

The Daily Star

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Dhaka, Friday, March 5, 1999

Dialogue in Prospect?

The European Union has voiced its serious concern over the current political situation in Bangladesh. As our development partner it felt obliged to address a few words of caution and advice to the government and opposition in Bangladesh. The EU declaration on the political situation in Bangladesh is featured by a thought-provoking warning: if the political downside were not arrested soon enough 'effective cooperation' between Bangladesh and the EU would be rendered 'difficult.' Secondly, dismayed at the lack of adherence to the elementary principles of democratic governance, it called upon the government and political leaders of the opposition alliance to strike a balance between respect for the decisions of the parliamentary majority and that for the legitimate rights of the opposition.

So long as we fail to set our anarchic political culture in order, we shall keep counting such advice from external quarters for the simple reason that they are bound in working relations with us and have a stake in stability. What we need to realise — and must try to head off to protect our national image — is that the EU's words of caution and advice may well have just marked the beginning of the pre-1996 phenomenon of whole world getting concerned about our political deadlock running amok for others to notice and feel sorry, if not sore, about.

Of late though, two developments have taken place in the political sound-bytes reflecting a positive outlook of flexibility on the part of the ruling party to draw the opposition into talks. First, the city corporation polls are not going to be held hot on the heels of the municipal elections that left a bad taste in the mouth of the opposition alliance. These have been deferred until after the upazila polls are held, so that a long interregnum potentially exists between now and when any of those elections will have taken place. Secondly, the Telecommunication Minister Mohd Nasim who has been assigned to contact the opposition for a dialogue telephonically conveyed a government offer on Tuesday to Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, the BNP Secretary General. The ruling party is for talks with no preconditions attached while the BNP maintains that its five-point demands, inclusive of the latest one relating to annulment of the results of the just-held municipal polls, will have to be met in toto before any dialogue can take place.

Our editorial stance in the wake of the municipal polls has been that the ruling party should, after the passage of the elections, work with the opposition alliance to find a way to step back from the confrontational course. It is interesting to read a sign of creativity being reflected, perhaps for the first time, by the ruling party in its thinking approach. It looks as though it is trying hard to be accommodative and conciliatory to the opposition. The reason cited for the postponement of the remaining pourashava polls is enactment of suitable provisions in parliament for the direct election of female ward commissioner to the city corporations. It is an old issue revived by the government to apparently defer the election schedules and give the dialogue option a chance. It is true though that two of the four city corporations where the AL is dominant needed delimitation of constituencies, a rather time-taking exercise which should have been completed in good time for the polls to take place in one go. The ruling party may have planned to hold the upazila polls ahead of the remaining municipal polls for tactical reasons, so it is speculated by certain circles. The ruling party's calculation could be that polls to 463 upazillas being a massive local government-level electoral exercise, the BNP may not like to keep out of them, so that its boycott might end that way.

Without buying into such speculations, let's urge the opposition to forge ahead after the realisation of the futility of boycotting local level polls where the people's heart is, and the ruling party to take the opposition demands on board for a sympathetic round of consideration.

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Of Politics and Parties: Temperance or Violence?

What happens next? How will Shukur Ali and his family survive? Will a skinny woman carrying two babies tap on car-windows at the traffic light and chant "One taka, two taka Begum Sahib"? May be the hut that Shukur Ali rented and cannot pay for any more will go up in flames. These neighborhoods often burn as happened the other day in Agargaon. Where will they move to? Squatters as they have been, they were not really there in the first place. They have no legal place and now that Shukur Ali is disabled, they have forfeited their right to life.

It is a slum neighborhood, a neighborhood of tin-roofed makeshift huts — long and narrow without windows or even smoke holes. Each hut cradles its neighbors at the back and sides opening on a shriveled dirt lane that meanders into a maze of similar lanes. At the end of these lanes, as an American journalist puts it are "a few water-spigots sticking a foot or so out of the mud and some latrine-holes in cement-block shades". How many people live in each hut? More than possibly can.

