

Man of Peace All the Way?

King Hussein's death at 63, despite its cancer-afflicted inevitability, casts a pall of gloom that can only be termed as a big contemporary misfortune. He will be missed as a trouble-shooter in a volatile desert world which has been in dire need for peace before the next millennium dawned. He brought to bear a certain originality of thinking on his role as a peace seeker and maker in the Middle East. An idea of the man's true stature and his catalytic contributions in the region can be obtained not merely from the highly effusive terms in which he has been spoken of by leaders of the western world but also by the praise showered on him by some of his Arab colleagues.

He was imbued with the idea of service to his people since the very early years of his monarchy, something that lasted as an article of faith with him despite his heavy and sometimes distracting preoccupations of continually trying to live up to the strategic importance of Jordan. Little wonder the monarch has left his people, especially the younger generation, in a hysteria of grief. He has been as astute as he was invincible having survived three wars and a few assassination attempts. Yet the countries he had been occasionally distraught with — Israel and Syria — are now the ones who recall his memories in the fondest terms because he was instrumental in keeping peace with them.

The Arab leaders, Hosni Mubarak, Hafiz-al-Asad and King Fahad, mostly being in their seventies, Hussein's departure will be strongly felt among the elderly statesmen in the region.

The question now is: what after King Hussein? His son Abdullah has taken up the reins of monarchy according to his last wish which marked a change in the line of succession where his brother had figured as the crown prince earlier on.

His domestic legacy, and the trends he set in Jordan's approach to Mideast peace remain to guide his young successor whom we wish well as we do the same to the people of Jordan. The Hashemi dynasty is revered as it draws descent from Prophet Muhammad (SM). Jordan, a country consistently friendly to Bangladesh, has a special place in our hearts and it is only a fitting tribute to his memory that our national flag has been flying at half mast in honour of the late King Hussein. Our heartfelt condolences to the royal family and the people of Jordan.

Deterring Crime

Statistics do not always tell the whole picture. But there are some statistics, like the ones on incidence of murder, that need to be taken seriously. These statistics act as wake-up calls, drawing society's attention to the state of its law and order as well as moral health. A tallying of figures from the previous five months shows that 876 people have been killed around the country. This in itself is bad enough, but the figures for January — 193 killings — makes the situation appear grimmer. Violence against women, particularly killings for dowry and in acid attacks, has continued unabated despite existence of stringent laws, which make such offences punishable by death. It is clear that the law, which is supposed to act as a deterrent, is failing to perform.

In the case of Bangladesh, statistics on crime have never been the source of much social comfort. In the past, there have been some attempts to present the figures in a better light by comparison with other crime-prone societies. In 1992, the then minister for home affairs had claimed in parliament that incidence of murder, mugging, armed robbery etc., in Bangladesh were lowest in Asia. This, he had claimed, should lead to his promotion rather than resignation! Nobody took him seriously, of course. In more developed countries with whom the then minister was making comparison, there is strict enforcement of the law, and effective crime detection, investigation and prosecution mechanisms. The worry for Bangladesh lies, not in the incidence of crimes themselves, but the failure of the law to bring the culprits to book.

What the government needs to do is to devise ways to improve the efficiency of the law enforcing agencies. This means investing in manpower and technical capacity to detect and investigate crimes more efficiently so that the rate of prosecution and convictions increases. The judicial process also needs to be streamlined so that violent crimes such as murder, armed assault, acid throwing etc., are addressed more speedily. Criminals must be made to understand that crimes would not pay; and victims should be assured that, if they report crimes then justice would be done.

Overbridges Need Attention

The city's foot overbridges are in a despicable state. An exhaustive report appearing in a local Bangla daily Monday vividly portrayed the conditions of 14 such bridges built exclusively for the pedestrians. It all started in the eighties as the pressure on roads mounted due to a dramatic rise in the urban population coupled with a spate in vehicular traffic. Foot bridges were suggested as the main remedy for smooth flow of traffic and safe crossing of roads for the pedestrians.

