

# Hartals, but for Whom?

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FREQUENT and prolonged hartals are no doubt favorite items for the political leaders. But how much palatable are they for the general people? How do they evaluate hartal in their everyday life? These are few questions that those struggling for power never care to ask, as they may not find the answers as delicious as the hartals are.

To inquire about the actual opinion of the people on hartal, we recently conducted a survey in the Dhaka City. Some interesting observations as well as some shocking facts came out. Let them protest in the Parliament

A large number of the respondents felt that parliament is the most appropriate place to settle political issues. The issues put forward by different political parties regarding hartals were often not comprehensible to them, they found these too distant from their day to day lives. So they identified the issues to be solely about 'Rajnit' or 'power struggle' which is the Bengali translation of politics. The parliament, in their opinion, is the most appropriate place to settle the 'Rajnit' issues. The respondents could not find any reasons for their daily sufferings caused due to hartals. Mofiz, a small trader told us that even a single day's strike costs him a loss of about Tk.10,000 or more. He is at a loss to understand the rationale behind this hartal which brings him so much misery. To him as well, the only place to resolve problems among the politicians is the parliament, else why did we elect them to the parliament, was his question to the politicians.

Disruption of normal course of life also led some respondents to suggest about settling political issues in the parliament. Jahan Ara Khan, a housewife mentioned that the education of her children is being considerably hampered by frequent hartals. Moreover, the prices of the daily necessities go up during the prolonged periods of strikes. Such disruptions in the normal life led her also to

suggest parliamentary solutions to political issues.

## Hartal in the Manifesto

Apart from settling the political issues in the parliament some of the respondents called for more responsible behaviour on part of the political leaders. They urged them not to make people captive of their power rivalry. Accordingly some respondents suggested about the inclusion of a provision in their manifestoes on their right to call hartals. This the respondents believe would make the politicians aware of the people's frustrations at their irresponsible behaviour. Many of the respondents characterised the hartals as anti-people not anti-government as according to them elites do not suffer, it is the common people who suffer the most.

## Exemption for Public Transport

One of the sections that suffers most during prolonged hartals are obviously rickshaws, pullers and taxi-drivers, whose daily income depend upon the movement of people, which is stalled by hartals. Abul Hussain a rickshaw puller told us that often during hartals he and his family have to go without food. He urged for a little sympathy on part of the politicians for the sufferings of people like them. He suggested that rickshaws and taxis may be exempted during hartals.

## Alternatives to Hartals — Processions and Sit-in Protests

Processions and sit-in protests appeared to be more civil means of expressing political protest to some respondents. Young Tonmoy of grade three expressed his frustrations that during the hartals he cannot go to school and play with his friends. He also cannot go out in the evening for a walk. Processions, meetings and sit-in protests seemed to be more

appropriate even to this boy. But our politicians seem to think otherwise. What lessons we are imparting to our children?

## Privatized TV Channel for the Opposition

One interviewee identified lack of democratic space in the political arena for protests to be a major cause behind resorting to hartals. Thus, she suggested about privatized TV channels where the oppositions can express their arguments and criticisms and also inform the people about their programmes and policies.

## Hartals — the Gender Perspective

Apart from sufferings of the people in general, hartals cause some specific sufferings to the women. First of all, as the hartals create an insecure atmosphere in the streets the chances of mistreatment or physical harassment of the women seem to be much more during the period. A girl pointed out that during one hartal day she was caught in front of a militant procession while passing by the road. Being afraid she ran to the police for shelter. But ironically enough the police on the spot took opportunity of her vulnerability and harassed her.

Secondly, the insecurity mentioned above prompts many parents to restrict the movement of their daughters during hartals. This on the one hand hampers their education or other works and on the other, pushes them back in the competition since the male members are not usually restricted from going out. An S.S.C candidate informed us that she could not go to her coaching centre to appear in model test during a hartal day, but her male counterparts could all appear in the test.

Thirdly, hartals bring about tremendous miseries for the women who work as daily laborers or in the garment factories. The former suffers more than the male laborers since they cannot easily change their occupation and engage in plying rickshaws or sell groceries like a male. The problem of the lat-

ter is much more acute because absence or delay in going to work place during hartals lead to cut in wages and even to loss of jobs. On the other hand going out means exposing themselves to any kind of unpleasant situation. Moreover they are more easily victimized since they often are unable to put up organized protests like their male colleagues.

