

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 concerns 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, not who 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's Initiative: Some Questions

by Nurul Kabir

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 Chairman 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 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 CEC, 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.

nience. An Election Commissioner could be removed the way a judge of the Supreme Court is removed.

The proviso of the Article 118 (5) of the Constitution says: "An Election Commissioner shall not be removed from his office except in like manner and on the like grounds as a judge of the Supreme Court."

The constitutional provision (Article 96) that deals with the process of removal of a Supreme Court judge says:

"A judge (of the Supreme Court) shall not be removed from office except in accordance with the following provisions of this article —

There shall be a Supreme Judicial Council, which shall consist of Chief Justice of Bangladesh, and the two next senior Judges:

Where, upon any information received from the Council or from any other source, the President has reason to apprehend that a judge —

(a) may have ceased to be capable of properly performing the functions of his office by reason of physical or mental incapacity, or

(b) may have been guilty of gross misconduct, the President may direct the Council to inquire into the matter and report its finding.

If, after making the inquiry, the Council reports to the President that in its opinion the Judge has ceased to be capable of properly performing the functions of his office or has been guilty of misconduct, the President shall, by order, remove the Judge from office."

In the present case, the President has received no information from the 'Supreme Judicial Council' that the CEC has become physically or mentally incapable of performing

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 pre-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

The latest public opinion polls show Labour even further ahead than ever, with a rating of 56 per cent against 24 per cent for the Conservatives. But Blair will be away after his recent experiences.

Few apter phrases have been uttered by British politicians than that coined 30 years ago by an earlier Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson. It was the simplest of thoughts and it has become a political cliché: "A week is a long time in politics."

For Blair, bouncy and self-confident, the words have proved as uncomfortable as they always were. Sudden events can change a political scene overnight, as they did just before Christmas.

A government that seemed accident-resistant and still looks to be set for a decade or more of power was suddenly made to realise that it could not walk on water.

It had a series of nasty shocks — ministerial resignations, including Peter Mandelson, President of the Board of Trade, forced by indiscretions and personal misdemeanours, suggestions that one or two ministers have been living it up by flying Concorde or dining at five-star hotels, and quar-

relling between ministers that has bubbled to the surface.

None of this has been as serious as incidents that brought the preceding Tory government into such deep disrepute. A reminder of those bad days came in January when former cabinet minister Jonathan Aitken confessed in court to perjury. He has been left to stew for several weeks pending the judge's decision on how long he must serve in jail.

A mystery remains as to how John Major came to put Aitken into the government in 1994 — as First Lord of the Treasury, no less — when it had been well known for several years that he was a dubious character.

The Aitken case, which was about sleaze, was a timely reminder of a murky past and the Blair government has entered 1999 slightly shaken. The squeaky clean image that had looked so attractive in days when Conservative MPs admitted accepting payment from lobbyists to ask question in the House of Commons had been tarnished.

Public cynicism about MPs has returned. The comment that politicians are "all the same" has returned. The opinion poll that shows Labour rid-

ing so high also shows that 52 per cent now believes that the government has not upheld high standards of public life.

The good news for Britain is that people are now much more on their guard against sleaze and governments will in future have to watch their step. Blair is plainly aware and nervous of developing this type of Achilles' heel.

The problem facing politicians in an increasingly materialistic global climate is that they feel the need to keep up with 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, prime ministers and ministers feel they must travel grandly to uphold their country's international position. Each is tempted to outdo the other.

Labour may have lost some credibility in the last few weeks on this sleaze issue and lost



PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR
Faces mid-term electoral tests

some 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 some.

In Scotland it may be in for a

shock. The Scottish National Party, which wants full independence, could win so many seats Labour may have to go into a coalition in the country's first government for almost 300 years.

The Conservatives are almost a non-factor in Scotland and are getting nowhere in Westminster. From the Thatcher heyday it has been a mighty fall.