Even though it may sound strange, only five out of the fourteen bridges we have are being used at all by the members of the public and the rest are mostly in disuse, serving virtually as public toilets and urinals, claims the report. The report further has it that dustbins have been placed at the entrance to the stairs of some of the bridges making it impossible for people to use them because of stinking odour from the filth and garbage. The entire story speaks of the lack of civic sense on the part of road users and also lack of supervision from the DCC. It is a pity that despite the existence of such bridges to facilitate road-crossing most people do not take advantage of them. Rather they run across the roads to the peril of the moving traffic and themselves. Quite a few of the overbridges have been taken over by vendors for running their small businesses. There were even complaints about the presence of eve-teasers on such bridges. We strongly suggest that these bridges should be cleared of all types of vendors and anti-social elements. At the same time appropriate measures will have to be taken by the City Corporation and the law enforcing agencies to get the people use the overbridges for road-crossing. People must be made to understand the importance and usefulness of the bridges so that in time we may acquire at least one good national habit.

PRESIDENT Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed recently made an attempt to broker a negotiation between the country's conflicting political camps. It came just before the President's speech delivered in the parliament on January 25. As we all know, the presidential move proved to be abortive.

The peace-loving citizens, constant victims of irritating words and destructive actions, must have thanked President Ahmed for his initiative.

But the content of the presidential proposal to the opposition has raised eyebrows of many who are familiar with certain laws, especially those regulating the country's Election Commission.

The President reportedly proposed to the Opposition BNP on January 25 that he would use his good office to push forward the already announced schedule for municipal polls, had the Opposition agreed to call off the hartal and attend the presidential speech delivered in parliament. The next day, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina publicly admitted that she was aware of the presidential proposal and that she was ready to honour his move, had the opposition agreed to the offer.

But the presidential move, coupled with the Prime Minister's involvement in it, raises a very important question: Have the President and the Premier stepped out of their respective jurisdictions, by putting forward a proposal relating to rescheduling the municipal polls?

The President's move may be seen by some as an intrusion into the jurisdiction of a constitutionally created institution called Election Commission. The Prime Minister's readiness to support it amounts to the same thing.

According to the Pourashava Election Ordinance, 1977, the Election Commission is the sole authority to decide, under certain rules formulated earlier, as to when and how the municipal polls would be held. The Clause 25 of the Ordinance

The best solution to the problem is to ensure that the Election Commission can really work independently. If the Prime Minister is really committed to the independent functioning of the EC, she should free the Commission from her secretariat (the EC is still attached with the PM's Secretariat) and allow the institution to grow independently.

says: "All elections of Chairmen and Commissioners of a Pourashava shall be organised, held and conducted by the Election Commission in accordance with the rules..."

Giving guidelines for the rules, the electoral law concerned interprets that these cover a number of matters including 'nominations of candidates, objections to nominations, scrutiny of nominations, withdrawal of candidatures' and so on. In other words, the law and the rules concerned have given the Election Commission full authority to announce the schedule of municipal polls and conduct the polls in accordance with the schedule announced earlier. What the EC has more to do in this regard is to notify the schedule in the official gazette.

The rule 8(2) of the Pourashava Election Rules says: A copy of such notification shall be forwarded to the Returning Officer which shall be locally publicised at some prominent places in the wards as well as at the office of the Returning Officer and the office of Pourashava.

The laws and rules concerned, therefore, clearly show that the EC is in no way obliged even to consult with the President or the Prime Minister about the schedules of the municipal elections, while the law has provided the President and the Prime Minister with no legal scope to interfere with the decision of the Election Commission in this regard.

Some might argue, what is wrong with the President deciding to 'use his good offices' to revise the election schedule, especially when the objective behind the decision is a noble one: Brokering a deal between the feuding political camps? Still the question remains,

at the cost of what? By degrading a constitutionally created institution like Election Commission?

Did the President take consent of the Chief Election Commissioner, before putting forward the offer of revising the schedule already announced by the Commission?

Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena has categorically told The Daily Star that the Commission was not aware of the development before it was made public by the press.

According to the EC, the Commission was left with no option but to announce the schedule of the municipal polls under which the polling would take place on February 23-25 next.

Originally, the last date of holding the polls was September 2, 1998. But following a writ petition, challenging the provision of the government authority to appoint an interim administrator for the period between expiry of a municipal body and the election of a new one, the court gave an order on June 7, 1998 to maintain 'status quo' until the issue is settled.

Later, the government went to the court for permission to hold the elections, pending its verdict on the disputed matter relating to the appointment of administrator. The court eventually ordered the EC, on September 20 last year, to hold election within 180 days from the date of delivery of the order. The deadline expires on March 19 this year.