Fourthly in many private offices and factories there is a rule that if the place has to remain closed during a hartal, workers have to work on the following weekly holiday. This creates many problems for the female workers since going to work place during a holiday disrupts her household works which, is expected by all other members of the family. The usually does not affect the male members since they do not have to think about their household duties and there is no pressure of expectation upon them.

The interviews gave us an impression that frequent hartals by the political parties and the consequent sufferings of people are gradually eroding peoples' respect and confidence on democracy. Specially the issues on which hartals are called are usually so distant from the lives of the general people that they are perceiving political processes as more and more 'Rajnit' rather than people centric. The state of affairs urgently calls for responsible and tolerant approach of our political leadership. Such approach may contain elements like arranging referendum on peoples' opinion on hartal as a means of political protest, promise in the electoral manifesto about abandoning violent and prolonged hartals.

If measures are not taken soon the future of democracy in Bangladesh may be put into question. The politicians must realise that people's patience is running out.

The report is prepared by Nadira Khan, Novera, C.Zaman, Kaji Fahmida Farzana, Jasiya Khatun, Rahnooma Afroz, all students of First Year BSS, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka



Politicians taken to street: Whither public?

— Star file photo

# Restructuring Political Protest

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cons of the scopes provided by the parliament to differ, criticize on policy issues and ultimately influence policy making. In the USA the National Democratic Institution has been set up largely to serve such purposes. The MPs may also be sent abroad from time to time for learning on parliamentary affairs. Such institution may have two-fold effect regarding the practice of protest. Firstly, acquaintance with national issues will generate a more responsible behaviour in terms of calling prolonged hartals or frequently resorting to violence. Secondly, thorough knowledge about the parliamentary codes of conduct will help to create more positive atmosphere inside the parliament and thus discourage abandoning the parliament frequently.

A strong, effective and more accommodative parliament can contribute immensely in developing a positive atmosphere of political protest in our country.

**The Role of Media:** This pillar of democracy has tremendous potential for bringing positive changes. In fact the media, both print and electronic can be prime means for developing more democratic space for opposition voices. The role of electronic media has so far been

totally frustrating. Immediate privatization of the TV and Radio can have long term impact upon the culture of protest. If the oppositions find effective scope for transmitting their arguments in the electronic media, much of their anguish will be diminished. Even if the government continues to control these media, there should be at least one-hour of programme schedule for the opposition regarding their arguments and claims. In fact the total governmentalization of the electronic media is a major stumbling block for the development of a democratic political culture in our country.

Most of the newspapers are already carrying out their social responsibility by denouncing the hartal culture but they have to remain careful about maintaining continuity in their position under all ruling parties.

## Abolition of Political Mastani and Reorientation of Political Protest

Enough democratic space for the opposition will not only change the violent and destructive culture of protest but will also help to abolish the hideous trend of political mastani. If protest can be reoriented to

wards civil and democratic means, a momentous achievement will be the loss of refuge for political mastans, who are polluting the entire society particularly the educational institutions.

## Restructuring the Ends of Protest

While creating space for the opposition demands institutional and other reforms in the civil means of projecting protests, the opposition parties on their part must demonstrate responsible response. Primarily this calls for a neutral assessment about how far the goals of protest concern the strengthening of democracy and popular welfare. If the ends of protest merely concern the attainment of power it cannot thrive on civil and democratic norms. The ends will definitely call for means of violence and disorder, since they lack popular appeal and sometimes even understanding. The more responsibility the opposition will show in terms of their issues/goals of protest the easier it will be to formulate democratic spaces for them. The task of restructuring political protest actually requires high level of political maturity and of goodwill both on part of the government and opposition. Whether the politicians will be able to come out from their narrow power ambition and attain such virtues will decide the future of political protest culture as well as of the entire democratic order in our country.

Let sanity prevail upon our politicians, else the posterity will remember them only as politicians not as leaders.

Compiled by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed, Fellow, Centre For Alternatives

# More Reflections on Hartals

Continued from page 6

both international and national, for a democratic settlement of issues were tried but in vain. Leading citizens mediated for quite some time, citizens rallies were held, business community made few attempts, columns of newspapers were filled with messages to the then Opposition. It did not work, instead it escalated to new heights. With this freshness of memory one can not expect a dramatic change in the attitude of BNP in using this method of political action. Certainly no amount of persuasion can deter them from using this weapon once it begins to yield results. It may.

