

No More Hartal, Please!

The nightmarishness of hartal is fast degenerating into the spectre of a hydra-headed monster rising across the length and breadth of our national life. The thin fabric separating law from lawlessness and order from disorder is under a serious threat of rupture. Hartals have become more prone to violence, more destructive in their sweep because of the fact that they are now demonstrably more contentious than ever before: the caller party and the ruling party being engaged in a slanging match, as it were to get on with their respective programmes of staging hartal and countering it full blast. In a patently confrontational situation like this, violence has been erupting in newer, uglier forms as was clearly evidenced on the very first day of the 66-hr hartal.

Snipe and cracker shots were fired, with so much as a bomb thrown from a rooftop in wanton disregard for human lives. The casualties from manufacturing bombs stood at two, one in Dhaka and another in Barisal. Gunshots were heard in close proximity to police posse. More violence followed on the second day as violence only begets violence. It is difficult to keep count of people injured in the two successive hartals called by the opposition.

A single death caused by hartal is unconscionable, but there have been quite a few already as a blot on the conscience of those who called it. How long the nation should bleed from lethal politics? This destructive hartal culture must stop, here and now. What has the BNP gained by calling hartal that it could not have achieved without recourse to it? In our view, nothing. On the contrary, we think the party's image has suffered a good deal. To the BNP we say, you have had your revenge by calling hartal now it is time you stopped pressing further with it.

The important D-8 summit is only a few days away. We would like this auspicious event to be entirely free of any hartal call. Please do not insult the nation in front of world dignitaries, that is our fervent appeal to you!

If you believe in democracy, let the people judge for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Why must you force your party's opinion on the people? We urge the BNP to step back from further hartals and the AL to engage the opposition in a dialogue.

Clinics or Death-traps?

Death traps in the form of unauthorised private medical clinics are growing in numbers throughout the country. This is a grave situation. A Daily Star investigation has exposed the soft belly of the administration responsible for issuing licences to clinics and detection of unauthorised ones springing up in any part of the country. The report basically brings into focus the pitiable lack of cooperation and coordination between the Health Directorate and the law enforcing agencies in identifying and eradicating the so-called health clinics engaged in illegal business that put public health in peril. There is hardly any mechanism by which these death chambers can be detected and their owners brought to book. The number of registered clinics in Dhaka is only 205 while 546 are said to be in business all over the country. Most of these clinics are housed in private buildings, many of them in unhygienic conditions and without proper equipment and qualified doctors in attendance. Several of these are engaged in the illegal business of terminating pregnancies, treating bullet or gunshot wounds behind the back of the police and many other anti-social activities.

The Health Directorate has a very simple answer to this vexing problem of registration: "Since we do not have any list of unregistered clinics we are not aware of any existence of unregistered private clinics in the country." They hold the police responsible for not shutting down the "illegal business being carried out by private clinics". The police for their part shifted the responsibility of "identifying" such clinics to the Health Directorate. In this tussle it is the health of innocent public which is suffering. The Secretary of Bangladesh Private Clinic Owners Association (BPCOA), whose business is hurt because of the mushroom clinics, had meetings with Health Ministry officials to stop this clandestine business but accuses the ministry of not responding to their proposal for a tri-partite committee to curb this menace.

Shouldn't the Health Directorate ask for a municipal licence at the time of registration of clinics and by doing so both the DCC and Health Directorate can maintain a list of authorised clinics and request for police action against the offenders in the interest of public health which is of vital importance for any nation.

Insult to Civility

The ordeal of Farida, an eleven-year-old maid at a residence in the city's Siddheswari area who was tortured by her employer and later rescued by police in critical condition on Tuesday, is identical to those of many other child domestics in our country. The only difference is that her story has become a matter of public knowledge. Farida and Abdi, the eight-year-old maid who was mercilessly beaten and thrown out of her employer's house in the dead hours of night a couple of months back, are familiar faces in our 'civil' society. In exchange for an apology of two meals a day, a place to sleep and some new clothes a couple of times a year, they are forced into the life of a slave. From dawn to well into dead hours of night they toil, washing clothes, sweeping floors, so on and so forth. Verbal and physical abuse intersperses.

