jailers of 1975. Politically, it is an open secret that several prominent NGOs with countrywide institutional network are on good terms with the Awami League. Accusations have been flying all over that the Awami League had politicized the mid to lower echelon of the bureaucracy and the police that will not only crush the anti-government protests but also help rigging the future elections.

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For the Bangladeshi politicians, the habit of protest, as a vehicle of opposition empowerment, is addictive but the country has recently been suffering from a hartal-fatigue that the AL would use against the new alliance. What the Awami League protesters did with relative impunity in 1996, may not exactly be replicated by the BNP in 1999, but hartal will be used to mobilize public support and give a political voice to the united front against the government. The Awami League government may be tempted to

tal-thumping activists, they would need astute tacticians to match their opponents in power. The Awami League has useful allies as it faces the BNP-led attack on the government. Numerous Bengali newspapers along with their columnists are inclined to support Sheikh Hasina's government and most of its policies and actions. It was the support of the Bengali newspapers that made the 1995-96 anti-BNP mass movement a success. Although they have not performed significantly in the polls, the left-leaning forces remained influential, and they would most likely support the Awami League in its confrontation with the right wing and the Islamically inclined antagonists. The liberal educators who dominate the academic establishments usually support the BNP-led alliance unless they fear that such contrived charges will accelerate in the coming months as the political acrimony intensifies. The recent Khaleque (allegedly forced to join the AL and then returned to the BNP) episode gives reason to fear that the ruling party might disarray the opposition both through intimidation and induced defections in the BNP and the JP ranks. But the Awami crackdown and coerced defection, if any, from restoring stability, may signal even more instability. Moreover, the international observers and the Dhaka-based diplomatic community will not readily accept coercion for maintaining law and order. They might rather expect Sheikh Hasina to seek a fresh mandate sooner, not later!

It is not a compelling ideological confrontation between the right and left that divides the Bangladeshi parties, but some ideological tenets, stated or unstated, are surely intertwined with what is otherwise a partisan polarization for power. Not only the AL believes to be the rightful inheritor of power in independent Bangladesh that they fought for in 1971, but also it claims to its credit a lingo-centric secularism, distinctive from the earlier Muslim separatism that characterized Pakistan. The new opposition allies, on the other hand, laid their claims as the Bangladeshi nationalists, eager to protect the sovereignty of the nation (an euphemism for standing up to India's hegemony) and willing to respect the Islamic identity of the Muslim majority in Bangladesh. They want to identify the citizens of Bangladesh as Bangladeshis not Bengalis but the Awami League insists that Bangladesh, having been separated from Pakistan, should derive its national awareness from its Bangla language. The ideological postulations and counter-

use repressive measures to keep the agitators at bay. Indirectly, it has already been hinted that the JP chief Ershad may be sent back to jail. Scores of cases have already been started against most ex-BNP ministers and even their grassroots workers on various allegations but the opposition feared that such contrived charges will accelerate in the coming months as the political acrimony intensifies. The recent Khaleque (allegedly forced to join the AL and then returned to the BNP) episode gives reason to fear that the ruling party might disarray the opposition both through intimidation and induced defections in the BNP and the JP ranks. But the Awami crackdown and coerced defection, if any, from restoring stability, may signal even more instability. Moreover, the international observers and the Dhaka-based diplomatic community will not readily accept coercion for maintaining law and order. They might rather expect Sheikh Hasina to seek a fresh mandate sooner, not later!

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To the Editor...

What a terrible mess!

Sir, I am writing this letter at 10:15 PM on 18 Jan.

Just a few minutes ago it was announced on BTV Ten o'clock news that it will be Eid tomorrow! Our government could not manage (or decide?) to get this information for its people even at the time of the Eight o'clock "Shabab". This mess by our government machinery can be considered as really shameful and disgusting.

We had always hoped that some things would, at least, be spared from the inefficiency of the present government. I mean, this is the last straw. We are really afraid to think that at this hour many people have gone to rest preparing for another day of fasting tomorrow after their "Tarab" prayers! Only the Almighty Allah knows what type of mess can be expected tomorrow morning in holding of the Eid congregations. And those poor people who are in their sleep at this hour do not even know that there is an "Eid Jamaat" in the morning.

No government has the right to play games with such an as-

pect of life of the people who come together once in this time of year. We demand an explanation from the authorities concerned. And not just a shrugging off of responsibility on this matter like we have gotten so used to seeing with every type of mess done in the past.

We need an assurance that it will never happen again in the future.

An Anxious Observer

Chittagong.

Who has the priority?

Sir, On 22 January, Friday, at 9:30 AM in the morning, we had to take an elderly relative to a Diagnostic Centre for an emergency Cat-Scan by an ambulance. She has suffered a brain-stroke two days before. On our way, we had the misfortune of getting stopped by the traffic sergeant at the Minto Road Crossing due to the passage of either the presidential or prime ministerial motorcade. Despite repeated blaring of the ambulance Siren and requests to the police personnel in-charge refused to waive the way for the ambulance citing

security reasons. After nearly 10 precious minutes of waiting, the motorcade passed and we were allowed to proceed.

I do distinctly remember that the PM pleading during the last general election of not blocking the road during her passage. However, we have hardly seen that pledge being taken care of. This incident definitely illustrates that not only are the rights of common citizens are now being ignored, but also emergency services are being halted on the way.

One of the fundamentals of our Constitution is Democracy. And democracy emphasises equality, it stresses on the fact that whether it is the Prime Minister or a street-side beggar, a citizen of the state has the same rights.

A few days ago, aboard a British Airways flight, Prime Minister Tony Blair was forced to cut off his conversation with the Queen on his cellular during take-off by the pilot. Because the phone could have conflicted with the navigational equipment and could have caused risk of safety for other fellow passengers on that jet.

And here we are talking about emergency services which

should have the priority over any other vehicle on the road when it has its lights and sirens on. Evidently, this is being completely ignored in this country by those very persons who have taken the sacred oath to protect our Constitution.

Sheikh Tashfeen Islam
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Please! Please!!