For organising hartals one needs a minimum number of political cadres and a crowd to participate in its implementation. Both are in abundance in Bangladesh.

To the disenfranchised poor who have no representation in the forums of the nation where their fate is decided, hartals are like Carnivals. More the merrier. Hartals provide opportunities to express their anger against the existing social order that is so unjust. Having all opportunities closed to access resources, the opportunity to destroy property allows the lid of anger to go off. We have witnessed such celebrations in our recent history. For the disenfranchised sections of the poor, hartals are days when they turn their weaknesses into strength; they feel the pleasures of power. They rule the streets.

And for the educated unemployed youths hartals provide opportunities for proving one's capacity to mobilise and in the

process future absorption into the system becomes surer. Future leaders are groomed in such political culture. Indeed, hartals provide training for these young people for all kinds of rent seeking activities that had gripped our everyday economy. A third factor is a sizable section of disinterested citizenry who see no stake in the political choices offered by ruling parties. Political change every time raises their hopes only to be diminished in no time.

## What Did It Go Wrong?

While searching for and debating alternative modes of political protest, the participants analyzed and discussed the nature of political parties, political culture, administration, and causes behind why hartal is frequently chosen as a tool for political protest. They identified various causal factors that give rise to the current negative and violent politics and raised some very pertinent questions.

**(a) A Zero Sum Game:** The participants felt that for both the major parties (AL & BNP) it was a zero sum political game. Their actions reflected the fact that none of the parties were willing to give the other any political space. This was also reflected in their negative and intolerant attitude towards the democratic process and institutions and 'tit for tat' political strategies. Participants stressed that any negative action by the major parties was justified using arguments like "they did it to us, we were in power" or "they did it first" (i.e. calling hartal on non-issues or hogging the mike/floor at the parliament, or partisan use of administrative offices etc). Moreover, because of the 'zero sum game attitude' and 'tit for tat' strategy the political parties failed to play constructive roles in making the democratic process or institutions work. One exasperated participant exclaimed, "I am tired of listening to their claims that they brought democracy etc. etc. when clearly none of the parties are showing any respect to the verdict of the people in national elections of 1991 or 1996 and letting the elected party work and the democratic institutions to function. Do they have any respect for people's judgement?" The participants also stressed that the political parties failed to take up issues that matter such as air pollution in Dhaka or primary education because of this 'power grabbing/ me first/ all is fair if I am in power attitude.' Selim ul Huq of BCAS pointed out that the political parties were not concerned with major issues such as air pollution in Dhaka, which is negatively affecting the children of this city.

**(b) Politicization of the Institutions:** Participants, especially the former civil servants present at the dialogue, stressed that the zero sum game attitude of both major parties has led to the politicization of the administration, legislature, and even in some cases the media (particularly electronic media) since it benefits the party in power. Extreme politicization has made the parliament, civil administration ineffective (and partisan), so the people or the political society can not put their trust in the political and administrative system. Mahfuz Anam the editor of the Daily Star pointed out that incident speaker's decision in the floor crossing of two BNP members has adversely affected the image of the parliament and the democratic process. Partisan actions and politicization of the administration have made the existing institutional protest mechanisms (utilization of parliament etc) ineffective.

**(c) Lack of Proper Institutional Mechanism:** The participants, though they raised questions about the validity of hartal and actions of the political parties, expressed that hartal was an effective tool. Ahmed Kamal of History department, DU, pointed out that hartal forced people/government to pay attention to the demands made by the opposition. Mohammed Jahangir, a well known media critic; Mahfuz Anam, Ahmed Kamal, Enam A. Chowdhury, a former civil servant; and many others pointed out that the government control over the electronic media, parliamentary media coverage, also parliamentary agenda leaves the opposition few alternatives than to take to the streets and call hartals. The other point that was raised was that internal machinery of the political parties is not democratic. Decisions are taken from the top and imposed. The rank and file has little say and makes it easier for the top leaders to impose any decisions regarding public protest measures. Imtiaz Ahmed of Center for Alternatives observed that there should be voting in a party on the question of calling a hartal and if two-third of members support it, only then the party may consider calling a hartal.