This is where Shukur Ali lives with his wife and two little children. All day long he pedals a cycle-rickshaw to earn dinner for the family and for himself. So, late in a fateful haral day, he was waiting near the National Press Club for his next trip. Uniformed policemen were all around. Suddenly, a bomb was thrown and Shukur Ali's right arm, torn away. At that time, perhaps, or later his wife was squatting on a dirt floor nursing their baby and preparing the dinner of rice and dal. She had not heard the dreadful news as yet.

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What for? They say it is for democratic rights. May be as Theban poet Pindra Said, violence is natural and justified in the contest for power, call it by whatever name you like. But freedom for the multitude is a more sonorous cry. And this is true for both those who use violence as an instrument for gaining power and those who resist in a similar manner to remain in power.

I recall the Platonic dialogue between the Athenian stranger and Clineas in Laws IV: "Consider them to whom our state is to be entrusted. For there is a thing which has occurred times without number in states. That when there has been a contest of power, those who gain the upperhand so entirely monopolize the government, as to refuse all share to the defeated party — they live watching one another, the ruling class being in perpetual fear that some one who has recollection of former wrongs will come into power and rise against them. Now according to our view such governments are not politics at all, nor are laws right which are passed for the good of particular classes and not for the good of the whole state. States which have such laws are not politics but parties, and their notion of justice are simply unmeaning. I say this, because I am going to assert that we must not entrust the government in your state to anyone because he is rich, or because he possesses any other advantage such as strength or stature or again birth. But he who is most obedient to the law of the state, he shall win the palm. And when I call the rulers the servants or ministers of law, I give them this name not for the sake of novelty but because I certainly believe that upon such service or ministry depends the well or ill being of the state. For the state in which law is subject and has no authority, I perceive to be on the highway to ruins, but I see that the state in which the law is above the rulers, and the rulers are the inferiors of law has salvation, and every blessing which the Gods can confer".

Athenian then goes on to give the parable of two types and vocal exercises have precludes and overtures, which are sort of artistic beginnings intended to help the strain which is to be performed. Lyric measures and music of every other kind have preludes framed with wonderful care."

Similarly when the law-giver utters a preface, a prelude or a preamble of the law, it creates a good-will in the person or persons to whom it is addressed so that by reason of this good-will, they may receive it with better understanding and follow the same with grace. Law, therefore, in good governance is in two parts, the pure and simple law and the exhortation or prelude to law. There are two instruments for legislation and its enforcement — persuasion and coercion. A preamble fashioned with care can result in voluntary acceptance. Pure and simple force or compulsion on the other hand, begets opposing violence.

A statesman or a lawgiver ought to have three things in view. First that the country and the people for which he or he is responsible "should be free, and secondly, be at unity, and thirdly, should have understanding." For how can there be the least shadow of wisdom when there is no harmony? Reverting back to Plato's dialogue one could say. "If anyone gives too great a power to anything, too much food to the body, too much authority to the mind, and does not observe the mean, everything is overturned and in the wantonness of excess runs in the one case to disorders, and the other to injustice, which is the child of excess." The moderate is always better than the immoderate, the worse. And surely justice does not grow apart from temperance.

So, I end with Plato's invocation to justice: To justice, he who would be happy holds fast, and follows in her company with all humility and order. But he who is lifted up with pride, or elated by wealth, rank or beauty, who is young and foolish, and thinks that he has no need of any guide, but is able himself to be the guide of others, he, I say, is left deserted of God; and being thus deserted, he takes to others who are like himself, and dance about throwing all things into confusion, and many think that he is a great man, but in a short time he pays a penalty which justice cannot but approve, and is utterly destroyed. Wherefore, seeing that human things are just ordered, what should a wise man do or think or not do or think?...The temperate man is the friend of God, for he is like him, and the intemperate man is unlike him, and different from him and unjust.



Do I Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

The Path to the Presidency Passes through the Prison

Olu Falae has refused to accept the election results and plans to challenge the results in court. A refusal to recognise the outcome by Falae would taint the vote and undermine the country's return to civilian rule after 15 years of military government. Acceptance of the election results by the international community is vital for Nigeria, hoping finally to cast off its image as a pariah and in need of outside funding to cushion the blow of a collapse in oil price in the international market.