The employers, who often boast of being conscious and conscientious citizens of the society, assume the role of remorseless tormentors, treating child domestics as piece of dirt. They simply forget the fact that just by hiring the poor children they are violating their rights, let alone hurling verbal and physical abuse at them. They don't even ask themselves for once whether they have the right to treat them as slaves.

Sensitisation campaign in the shape of posters, programmes on the electronic media has apparently failed to arrest the alarming rise of this menacing form of child right violation. Time has come for the law-enforcers to play their role. They must make sure that the abusers who get caught are punished. Otherwise, children like Farida will always be vulnerable to their tyrannical employers.

LIFE is cheap in a developing country. Literally, it is so, because items produced at home are inexpensive here due primarily to cheap labour. Figuratively speaking, it is also true; cost of a human life here is relatively cheaper than in other countries.

Once more Bangladesh has proved that thesis, though money was no factor in this case. Kazi Aref, a prominent leader and veteran organiser of the liberation war, was gunned down, along with four of his colleagues in broad daylight on a public platform in the remote village of Kalidashpur in Kushi district on the 16th instant. Eye witness accounts suggest that armed assassins had planned it well in advance, were hiding themselves in and outside the crowd of the meeting and had the incredible courage and self-confidence to call out the name to identify the principal victim correctly before shooting him down at a point blank range. The other witnesses fell as easy prey to the marauding invaders. The few police on duty stood by, to the bewilderment and consternation of the fleeing crowd.

The incident took everyone by surprise, shock and dismay. Home Minister and senior officials of the various branches of law enforcing agencies of the land hurriedly went to the spot. Punitive actions were taken against the officer-in-charge of the thana concerned, Daulatpur, and others for dereliction of duty. Full-scale and all-out investigations were set in to apprehend the killers, till now without much success. To add insult to injury, the Home Minister was reported to have stated that the killing of Kazi Aref did

not demonstrate a deterioration in the law and order situation in the country. People were stunned.

It may be recalled that to establish law and order was the first and foremost priority of the ruling party, as it was stated time and again, by their leader immediately before and after the last parliamentary election. The policy was highlighted on the election manifesto. But, as time passed, the incidence of crime grew, while very little of the pledge was translated into action. It has, unfortunately, been compounded by actions and encouragement of those who are endowed with the patronage of wealth and power of the ruling party. In the process, supporters of the opposing camps started to regroup in order to flex their muscles to match. This process continues.

There are many instances of commission of serious crimes which the government has not been able to solve or are not willing to solve. To cap it all, some of the crimes were reported to have been committed with the knowledge or hope that these would be condoned by members of the ruling party. How could one repose veracity in the story of Tuhin, a BNP activist, who "committed suicide" by hanging himself with his shoelace in police custody within hours of being detained? Cynics remark that the shoelaces must have been extraordinarily long and thick to do this marvel and Tuhin also must have waited long to take his life in a congenial place like a solitary police confinement.

Kazi Aref's Killing

A Pointer to Law and Order Situation

One thing is certain that, irrespective of widespread and intensified repression, people's will cannot be suppressed for long and will ultimately triumph. More we recall and act upon it, the better it is for all of us.

No suitable action was reported to have been taken to solve this case.

Rubel, a promising university student, who was picked up by the police on a trumped up allegation, had to pay with his life while in police "care". The police officer allegedly involved in his murder is roaming around scot-free. Another university student lost his life in police firing but, according to police, he died in explosion while preparing bombs. The autopsy report proved otherwise; he died of bullet wounds in-

lence erupted and bloodshed took place, with consequent loss of life and property. In contrast, BNP had made sure during their regime that no anti-hartal rallies were allowed, thereby avoiding conflict and violence.

