

The Daily Star

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Opting Out of Hartal — Sparkling Alternatives

The civil society discourse on alternative options to hartal organised by The Daily Star and the Centre for Alternatives, DU, Wednesday threw up new ideas worthy of serious consideration. Not all of these might sound novel, but given their sharply defined articulation with a degree of practicability to top them off they are definitely improvements on the previous versions. These have one more advocacy quality about them come as they do from an enlightened cross-section of the civil society which, in modern political parlance, has acquired the reputation of being 'the saner third force' in democracies around the world.

The first bunch of suggestions that strikes a responsive chord in us relates to guaranteeing the opposition a full play on the floor of the House so that their political protestations are contained within the four walls of Jatiya Sangsad. That 'parliament should be made into a focal point of national politics' has been an oft-repeated piece of wishful thinking and pure rhetoric without the evidence of concrete steps taken to facilitate such a role for the JS. Every ruling party caught in the whirlpool of hartals felt constrained to say so. For the opposition's part, they have been pretty much demanding on the question of more parliamentary time, but falling formally short of pressing for a totally central role of the parliament to the exclusion of other options, especially hartal.

It is the institution of the Speaker in parliament which has to rise to the occasion by exercising its powers to the fullest degree, if necessary with bold imagination and creative ingenuity. He has an amplitude of manoeuvrability within what is occasionally referred to as the 'dictates of the Rules of Procedure'. However, to convince the opposition to participate in the activities of the parliament, the Speaker must acquire an image of impartiality. This the present Speaker and the Deputy Speaker have miserably failed to establish. Similarly, through widespread politicisation of the bureaucracy the government has greatly tarnished the image of the administration. These two factors severely complicate the prospect of persuading the opposition to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy.

The opposition has to get more time of the parliament, something that can be ensured by entertaining more of their important motions on the floor of the House. To place their legislative performance in full public view it is necessary that a separate television channel be opened for telecasting the JS proceedings. But to focus on the opposition activities, there needs to be an Opposition Hour on BTV. Radio can think up its own slots for the opposition. For the sake of exhaustive but meaningful opposition converge, the public speeches of the Leader of the Opposition should be telecast live just as that of the Prime Minister which ought to be carried in full.

The decision for hartal is too crucial a matter to be left to the party chief or the caucus. It must be subjected to voting through all tiers of the party organisation before being adopted. If a mass-based party lets the majority view prevail through an internal mechanism there will be no question about making any mistake in reflecting public pulse on the choice made.

What strikes at the heart of the problem is the contention that since hartal is directed against the government, the whole of the private sector, meaning public life as such, needs to be spared the unjust imposition and onslaught of a purely partisan decision-making aberration. People do need a break, here and now.

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Sun and the Candlemakers

Until recently, the investors could not reveal their true design — the sterilisation of living things — without making it unachievable. The peasantry were a powerful social group. Life was sacred. But peasants are disappearing: they have become farmers, eagerly awaiting the smallest sign of "progress" capable of delaying their ultimate demise. And life has been reduced to a source of profits in the banal form of strands of DNA.

Is rice just food for a Bengali? Yes, and much more. To eat in Bangladesh means to eat rice. But rice is also a biological heritage handed down by our ancestors. It is a cultural icon, a way of life. Nabanna, the new harvest, is an occasion for festival. A bride comes into the family and she is blessed with sheaves of paddy by the elders. Rice, mellow and soft is offered to the teething child and Anna Prashan is another big family festivity.

Now that hybrid rice has made its tentative entry into the agricultural scenario of Bangladesh, the question is: are we turning a heredity nurtured by the farmers and a way of life treasured by all Bengalees into a commodity? The choice, however, between a free variety and a hybrid is a political and not a scientific one. When biologists become easy prey for investors and cut themselves off from natural heritage and society, they become willing accomplices of the genetic industrial complex whose single-minded attempt is to win patents over life-forms and transform sheer greed into the philanthropic wonders of genetically modified organisms. In this scenario of the demise of scientific democracy, we have to depend on the courage and honesty of a few scientists who are willing to open themselves up to the scrutiny of their fellow-citizens.

Allow me, therefore, to invoke two such societists, Berlan and Lewontin for tracing the progress from the deterioration technique of the nineteenth century to hybrids and the terminator technique today.

In an article entitled *Operation Terminator* published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December, 1998, they say:

"Life has two fundamental and paradoxical properties (1): the ability to reproduce and multiply (while preserving its characteristics) and the ability to adapt, change and evolve.

The first has given us farming, the second selection.