**(d) Hartal — Public Perception:** The participants identified hartal as an extreme tool of political protest. Many argued that the use of hartal as a tool against military regime or colonial powers was justified. However, they questioned the use of hartal against democratically elected governments (post 1991 period). Moreover, they asked whether given the socio-economic condition of Bangladesh calling hartals was justified. Participants felt that the political leaders have nothing at stake. One participant stated that the children of the political leaders study/ live abroad or the leaders have enough money to ensure their children's future in Bangladesh, so the political leaders would not be able to comprehend the agony and insecurity felt by the common people about their future and future of their children because of negative politics and violence.

Participants also stated that hartal succeeded because of the use of violence and non-democratic attitude of the hartal calling party. Many emphatically asked whether the public has the democratic right to not observe hartal if it wanted to. "What about my democratic right? How can these parties

call themselves democratic?" were the questions raised by Mohammed Jahangir. Participants also expressed that hartal will take place because violence pays. Ahmed Kamal pointed out that extortion, forcible appropriation of property etc were possible during hartal. These economic benefits help to sustain hartals. Moreover, other participants felt that anti-hartal campaign has always been given a political color, which is why it has failed. Furthermore, the typical middle class unwillingness to be vocal against violence, negative politics is another reason why anti-hartal movement has not been successful. Ahmed Kamal recalled the ridicule he and his friends experienced when they floated the idea to form a human chain protesting hartal and demanding a solution to the political stalemate in 1996.

## Some Suggestions

The participants came up with a wide range of suggestions for 'fixing the present system of negative politics.' Among them some were technical, some innovative, some debatable. Their suggestions varied from role of the media or parliament to reforming internal mechanism of political parties to creating an alternative platform/ building an anti-hartal movement etc.

## (a) Role of the Media: The suggestions made by the participants fell under two categories—

### (i) Print Media's Role in "De-emphasizing" the Importance of Hartal:

Many participants complained that the print media excessively publicized the news of hartal and news on hartal related activities (using banner headlines etc) that make hartals appear as successful and popular and encourage political parties to call hartals. Mohammed Jahangir, Ruby Gaznabi from Naripokho, and many others felt that the news reports on hartal needed to be toned down. As Mohammed Jahangir put it "the minute by minute report of hartal related activities (i.e. at 10:30 the hartal activists took the road, at 10:40 the anti-hartal activists came, at 10:45 the police were seen standing etc. are unnecessary." The participants also pointed out that this toning down should be a uniform act by all the newspapers, otherwise it would be ineffective. Several felt that the press council should take up this issue and arrange a roundtable on this issue. Ruby Gaznabi suggested that news columns on hartal should be left blank as a sign of protest. An IR student mentioned that the news columns should be completely blackened.

### Media as an Alternative Voice for the Opposition

The participants felt that both the print and electronic media can serve as the opposition's voice which might lessen the oppositions tendency to call hartals at the 'drop of a hat' to make their voices heard. The following were suggested:

• Dr. Hanif suggested that the print media could have a special page and try to print the opposition's view/ perception etc on various issues at least once a week.

• Autonomy of the electronic media was emphatically demanded by many so that it could act as a free agent and not be subjected to government control.

• Many suggested that the opposition should have access to the electronic media. Mahfuz Anam expressed that one hour TV time should be allotted (non-controlled) to the opposition everyday to broadcast their views. He felt that the party in power should not feel threatened by this since it would have control over the remaining 23 hours of TV time to express their views.

• The TV/ Radio should broadcast parliament sessions live (non-edited). A second TV channel can be set up to meet the costs.

• Public meeting of the opposition (called by any opposition MP) should be broadcast live.

**(b) Utilization of the Parliament:** The participants also felt that Jatiya Sangsad (JS) can serve as an effective arena for the opposition to voice their opinion, grievances, and views. They all agreed that the parliamentary practices should be opposition friendly. Some suggested that more time should be allotted to the opposition. Moreover, the speaker's ruling should not be used to prevent the opposition from presenting their views. Furthermore, the role of the speaker needs to be enhanced and non-partisan. The partisan practice in the parliament (i.e. floor crossing overlooked etc) should be avoided.