The police normally took action against opposition workers and turned a blind eye to the real perpetrators of the crime. Cases in thousands have been registered, including most of the opposition legislators, many of whom were on false grounds. So is the case with

BNP leader and parliamentarian leading a peaceful demonstration was being beaten down in the street, while on the same day a ruling party parliamentarian riding high in a Pajero was leading a convoy of armed supporters, under police protection, spreading terror and violence in the streets?

These are some of the anomalies people would like to ask about from the ruling party. But will the government give answer correctly? Or, the answer would be like the one given when the opposition's meeting in Paltan Maidan to commemorate their historic day of 7th November was bombed and dispersed, threatening the life of their Chairperson herself? The incredulous answer was that the bomb had been planted by the BNP cadres themselves in order to lay blame on the Awami League. Even subsequently, it was seen that opposition hartals, if not obstructed by the police or interrupted by private armed hooligans, passed off peacefully. This is what should have been and this is what people would like to see happen.

The deliberation on this subject would not be complete without referring to the condition of women in the country. Repression, rape, kidnapping and killings of women have been rampant. Rape and killing of Sheema received wide publicity but still remains unresolved. No redress was made about rape of little Tania in police custody in magistrate's court. Even girls in Jahangirnagar University raped by their

fellow students had to undergo the ignominy and humiliation of denial of justice. Kidnapping for ransom has been newly introduced, major victims being members of the industrial and business community. All these make a distinct and irrevocable conclusion that the law and order situation is definitely going from bad to worse in the country.

The government decision to reverse its pledge made at the last parliamentary election to repeal all black laws like the Special Powers Act makes it appear that these are not to be used much to apprehend criminals and terrorists of the kind mentioned above. The assertion, therefore, gains more ground to the effect that these black laws are, in effect, being retained for application against political foes only. Furthermore, election pledge to separate administration from the judiciary still remains unfulfilled and appears to remain so during the tenure of this government. Contrary to the assurance that rule of law will prevail, Prime Minister herself has to face serious charges in the highest court of law in the country.

Thus, the nation is appearing to make a distinct progress on unplanned but almost an inevitable march to the alter of sacrifice of our highly coveted principle of democracy. But one thing is certain and indisputable of widespread and intensified repression, people's will cannot be suppressed for long and will ultimately triumph. More we recall and act upon it, the better it is for all of us.

The author is a member of the Advisory Committee of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

flicted on his back.

The anti-hartal rallies, a new culture of the present Awami regime, was stated to have been introduced to reassure and allow the anti-hartal elements among entrepreneurs, businessmen and others to go on with their normal trade and activities and also to occupy streets during the period of hartal. The opposition allege that the exercise was principally aimed at making a show of force and, through intimidation and conflict with and protection and support of members of the law enforcing agencies, to throttle hartal promotional activities of the opposition. As a result of confrontation, vio-

thousands of political detainees. Often, the police take the plea that they had to comply with the unwritten orders of the superiors. Otherwise, how could one justify silence and inaction of a contingent of police witnessing some gunmen disembarking from the convoy led by a parliamentarian, chasing a peacefully picketing college student, and murdering him with a point blank shot? How come the police failed to apprehend the person who had snatched a gun from a policeman in a bid to attack a BNP procession? Many newspapers published clear photos of the face and impending action of the snatcher. How come a senior

Clinton's Acquittal and its Ramifications

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

The fall-out from this impeachment trial is yet to be assessed. There is a view that a lady Republican (Elizabeth Dole) could be elected in the White House in 2000 while the Democrats could be back to control the House of Representatives.

the impeachment trial, only second in US history.

Where did the Republicans go wrong? The simple answer seems to be that they became arrogant after they swept to control the House of Representatives in 1994 and they could not read the minds of the public. The trial was supposed to be about right and wrong; about whether President Clinton was guilty of high crimes and misdemeanours. They thought that the more intense examination and scrutiny in the affairs of Monica Lewinsky, the more the public would be convinced to remove President Clinton from the office. But ultimately the Republicans found that it wasn't and this is their misjudgment.