THE presidential election held earlier this week in Nigeria, one the D-8 member countries, demonstrated the truth of an often-quoted African maxim: that the path to the presidency passes through the prison. At this time last year, both the candidates in the presidential election were in jail as political prisoners.

In the election, former military ruler General Olusegun Obasanjo won more than 60 per cent of the vote marking a return to power two decades after he stepped down from office. The election results broke down pretty much as expected. Obasanjo made a clean sweep of the eastern regions and the Muslim-dominated northern regions while his opponent, former finance minister, Olu Falae managed to take his ethnic Yoruba homeland in the 'south-west'.

Olu Falae is charging widespread vote rigging. International election monitors have expressed serious concerns over many reports of ballot box stuffing in different parts of the country. However, they have accused supporters of both candidates of participating in the vote fraud.

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At this time last year, both Obasanjo and Falae were in jail. They were the victims of the corrupt military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. Obasanjo was jailed for his alleged role in a 1995 military coup. Since Abacha died of a heart attack last summer, Nigeria has undergone a spectacular change in political mood. Abacha's successor and the country's current military ruler, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, released political prisoners, scheduled legislative and presidential elec-

tions, and set in motion one of the most important political transitions in Africa since the end of apartheid.

General Abubakar has promised to hand over power to the newly elected President before the end of May. He left a three-month gap after this week's election to give the judicial system time to settle any legal challenges to the vote.

General Obasanjo faces a daunting task in consolidating the country's return to democracy. He first gained fame as the military leader who took the surrender of Biafran separatist forces in the 1967-70 civil war. He took power in 1976 after the assassination of Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammad. In 1979 he became one of the first African military leaders to relinquish power to civilians voluntarily. However, his elected successors were overthrown by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1983, and the military has governed ever since.

An attempt to restore democracy in 1993 only plunged the country into deeper crisis when the army annulled the elections that businessman Moshood Abiola was poised to win. Dictator Sani Abacha took power in the ensuing political chaos.

Abacha's sudden death last summer and Abiola's in prison several weeks later removed the two protagonists blocking a fresh start at democracy.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation. Corruption and mismanagement under a string of military men for all but a decade since independence in 1960 have ruined the economy and impoverished most Nigerians. The country has become a debilitated giant, squandering most of the \$250 billion oil revenue it earned over the past two decades. Today the economy is in serious trouble, facing an external debt of about \$30 billion as well as the lowest price of oil in over a decade.

In the last two decades, the military rulers not only left the economy in a state of near-collapse, but gravely weakened the institutions within the country including, but not limited to the civil service, the judiciary, and the education system. They also undermined the constitution which was drafted in the late 1970s in order to hold together a country fresh from the Biafran civil war.

The economic crisis has exacerbated the regional divisions within the country. The strains between the country's Muslim-dominated north and west and the Christian-dominated east and south are emerging. The eastern and southern regions of the country feel that

mined all previous governments, both military and civilian. So ingrained is the practice of corruption that few now understand how to do business or administer government cleanly. The job of rebuilding the shattered economy should be a top priority of the future administration. In one of Africa's richest countries, millions now live in poverty.

Obasanjo also has to implement the provisions of the last economic reform programme agreed with the IMF in the late 1980s. Unless these reforms are implemented, modest relief on offer from the IMF will not be available. And this will spell disaster for an economy which is reeling from low oil revenue. Last, but not the least, he has to tackle the issue of regional disparity. If he fails, the long term unity and integrity of the country cannot be taken for granted.

Now the big question is: will the current military leadership headed by General Abubakar hand over power to Obasanjo after his scheduled inauguration on May 29. If the past history of Nigeria is any indication, several dangers including the possibility of another military takeover still lurk in the run-up to the scheduled transfer of power.

International monitors have so far refused to endorse the presidential election as being free and fair. Citing a glaring disparity between the modest number of voter turnout at polling stations and the high number of ballots cast, foreign observers are refusing to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election. The absence of foreign endorsement raises unpleasant memories for many Nigerians. In 1993, charges of irregularities led to the cancellation of the country's last presidential election results and paved the way for the takeover of the government by General Abacha, who ruled the country ruthlessly for four years.