Geological time has seen an extraordinary genetic variability develop both between and within species. In the course of their very short history, men have domesticated plants and animals, selecting them and adapting them to their needs by exploiting and expanding this natural variability. But towards the middle of the 19th century, these two complementary properties became incompatible. Selection was not longer a way of satisfying needs, but of making money. Seed-producing "investors" realised that their work could not become a source of gain if farmers sowed grain they had harvested themselves. Nature became set against the "natural law" of profit: farming

investors, looking to maximise the return on investment ignore the adaptation and selection route to improvement and choose the most profitable varietal type — the hybrid leading currently to the terminator technique. A killer 'transgene' that prevents the germ of the harvested grain is introduced. The plant grows and yields a harvest, but the grain is biologically sterile. In the process, farmers are dispossessed of their right to seeds. Their demand for better varieties is transformed into a demand for hybrids. Nature becomes set against the natural law of profits, farming and farmers against

and farmers against selection and breeders. As nature's unfortunate property of reproducing itself and multiplying could not, at the time, be legally taken away by political means, the only way of achieving the same result was to use biological methods...

Terminator is merely the outcome of a long process of seizing control over living things that began when biological heredity started to become a commodity. In 1907 Hugo de Vries, the most influential biologist of his day who "rediscovered" Mendel's laws (4), was the only one to realise that in an applied science like agricultural genetics, economics took precedence over science: what is profitable affects, or even determines, what is "scientifically true".

He investigated replacing the technique of improving cereals by isolation, which dated back to the early 19th century and

research alone that does all the basic work on improving the populations of plants on which everything depends."

Research work is being hampered by the privatisation of knowledge, genetic resources and the techniques for their use.

Third, the price of privatisation of knowledge resulting in royalties on genetic resources is exorbitant and sheer piracy of humanity's common heritage. Why should we opt for the cost of brick up doors and windows and of hybrid candles, rather than relying on lines or varieties patiently selected and adapted by the farmers?

Strange are life-sciences that conspire against the marvelous property of living things to reproduce themselves into farmers' fields so that "capital can reproduce and multiply with investor's bank accounts. Will we soon be forced to brick up doors and windows to protect candle-makers from unfair competition from the sun?"

But the sun shines for every one and there is no shortage of argument why it does. First, the

extraordinary plant genetic variability has been nurtured by peasants all over the world and through the centuries. "The domestication and selection

adaptation work done by peasants over thousands of years has built up a biological heritage from which the industrialised nations have greatly benefited — and which they have plundered and already partly destroyed. American agriculture was built from these genetic resources freely imported from all over the world, the only important species native to North America being the sunflower. If justice still means anything, the US — biological heritage — should repay their "genetic debt" to the world.

Second, the unprecedented increase in yield of miracle seeds has been due to the free movement of knowledge and genetic resources and to public research.

"For example, in the course of the 1970s nearly all the hybrids in the US Corn Belt were the result of crossing two public lines — from the universities of Iowa and Missouri. It is public research and public

research alone that does all the basic work on improving the populations of plants on which everything depends."

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The fundamental question is therefore, whether the genetic industrial complex is given a free hand to guide technical progress to the path that brings most profit rather than prosperity and empowerment of the tillers of the soil.

In short and I quote Berlan and Lewontin once again:

"Do we want to allow a few multinationals to take control of the biological part of our humanity by granting them a right — legal, biological or contractual — over life itself? Or do we want to preserve our responsibility and our autonomy? Will farmers' organisations continue to allow ruinous techniques to be imposed upon them or will they debate what would be in the farmers' and the public's interest with renewed public research and a network of breeder-agronomists? Finally, what are the intentions of 'public' agronomic research — which for decades has been privatising the material of life economically, and now biologically? Or do we declare living things as our common heritage? Do we organise farmer-centered and farmer-led public research around this common resource of humanity to 'block the already well-advanced private hold that is seeking to eliminate any scientific alternative that would restore power over living things to the farmers?'

Will we, and I repeat what I said earlier, brick up the doors and windows to protect candle-makers from unfair competition of the sun?"

Davos Signals Responsible Globality

Even a small island like Mauritius stole the show. CEOs like Helmut Maucher of Nestle, Eugene Schrempp of Daimler-Benz and Eaton of Chrysler, Ted Turner of CNN, Dr Henry Kissinger, Moody-Stuart of Shell, Percy Barnevik of Investor AB, etc addressed Sessions on business, politics, social, medicine, high-tech, finance, etc. The only glaring omission was that of Pakistan from where no official delegation came.