It is interesting to note that 74 per cent do not think President Clinton is honest and trustworthy but 69 per cent approve of the way he handles the job and 81 per cent think his presidency has been a success (USA Today-CNN poll). What does this poll lead to? This appears to demonstrate the old morality and tradi-

tional Christian values do not bother the American people. They were able to distinguish between private and public behaviour of the President. It is in this modest way the people of the US have set the social and ethical standards in public life. The ordinary people are happy with the prosperous times and they are more concerned whether their local schools are getting enough funds or whether the senior citizens are being properly looked after by the government. These simple issues bother them and not what the Republicans thought that the affair with the White House intern and his untrue statement would outrage the American people. The simple truth is that the economy under President Clinton is robust and the public did not mind his indiscretions while they were economically comfortable.

Another interesting episode is that the US media went horribly wrong. The media thought President Clinton would not survive a year. They also failed miserably to read the minds of the American people. The media could not explain the fact that while a majority of the people believe Mr. Clinton is not honest, they did not want him removed from the high office. The US media overwhelmed by the Monica affair succumbed to wrong conclusions. Some believe that the media barons have learnt their bitter lessons.

The public will question the taxpayer's money of 40 million dollars spent in the investigation of the White House indiscretions by the independent counsel Kenneth Starr. Initially it all started with the alleged financial irregularities of Clintons (commonly known as White Water matter) while he was Governor of the State of Arkansas. When Mr. Starr could not find anything wrong in that matter, he turned his attention to Mr. Clinton's private affairs. Mr. Starr did not keep his balance and pursued ruthlessly against President Clinton. The American public saw him vindictive and overzealous. Many believe that he had undermined the office of the independent counsel and this office is unlikely to be re-created in its present form after it expires in June. There appears to be widespread agreement that the office has become unaccountable and even unconstitutional. It may be pointed out this office was in fact created by

the Democrats during the Nixon's period.

The Republican chief protagonists had to say that they were duty bound to proceed under the Constitution. The House Chief prosecutor Henry Hyde (a Republican from Illinois) admitted that "it could have been better and I do not walk away from this feeling we got treated badly." The Republican Party will now attempt to repair the damage and try to explain to the public that the party is not the party of impeachment and weak on policies and issues compared with the Democrats. They will need a comprehensive reappraisal of the influence of the Christian Right on the party. They must find a way out from this negative image if they wish success in elections in 2000.

President Clinton's Presidency has been tainted in history. The impeachment trial will haunt him throughout his life as he is the second President in history to be impeached since President Andrew Johnson's just after the civil war in 1868. It is assumed that he will be using his formidable energy and intellect in a search for redemption. He also wants to do all he can to guarantee that his anointed candidate, Vice President Al Gore succeeds him in the White House. His statement indicated that he wanted better

relations with the Congress. He wants to be remembered as the man who introduced reforms in social and welfare policies for the disadvantaged. He will work vigorously in his final two years to reverse the tainted image of his Presidency.

There is a view that the Lewinsky affair leaves surprisingly Hillary Clinton as a winner. In the last November election she was a sought-after leader to espouse the cause of the Democrats. She remained loyal with her husband throughout and accused the Republican leaders of hatching a political conspiracy to remove her husband from the office. It is reported that she might run for New York's seat in the US Senate in 2000. Polls show that Mrs. Clinton is ahead of the Republican candidates. This could be a step for her in the White House later.

The American people were relieved of this undesirable 13-month long saga. Expressions such as "waste of money" and "disgusting" emerged in interviews with the public. However few defended Clinton. The question is, they said, whether he should be removed from the office and the answer is No.

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(Elizabeth Dole) could be elected in the White House in 2000 while the Democrats could be back to control the House of Representatives.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

To the Editor...

Lawlessness

Sir, It's been over 27 years we achieved our independence. Now let's see what we achieved or got during all these years. Democracy is only 8 years old as we killed it more than once. Law and order is deteriorating day by day. Crime rate has increased beyond expectation. Society is gripped by various types of crimes. Killings, murders, extortion, terrorism, child abuse, acid throwing, assault on women now have become a child's play.