Adding to the uncertainty are reports that several military officers with close ties to General Abacha are opposed to an Obasanjo presidency because of their role in convicting him in a 1995 coup plot. Obasanjo was arrested for his alleged role in that coup and released only after Abacha's death. These officers are worried that a Obasanjo administration would seek revenge against them.

The next three months represent a time of vulnerability for the fragile democratic movement in the country. It represents an opportunity for those not happy with the democratic transition. Sullen and fearful of the retribution that might follow years of democratic and human rights abuses, they are itching to stage a new coup.

Considering the country's history, such fear is warranted. Since 1960, the country has endured at least six coups and several failed attempts to seize power from both civilian and military governments.

There has hardly been a single fair or clean election in Nigeria. Despite the evidence of vote fraud, it is clear that Obasanjo has won the election, even if all fraudulent votes are discounted. The holding of an election is by itself a rare cause for celebration in a country that has known little democracy, almost no good government and is seen as one of the most corrupt in the world.

As a fellow member in the group of D-8 countries, Bangladesh can only hope that a democratically elected government will represent Nigeria in all future dealings. As a nation, we have discarded autocratic rulers and are ourselves in the process of developing and nurturing democratic ideals and institutions. We should, therefore, prefer to deal closely only with those countries who uphold similar democratic principles and values.

Despite being independent since 1950, the trappings of electoral democracy has proved to be something of a novelty for Nigeria. We can only hope that the latest return to democracy will usher a new era of stability in a politically volatile nation.



Connecting the Dots.
Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

Friday Mailbox

Political suicides
Sir, Awami League, supremely haughty, brash, arrogant, patronising about 'possessing' Bangabandhu (simply because incidentally he happened to be an Awami Leaguer, he could have belonged to any other party), and dictating terms to all and sundry in an autocratic manner (not visible to themselves, otherwise this letter would not have been written); appears to be digging its own grave for the above reasons. Self-survival exercises does not mean working in public interest.

AL lost the general elections in 1991 (the excuses are there all right), and BNP came back to power again, elected by the people (employing the "voters' right", a term backed to death by AL). Now AL is in power with barely 37 per cent or one-third of the total votes cast during 1996; and the party is behaving autocratically, misusing and overusing the Bangabandhu logo and state power, with poor advice on mass psychology. Can't they stand on their own feet without the above-mentioned logo?

The party must realise that there are millions of silent citizens whose opinions are not available in the mass media. Moral support is something invisible and cannot be measured. The other invisible factor is whether to withhold the benefit of the doubt to a party on any issue, whether AL, BNP, in the court, or in a family case.

Tolerance is missing in abundance; resulting in frequent harlots, a language which is understood by those in power — a weapon relentlessly used by AL on 180 occasions, to prevent Bangladesh taking off on development and prosperity (who egged them on against the country's interest has to be probed to the satisfaction of the public). Today we are moving backward rather than forward, thanks to the patriotic spirit displayed by the same politicians fighting the demons of imagination.

It sounds funny that when AL is in power, the country is in all sorts of danger. Also the immediate post-revolutionary period (1970s) was more sensitive and turbulent, than the decades subsequently; so why treat both the periods on the same basis, as far as the 'danger levels' are concerned? It is time the politicians shunned the patriarchal or matriarchal approach. After 28 years we citizens are out of the spoon-feeding stage!

The public is not gullible, and the AL is trying to sell unsalable products to the people. How we survived for two decades when AL was out in the wilderness?

The politicians should stop talking about democracy and fooling the citizens because there is no democracy inside and outside the political parties. This question is never taken up publicly by the politicians.

There are seven veils of transparency and purdah. Only a new generation of political leaders can usher in transparent politics. It is time for the old guards in all the parties to retire gracefully. Don't sell off the lid — it might explode! Ventilation is good for circulation (of democracy!).

A Voter Since 1943
Dhaka

The political solution
Sir, It looks to me there is a simple solution to the bedeviled politics in the country: provided the current leaders of the two major parties agree to come to some sort of an agreement on the recognition, in some form, of the main leaders of each others' party, now both deceased.