As a unique collection of businessmen, academics and leaders of the world gathered at Davos for the 1999 Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), the most important challenge facing the transition into the 21st century is to find a right balance between free market forces and the needs of the vast majority of peoples having no control over these forces but subject to some unpredictable events happening elsewhere in the globe, "catastrophically altering their own and their family's life", to quote Dr Klaus Schwab, Founder and President WEF. Everybody recognises that in this age of high-tech globalisation is necessary in order to share capital, goods, services, ideas, technology and knowledge in a world that has four times more inhabitants than at the beginning of this century. As entrepreneurship and free markets act as the engine for wealth, concern about the welfare of the masses and their social cohesion in a world of increasing competition makes this year's theme "as globalisation with a known face, Responsible Globality."

Jean Chretien, Canada's PM, expressed it best, noting that "events in Russia, Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia suggested that the western world had become too triumphant about capitalism", pointing out that when economics and markets collapse, the losses are ultimately that of the vast majority of ordinary people in places as diverse as Indonesia, Brazil, Russia, South Korea, Thailand etc. Canada's PM called for currency traders to be controlled, "we cannot see prosperity disappear overnight because some boy in red suspenders in New York decides this is not a good currency. The free market system has to be re-structured but there is no easy solution." President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland warned that while under the old bipolar system the world was divided along ideological lines, under capitalism it is in danger of being divided along economic lines. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore set clear guidelines for joining the free market financial system. He said that while capitalism has served Asia well by raising the standard of living, it was

because of free market trade in goods and services. One could not have the same independence in financial services as excessive borrowing because of easy credit from international lenders, compounded by portfolio investors opting out of East Asian market, triggered the Asian financial crisis. When a country has weak banks, weak supervision and lack of knowledge of the international borrowing of the private sector, then it should stay away from the risk of joining a free financial market system.

Mahathir of Malaysia, who could not address any Plenary Session because of late confirmation of his participation, was more vehement about his feelings on the subject, "governments who fail to act against currency speculators should be thrown out of office. Currency traders can be compared to arms traders, their actions are no less lethal than rockets and bombs." He ruled out any early lifting of the currency controls enforced in Malaysia until the international community develops a method of curbing the currency traders. Mahathir called for currency

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

since financial calculations will not pay in the long run".

The financial sector led by Goldman Sachs executives opposed any curb on the activities of free currency trade while agreeing that "billions of people have been beggared." In the words of US Secretary Treasury Robert E. Rubin there were no easy answers and no magic wands but Rubin, an ex-Goldman Sachs partner, insisted that instead of drawing a financial mechanism for interaction, the absolute rules to financial stability and economic growth were strong macroeconomics and industrial policy. To prevent such crisis from re-occurring he called for, viz (1) countries to develop and follow sound policies, (2) developing measures to provide capital to industrial countries to reduce the volatility of flows, (3) mechanisms to induce appropriate risk during crisis, improved regulatory forces on risk management, (4) due enquiry by industrial country creditors and investors with

respect to developing countries. (5) enabling all citizens to participate in growth and economic well being produced by the global economy by promoting core labour standards around the world, increasing investments in health. He said that while the market-based economic system and global economic integration were far preferable he considered that unfettered markets do not and cannot deal with all the needs of the masses and there is need to identify processes to deal with the social issues to create a robust world economy with far less instability. When even the world's Superpower recognises that some sort of a safeguard is necessary, we in Pakistan have no business in putting the destinies of our peoples at risk for the sake of profit for a few money changers.

Many other world leaders addressed the Forum in different Sessions small and large, among them President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, who

was given an emotional send-off in his last major appearance as Head of State, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, US Vice President Albert Gore Jr who called for

traders to be registered in countries in which currency they are operating so that, "they behave like good boys". their activities should be transparent and that there should be a ceiling on borrowing twice their capital assets. He asked whether any bank would allow any country to borrow 20 times their capital assets, the international community places the rights of money traders above the health of the world economy. While Mahathir is universally reviled for suggesting controls, almost every other leader suggested the same in varying ways. Chancellor Schroeder of Germany was vehement about it.

Ms Ruth Dreifuss, President of the Swiss Confederation supported the concept of putting humanity before profit, "markets do not expand into empty territories, they are home to human beings embodying a tremendous cultural diversity who occupy different places in the world economy, the big ques-

alongwith 5-6 close aides including the Foreign Minister and Finance Minister are required. But obviously someone in the Board of Investment (BOI) goofed and the country lost this tremendous opportunity to explain our position on nuclear capability and on Kashmir. While discussing the global hotspots of 2000, a panel of experts described Kosovo, Palestine, Central Africa, Korean Peninsula, the Spratly Islands, Taiwan Straits, Indonesia, etc but there was no one at the official level to carry the ball on Kashmir. This was an amazing omission, given that both Pakistan and India are nuclear powers.