The lives of the people ranging from two years to above 70 are not safe and are always under constant threat. The murderers, extortionists, terrorists and the loan defaulters move freely in the society. Police themselves are involved in criminal activities.

We imported dogs to nab the criminals as our efficient police are unable to do so (alas! the dogs bit the policemen instead of the criminals).

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka-1000

Thanks Andaleeb

Sir, My salute to the young man Andaleeb N. Choudhury, of 'A' level class of Sholachista on his brilliantly vibrant piece on the significance of Ekushey February in The Daily Star.

May he grow up to be a worthy Bengalee who would start a movement which would make our politicians build our country instead of destroying it.

Zeba I. Seraj
Professor
Dept. of Biochemistry
University of Dhaka
Dhaka 1000

Lessons from Kafko

Sir, The powers that be should take heed from the current KAFKO crisis. A poor deal, inept management and no supervisory or monitoring skills have lead to the present situation.

The GoB has taken the correct stance, but it is somewhat akin to closing the barn door after the horse has taken its leave. I would request the government to learn something

from this, especially now that the oil and gas contracts are on the table. When you're swimming with sharks, you don't want to stab yourself in the foot.

The "big boys" are master players of these international finance deals. They've been doing it for years, manipulating small countries in the guise of industrial developers. Ultimately, it will serve our leaders well to remember that this is OUR country, not their playground.

Its resources are for the national benefit. Let's not give it all away.

Sadat Omar
Dhaka

(True) love bites

Sir, On February 14, Valentine's Day was celebrated in Bangladesh like elsewhere in the world. This is comparatively a new and modern festival in our society. There are however different views on the socio-religious acceptability of celebrating the Valentine's Day.

Meanwhile in our country, Valentine's Day is being celebrated as a day for sending/exchanging greetings card, letters, etc. among the lovers.

While attending a function on the occasion of the Valentine's Day, I was thinking whether true love at all exists in these days of imitation when people attaches much more attention to the commercial aspects of love? William Shakespeare in one of his sonnets:

"Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark."

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar,
Dhaka-1207

I hate hartal

Sir, I am an ordinary citizen taking a lot of interests in all sectors of national life after my retirement from service. Though old, I wish to enjoy the benefits of safe and secure living in our dear motherland. Unfortunately, the existing practice of hartal culture by the po-

litical parties is against the civilised code of life in our times. We must take a very positive and tough step to stop it forever. Otherwise democracy would be a hoax taking the shape of an ugly situation that might all for serious confrontation in the near future.

Today is our future. Mistrust, suspicions and lack of political statesmanship should not be allowed to continue as the luxury of political parties against the country's future.

May God bless us with His gifts of vision and courage to end the hartal culture in our country.

Abul Ashraf Noor
House #9, Road #4,
Sector #5, Uttara,
Dhaka-1230

Something must be done before it is too late

Sir, What is the future of a country where law-and-order deteriorated to such a degree that even the orders of the Prime Minister and Ministers are not carried out?

When opposition political parties arranged long march, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that the march will not be obstructed, but it was obstructed by the ruling party activists, supervised by an MP of the Awami League.

Gulshan Lake in Dhaka is being filled up by RAJUK despite the directive of the Prime Minister and an order of the Supreme Court. We are astounded, how could RAJUK dare to defy the Prime Minister and the Supreme Court?

Then in another incident Home Minister's order has been flouted. The man who was seen running towards a procession of the opposition after snatching a shotgun from a policeman is still out there though the Home Minister has said in the JS that he had given orders to arrest him.

In other incidents also, we heard about policemen defying the orders of their seniors. It is a bad omen - everywhere decomposition is setting in and it is not long before carion crows will fly overhead.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

OPINION

Valentine's Day

Aziz Amirul

I would like to express my feelings and suggestions about the recently observed Valentine's Day in Bangladesh.