When the going gets rough the Conservative party turns ruthless. The next big political development in Britain could be the replacement of Hague as party leader.

This will reopen deep party divisions over whether Britain should join the European Monetary Union, launched so successfully on 1 January. And this could even tear the Conservative party permanently into two.

— Gemini News
The author is the founder of Gemini News Service.

OPINION

Opposition's 4-point Demands

Shafiqur Rahman

Dr Khandaker Q. Elahi composed a massive, erudite and methodical analysis of the opposition's 4-point demands in the 8th and 9th issues of The Daily Star. He systematically analysed all the points and concluded that the public didn't find any justification to accept these demands. I would like to question his conclusion regarding only one of the 4-point demands, the second and perhaps the crucial one.

He argues that the opposition has not furnished any proof of the present CEC's partisan bias. I don't know what sort of proofs he requires but if he cares to dismiss all the claims and arguments of the opposition as baseless than he is only faithfully toeing the ruling party line. Now-a-days it is very difficult to separate information from misinformation, facts from propaganda in our deeply polarised print media, but even then some stark failure of the present CEC in discharging his duty on a non-partisan basis seems evident. In the Barisal by-election some ruling party ministers campaigned and made promises in an unabashed manner. Some voting centers were changed at the last minute to influence voting pattern in favour of the ruling party candidate. There were numerous irregularities in the pre-election campaign in the recent Pabna by-election. But to me nothing is more indicative of the foul practices than the result itself. The percentage of votes cast is unprecedentedly high in the context of our country. In some centers the number of votes simply doesn't conform with the maximum possible number that can be cast within the normal time limit. But observers found many centres that claimed completion of vote by the noon! In some centers votes were cast in favour of the AL candidate by approx. 1000 to 2/3 ratio.

In the 1996 national election, conducted by the present CEC, massive irregularities occurred, which are surfacing now. In the Maghbazar con-

stituency of Dhaka the election result favouring the ruling party MP was declared void by a court recently. A few days ago another court found that another ruling party MP hijacked the result for him in another constituency. It was found that in some centers zero votes were counted for the opposition! Doesn't this pattern seem to have been repeated in Pabna? Considering these facts can the opposition and a section of the public be blamed for branding the CEC as partisan?

Dr Khandakar says that, "As to the resignation of the CEC, the public cannot accept this demand, because the public has no reason to lose its confidence upon him". May I take the liberty of asking how could he learn the opinion of the public so accurately? Is he the public personified? Every one should remember that the public is not a monolithic object. Different sections have different opinions. We expect only the selfish politicians to claim wholesale support of the people shamelessly. Dr Khandakar says that the reorganization of the EC is a bureaucratic process, not a matter of political demand. Does he realise that his reasoning contradicts the whole Caretaker Government movement? Was the fall of autocracy in 1990 initiated by the leaders it decries? He stretches his imagination a bit further when he claims that the opposition wants immunity from the law. Morality must take precedence over legality, otherwise no one can challenge the establishment.

The CEC was selected by the mutual agreement of all the political parties. Now as all the opposition parties, who together claim more than 60 per cent of the popular votes, declared their nonconfidence against him, he should vacate the position. Last but not the least, as far as my scant education goes, the quotation, "Each nation gets the leaders it deserves", was uttered by Joseph de Maitre, 19th century French political thinker.

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 great 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 most joyfully as 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 futuristic vision of peace and harmony remain everlasting.

IAR
USA

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 discomfort of the superpower, now reduced to one.

Two deterrent 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.

Nearer home, Pakistan will be kept alive, to act as a buffer to Indian hegemony. The scenario is similar on India's Eastern front: Bangladesh will be courted with sweet and sour sauce to make it palatable for the palate. The digestibility is not guaranteed. In Afghanistan, the puss has to be removed, surgically or otherwise. It may hurt more than the patient. Blood transfusions are common enough, when confined medically to the human body. Sores in the body politic are more problematic to handle.

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 happening inside 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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