As we enter the area of globalisation we have to have responsible governance, this includes using every opportunity to stake one's flag, especially before the world's elite. Pakistan's only mention were the legal travails of the Bhutto-Zardari combine. In the words of Peter Eigen, Chairman of the Board of Transparency International, "Pakistani prosecutors have had to face legal challenges and obstruction as they seek to investigate the myriad financial dealings of former PM Benazir Bhutto and her husband," and sought help from the world community to end the status quo so that rogue off-shore financial centers (based only on illegal wealth) would be excluded from the international banking system.

The good news is that Pakistan climbed down from a notorious 2nd position to number 14 in the list of corrupt in among 85 countries evaluated, a long way to redeem ourselves but at least a start.

Pakistan must have a consistent policy towards the WEF. Invariably the Head of Government must go to Davos, if not at least two Senior Ministers with a small delegation. From India the Finance Minister and a couple of Chief Ministers came, even from Iran Foreign Minister Mr Kharazi was a principal speaker. Davos is a must on the Pakistani calendar or we will watch the world pass us by, diplomatically and economically.

It is the feeling of everyone; even passing a single day without newspaper seems intolerable, three days is unimaginable, but we had to go without newspapers for four days during the Eid holiday this time due to the confusion over the sighting of the moon.

We hope Bangladesh Sangbadik Samity will give importance to the PM's suggestion about publication of abridged editions during the holidays to keep the readers abreast with the world events.

It is also heartening to know that Prime Minister reads the newspapers thoroughly. So we can hope that she must have noticed our letters and surely we can expect she will not ignore those and take necessary steps about the problems, grievances and suggestions which are put forward through Letters to the Editor columns.

Nur Jahan Chittagong

Burma — No More

Sir, Sarah E Coghlan's article "Burma — No More" was interesting and absorbing (DS. 30.1.99). I too, out of a sense of nostalgia visited Burma (now known as Myanmar) and found that country in a deplorable state.

Rich in natural resources and once the largest exporter of rice in this region, the country for the last three-and-a-half decades has been plundered by the military bureaucracy. The army top brasses and the middle officers are sharing the nation's booty with impunity.

The Burmese in British days were known as the Irish of the East for their rebellious spirit, but today it appears that the people have seemingly resigned to their unfortunate fate. Sarah however errs when she states that General Aung San father of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was the first president of independent Burma. General Aung San along with his cabinet colleagues were assassinated when he was head of a provisional government on 19th July, 1947, barely six months before Burma was granted independence on 4th January 1948 under the Nu-Atlee agreement.

Sao Shwe Thaik belonging to the ethnic Shan community became Burma's first president (a titular post) and Thakin Nu its first prime minister.

Robert Kader Chittagong

Air is not fair

Sir, The concern of the public and a number of national dailies during the last few weeks regarding the grave air pollution of Dhaka city must have at long last managed to awake our authority responsible for the environment. It is indeed a great relief for the citizens of this city to see head-lines and that the government has now decided to ban the use of leaded fuel very soon and do away with two-stroke engine vehicles.

Robert Kader Chittagong

The foul-smelling overflowing garbages are not cleaned for months and give the market the most disgusting look. Adjacent to it is the City Corporation Market which wears a terrible look. The open urinals and open latrines should be replaced with public toilets. Footpaths should be kept free from unauthorised shops so that it looks like a proper marketplace.

The city fathers should take immediate steps to relocate the wholesale market along with the wholesale fish market to give the entire area a decent look.

It is understood that the owners of these vehicles will suffer financial losses and the operators will become unemployed following an instant withdrawal of these vehicles from traffic.

It is only fair that they are either rehabilitated or financially compensated. To save human lives, is it not worth spending 200-250 crore taka from the government exchequer?

Zahidur Rahman
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Good for gurus
Sir, Here are some of the recent thinking of our political gurus:

a. Hartal is environment-friendly.
b. If necessary let us decide on a particular day in a month for observance of hartal so that all demands can be raised then.
c. Poll officials urged to refrain from duties. They shall be compensated when BNP goes to power.

Readers please judge for yourself. These are the bottom lines of our politics today! On the contrary what better can we expect?

Tanzia Choudhury
Comilla

Karwan Bazaar nuisance

Sir