The participants expressed that since the MPs job is to be in the parliament and present cases of their constituencies, they should do that instead of being in the streets. Did not vote for them? Do we not pay them allowances to be in the JS? they asked. They also said that reformative measures need to be taken to make the parliament transparent and accountable. Rashid Ahmed, a physician, suggested that an upper house may help the parliament

Imagination is more important than knowledge

— Albert Einstein

# People's Perspective on Political Protest: A Report

A public dialogue on "Political Protest: Search for Alternatives" was jointly organized by Center for Alternatives and the Daily Star at the National Press Club auditorium on February 3, 1999. The objective of this dialogue was to bring together members of civil society and concerned citizens from various sections for exchanging their views on the current mode of political protest and to search for effective, viable alternative modes of political protest. Much of the discussion centered on hartal—validity of hartal, its negative impact, and causes behind hartals taking place and whether alternatives to hartal exist. The discussion also focused on other relevant and interlinked issues such as free media, effectiveness of the parliament, politicization of the administration etc. The point that was clearly made by the participants was that the current mode of political protest (post 1991), especially hartal, needs to be changed. The discussion is summed up below.

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to function more effectively.

**(c) Code of Conduct:** Ahmed Kamal stressed that a code of conduct needed to be formulated for all political parties (a national convention of all political parties can be held and the civil society and people would be included in the process). He explained that this could be implemented after the next election. Kamal argued that the political parties need to be made to understand that they will not be in power forever and that a code of conduct will be beneficial for them when they are in the opposition.

**(d) Alternative Modes of Protest:** Aly Zaker, a theatre artist, pointed out that since hartal is an extreme measure, political parties should consider whether other less drastic and innovative measures such as sit in (dharana), human chain, gherao, etc. can be taken to register protest (as effectively done by the opposition parties in India).

**(e) Dealing with Hartal:** Many suggestions were made regarding how to deal with hartal.

• Nurul Alam Chowdhury from a buying house pointed out that a referendum on hartal as a tool for political protest should be held during the next general elections. If the result of this referendum is NO, then the political parties should accept the people's verdict.

• Some suggested that laws should be enacted to ban hartals.

• Many suggested an anti-hartal public movement. They stressed that the members of the civil society should start this. Ahmed Kamal suggested an anti-hartal signature campaign. Some participants felt that to start an anti-hartal public movement extensive awareness raising need to be undertaken to build a critical mass against hartal. They argued that this could be done through cartoon depicting the negative impacts of hartal, extensive door to door campaign, publishing public survey reports on hartals, open public debates (inviting political parties to attend debates) etc.

• Aly Zaker felt that hartal on non-issues should be communicated to the people. Members of civil society and print media should build public opinion against this type of hartal. However, many questioned how an issue would be categorized as valid or a 'non-issue'.

• Mohammed Jahangir suggested that instead of calling a hartal and antagonizing and hampering people's daily activities, a hartal could be imposed only on government institutions.

**(f) Alternative Forum:** Many wanted a forum to be created to start anti-hartal campaign or to push for other mode of political protest. Shamim Ahmed the news anchor and others suggested that the members of the civil society led by President Shahabuddin can do it. Some thought that heads of armed forces, VC, secretaries, chief justices should be included in this forum. Kalimullah of Public Administration department, DU, suggested that a committee consisting of members of the civil society could be formed to act as a watchdog and keep account of the damages done during hartal and raise issues such as "who should foot the bill for these damages."

**(g) Institutional Reform and Depoliticization:** Some concrete suggestions were made in this regard.

• Imtiaz Ahmed stressed that internal party elections should be held so that the party decision making process is more democratic. He said that party elections should be made mandatory by the election commission.

• Ahmed Kamal suggested that since a 5-year term seemed too long to the Bangladeshi politicians, the serving time in the JS should be limited to 4 years.

• Mohammed Jahangir stated that mobile courts could be set up to punish those who destroy public/private property during hartal. However, some felt that the police might abuse this provision.

• Enam A. Chowdhury, Md. Kamrul Islam and other former civil servants stressed that without 'depoliticizing' the administration and establishing accountability negative politics will be there.

What was apparent from the discussion is that a critical mass needs to be created against negative politics. It is true that the suggestions about the media, institutional reform, parliamentary reform can be implemented in the short run. However, the political culture will change slowly. Two questions are vital in this regard. What strategies will the people want the political parties to take to register political protest since both the people and parties know that current western style democratic modes of protest may not work in Bangladesh? Secondly, is the conscious section of the people ready to make sacrifices (to build a critical mass) so that the political parties are forced to listen? The presence of the audience at the dialogue shows that at least some are willing to try. There are also others. But are the political parties listening?

Report prepared by Sohela Nazreen, Fellow, Centre for Alternatives.

The topic of the next issue is "Electoral Process in South Asia". Scholars, researchers, activists and all other interested parties at home and abroad are requested to send their articles to Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No. 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Faculty, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (880-2) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net