During the last few years since 1993 a group of young people in our country have started celebrating the Valentine's Day. Sending cards to their beloved and friends (of course, of the opposite sex), different kinds of nice gifts including expensive packs of imported chocolates, books, audio-cassettes and so on. Besides, on this day the "love-birds" cannot think of anything without a fresh red rose or a bunch of it. Flowers are an integral part of this day. Many a newly introduced couple are getting engaged in affairs on this day with an oath of remaining ever-faithful to each other.

Fine! Apparently it seems that there is no harm in observing such a day here which brings a jovial mood in the minds of the youth, but let us see what history says about the day. Its introduction in our country and what impact it might have on our culture and society in the coming years.

Usually, it is believed that during the Roman period a young man in Rome named Valentine was imprisoned for his conversion of religion to Christianity and he had a love affair with the daughter of the jailer. Finally, he was hanged to death as his punishment on 14th February. Before being executed he wrote a long love-letter to his beloved. Since then the day is being observed among the young people in different countries, especially in the Christian dominant ones.

In our country till the eighties hardly a few knew about this day. In the early nineties, specifically to mention the year 1993, a group of young people started celebrating Valentine's Day in a very limited way, restricted mainly to the Dhaka

University campus and among a few living in the posh areas of the capital. Every year the momentum was increasing. For the last couple of years we have been seeing quite a lot of festivities among the youth revolving round this day. But this year it seemed that the bomb of celebrating Valentine's Day has finally exploded.

It was indeed a day to remember in Dhaka University campus. All of a sudden the campus gave a completely new look. There was colour everywhere. Young men and women, both students and non-students, all gathered at the venue turning the TSC into a sea of joy, love, friendship and what not! I think throughout the day it was really impossible to find a single person without a red rose in his or her hand. At around four in the afternoon our Honourable Minister for Sports, Youth and Culture, Mr. Moinul Haque, arrived at the venue "Shonarjito Shadinata" where the main function was held organised by the students to celebrate the occasion. Probably for the first time in the history of this country a person in the rank of a minister became so much informal and friendly with all present there. His speech was a thing to hear: as if a friend was chatting among a group of his close circle. Later on the minister went round the campus before leaving the memorable venue. Apart from this, mock debates, seminars and so on were held by different bodies and forums of students throughout the day and needless to say, all aiming at a single topic "LOVE".

The above scenario primarily seems to be a very colourful and pleasant one, at least for a single day, in our busy lives. But if we think deeply then clearly an opposite picture comes out. Probably, a dreadful one for the future of Bangladesh. First of all, Valentine's Day

is totally an occasion evolved in Christianity, named after Saint Valentine. But we are mingling it with our culture where the sacred time often we speak of prohibiting alien culture, etc. Are we getting short of our own traditional festivals? A saying in Bangla depicts our rich past heritage with thirteen festivals in twelve months of the Bangla calendar. Of course, if our intention is to inherit a foreign one then there is very little to say. Once there was a time in our society when New Year's Eve was not given any importance but now it is a major occasion for us to celebrate and the aftermath of such an eve can simply be disastrous as there had been several instances over the last few years. Similarly, now Valentine's Day seems to be a mere fun party to us but in near future it may take such a toll on us that we would just be disgusted with it.

In fact, we are extremely of an imitating type. Whatever is done by others, we tend to do that. Be it at home or abroad. A sort of competitive attitude always prevails in our mentality. About even properly knowing about foreign cultural events we are just copying those as precisely as possible.

This year the functions of Valentine's Day have been celebrated inviting Government dignitaries. Therefore it seems that from now on the day will be celebrated with more enthusiasm and cooperation in Bangladesh thus elongating the list of alien culture in our society. Whatever we do we have to keep in mind that something new and outside one's habit does not always stay healthy. It may turn from sweet to sour any time. Dealing too much with anything not familiar is harmful. One should always remember that in a man's disciplined life a bit of restriction is always the best.