Under the court order, we have to conduct the polls before March 19. In that case, we had to consider a very important national issue — the country-wide SSC examinations scheduled to be held between the first and third week of March. So, we had to decide to complete the elections in February," says CEC Abu Hena.

Given the reality, there could be no reasonable ground to push back the EC announced

schedule for municipal polls. If the government has to change the date of election, it would have to secure approval of the High Court that has already fixed a deadline.

Then why the interference with the EC's jurisdiction of announcing the election schedule? It is the constitutional obligation for Prime Minister to assist the EC, instead of standing in its way to discharge the functions. "It shall be the duty of all executive authorities to assist the Election Commission in discharge of its functions," says Article 126 of the Constitution. So her position is totally at odds with what it should be.

If the President and Prime Minister can intrude into the jurisdiction of the Election Commission, then what is wrong with the Opposition claiming that the government has made the EC subservient to its whims? Or how does one blame the opposition for its decision to boycott presidential speech delivered in Parliament?

In the presidential offer, there was another important hint — the hint of eventually giving in to the opposition demand for removal of the Chief Election Commissioner.

Article 118 (3) of the Constitution says: "Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the term of the office of an Election Commissioner shall be five years from the date on which he enters upon his office..."

The present CEC has entered the office little less than three years ago. As described in the Article 118, he has the constitutional mandate to remain in the post for more than two years.

Well, there are provisions that a CEC could be removed before the expiry of his constitutionally fixed tenure of five years. But the provisions do not allow either the President, the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament to remove him at their convenience.

The functions of his office".

The BNP has, however, reportedly complained to the President, especially after the party's defeat in the last parliamentary by-elections in a Pabna constituency, that the CEC 'is guilty of misconduct'.

According to the party, the CEC has failed to check rigging of the polls by the ruling party, although the BNP candidate did not lodge any complaint to the Election Tribunal in accordance with the law concerned.

Whatever the case may be, following the BNP allegation, the President has so far not directed the Supreme Judicial Council to 'inquire into the matter', in other words, the BNP allegation.

The President's inaction (in the legal direction) regarding the opposition allegation only implies that he has not yet found any reason to believe that the CEC is 'guilty of misconduct'.

Despite all the above arguments, the President and the Prime Minister, perhaps, can solve the problems. The Prime Minister, who is also the leader of parliament, has the scope to get a legislation passed changing certain provisions of the existing electoral law. Or, the President on the advice of the Prime Minister can promulgate an ordinance in this direction.

Even then, they — at least the President — need to give a second thought before opting for such a solution: Why giving in to an irrational demand of undermining the Election Commission, specially when the opposition has not yet been able to prove any allegation against it.

The best solution to the problem is to ensure that the Election Commission can really work independently. If the Prime Minister is really committed to the independent functioning of the EC, she should free the Commission from her secretariat (the EC is still attached with the PM's Secretariat) and allow the institution to grow independently.

High-flying Blair Faces Three-way Election Test

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has ridden a storm over the Christmas resignation of ministers, tainting his party with the sleaze that brought down the Conservatives. But opinion polls show his rating higher than ever, and as Gemini News Service reports, a series of elections will provide an early mid-term test.

Derek Ingram writes from London

Soon Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government will be tested at the polls in a way that is unusual for a British administration so recently brought to power.

It faces not only the normal local elections on 6 May — almost exactly two years since it took office — but also on the same day elections for the new Scottish Parliament and for the new Welsh Assembly.

The results could produce some surprises for a party that astonished even itself by coming to power on 1 May 1997 with a majority bigger than it had dreamt possible.

The local elections, which take place in the regions and cities each year, produce a limited picture of a government's popularity because of traditionally low voter turnout.

The Scottish and Welsh elections will be quite different. Turnout could be high. For people in mainland Britain it will be totally new experience to vote for a regional parliament.

The election will produce in effect a mid-term verdict on what was so cleverly packaged and sold to the people as a slightly left of centre concoction called New Labour.

The next general election must be by mid-2002, but when governments feel confident they usually go for a new mandate in their fourth year. Ideally Blair will want to go to the polls in 2001.

As of now, nothing looks like stopping him romping home again. The Conservative Party under William Hague continues to cut a sorry figure indeed.

To the Editor...

The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Sir, Words fail me as I express my profound sorrow at the end of an eventful and successful life of the world's greatest statesman, King Hussein I of Jordan — a man whose vision, courage and dedication has helped achieve a better world. King Hussein was a champion of peace, and one of the very few Arab leaders who had the determined optimism for an equal and just peace process beneficial to all ethnic groups in the region, therefore ceasing the meaningless deadly hostile situation that prevailed. He had played a pivotal role in the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis. At a time when criminal activities by bigoted terrorists such as Osama bin Laden result in prejudices against the Muslim community as a whole, King Hussein's voice was in contrast one of sanity, foresight and peace, which accurately reflected the virtues of our religion. In years ahead, future generations to come over a timeless period would remember the great King as a forward-looking man, whose voice was for the betterment of society.

The distinguished King, one of the most progressive leaders of the Middle East was most highly regarded and respected by world leaders. His tireless efforts towards a long-lasting peace in the region and making the current peace process a reality was praised and acclaimed by all who looked forward to a better world. King Hussein's

voice was one of rationality and righteousness, a reflection of our hope and aspirations.

United States President Bill Clinton, who shares King Hussein's rationality and vision of a better and peaceful world had addressed the National Prayer Breakfast gathering on Thursday morning, urging the people to pray for the great King: "I ask you to pray for our King Hussein, a wonderful human being, a champion of peace who, I promise you today, is fighting for his life mostly so he can continue to fight for peace."

King Hussein was one of the greatest men of our times. A man of courage, dedication and vision, whose efforts towards a peaceful world of harmony would forever be remembered by the generations in the years ahead. Let us join President Clinton today to pray for our King Hussein, a wonderful human being, a champion of peace. Let us also salute the life of a dynamic statesman, a true Muslim, whose forward-looking and progressive vision has made this world a better place. Please pray for the great King and as we join President Clinton in his prayers, let us hope that the great King's vision of peace and harmony remain everlasting.

IAR

Pawn-manship

Sir, Pawns are supposed to act as pawns. The player moves the pawn; as the pawn has no power to move by itself. Political pawns sometimes try to assert themselves, incurring the displeasure of the master. Some

pawns are used, and then discarded.

What makes Iraq so defiant to US pressure? Trained by the master (against Iran decades ago). Now the de-training is in progress, much to the discomfit of the superpower, now reduced to one.

Two deterrents have a breaking action, back at home, the coming fall-out from the impeachment proceedings; and the poised peaking of the Wall Street stocks. By Feb-March the sorting out will indicate some direction. If these two factors coincide on a negative peak, there is instability ahead, likely to have global reverberations. None can help a superpower — it is home politics.

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The communal weather reports from Gujarat in India smell fishy, so long the method behind the madness is not deciphered. In Dhaka, the spotlight is on a suspected local terrorist internationally involved; or may be the better half is trying to be the worse half. This news coincides with the detention of a local business magnate, with his satellite channel disarmed. The forthcoming Calcutta Book

Fair is in the news, for happenings outside the good books. One leader is out on a political pilgrimage (as usual).

All the ingredients of a good spy plot for any writer of fiction. But later, it could perhaps indicate that fact is stranger than fiction. Good serving for the readers of the newspapers. The latter is a two-dimensional world, in black and white only.

Abul M Ahmad

Dhaka

Power failure in Faridabad and Gandaria

Sir, Faridabad and Gandaria is a well-known residential area in the old part of Dhaka city. Seven or eight lakh people live in this locality.

For the past few weeks the residents of Faridabad and Gandaria areas have been experiencing intermittent power failure. Power failure has been virtually chronic in our area every day and night.

All of a sudden electricity goes off. So the sufferings of the residents especially the school and college-going students know no bound.

We would therefore urge the authority concerned to take steps for electricity failure in Faridabad and Gandaria areas in old part of Dhaka city.

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PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR
Faces mid-term electoral tests

so votes. In the local elections it will be defending thousands of seats held at a time Labour was at its zenith of popularity and it is certain to lose each other.

Thus when Jack Cunningham was accused as Agriculture Minister of staying in an expensive hotel in Brussels officials pointed out that if British ministers stayed down the road in a modest place while all their other European opposite numbers were in a more prestigious one Britain would be seen a third-class country.

This excuse is repeated round the world. Presidents