There are practical ways of keeping alive history positively, not negatively. The solution to the end of the British Raj took 200 years. How long our problem will last on this mere personality issue? It looks ridiculous to continue it after 28 years and tell the public there is no possible solution.

If the weaknesses or the negative sides are publicised too much, then there would be no solution or progress; assuming that men are mortal and they can make mistakes or have weaknesses. Their positive historical achievements are facts, and have to be recognised in some form, without trading on the toes.

This simple sacrifice of forgive and forget has to be carried out for the unity and progress of the nation, at present hostage to charisma, ego and sentiment. There must be some give and take in national and public interest. This is the basic theme of a negotiation, sitting around a round (not square) table.

The problem is that no third independent group is willing to take up the initiative to bring the two parties together on this or some other line of approach. The fundamental obstacle is a psychological one: possible loss of face.

One way to overcome it is to start a peaceful mass campaign urging the leaders of the two parties to sit down together and sign an agreement. They must bow to public opinion, because their strength come from the masses.

The country has suffered much due to the 'sabotage', that is, the negative movements of both the parties at one time or another. They are concentrating everything on fighting each other, and hardly doing anything (5-10 per cent) for the country. It is time the masses took notice to stop this nasty and destructive game. No one gains: the parties, the country, the nation, the government, or the people.

Leadership has to rise above the human foibles.

A Senior Citizen
Dhaka

Bold Malaysia
Sir, There are many critics of Mahathir's Malaysia policy, but he deserves some credit and admiration for single-handedly trying to face the combined pressure of the powerful West carrels who have been desperately trying to penetrate into the Asian region since the early 80s, when Mahathir came into power. The North succeeded in demolishing Suharto after three decades. The instability of the capital in the SAARC region is no accident.

The oil gas and energy reserves are sought to be controlled globally by US led aggressive political pressure backed with arms deals or incidents. Bangladesh is in the news because of its natural reserves of energy resources. The CIS is under intense US pressure for market control its oil and gas outputs. The ME trouble spots are oil-centred (the one exception is communal-led). Texas oil company is clinging in Pakistan even after the terrorist attack on its personnel.

The Thais went the easy way, Singapore had to be kept surviving for the linkage into the region (now facing erosive recession in mini doses). Brunei has oil, and may be a secret target when its time comes. The two ends of communist Myanmar (Bangladesh and ASEAN) have to be controlled for obvious reasons. South Korea's dramatic collapse could not be anticipated?

Mahathir is not unpredictable. He made the same treatment to UK ("Don't buy British") in the mid-'80s, and forced Margaret Thatcher to fly down to make amends. He sacked in No 2 in the cabinet for reasons not openly publicised (the seditious charge has been withdrawn perhaps not to divulge sensitive information to the big powers).

Bangladesh is under pressure in the gas and energy sector, and CHT has the potentiality of becoming a globally sensitive area for strategic reasons. The SAARC is being homogenised for ulterior purposes for foreign power groups. The bus trips between New Delhi and Lahore and Dhaka-Calcutta are obviously subtle 'demoralisation' processes, perhaps initiated from capitals outside the region, for bigger and more unanimous shadows of looming hang-overs. In good diplomacy, only the tip of the iceberg should be visible.

The soft-core delaying tactics in Bosnia and Kosovo may be contrasted to the hard-core aggressiveness in Iraq and the Asian countries. Iraq is bombed without warning but Milosevic is served with hundreds of warnings and the delaying tactics are discriminatory in nature in the ethnic sense (West Christianity vs Muslim independent state in Europe). Still the US expects that her credibility should be respected by the aggrieved nations in Asia and elsewhere, especially by the Muslim nations.

The super power hegemony has to be carefully monitored for a combined stand (the Third World countries, now that the UN has been rendered impotent (Russia is trying for a diplomatic and big-power come back as a diversionary tactic); and WTO is controlled by the industrialized nations. Except for the USA, the First World countries are in recession and declining in power, and resources and trade. Europe is practically finished, and Japan can't help the super power, for more than one reason.

The world is waiting for the next big fall in the Wall Street during the coming couple of decades. The stability is delicately poised. The US is desperate to make a few strategic moves while there is still time. The collective pressure on the super power has to be maintained, not only as a defence mechanism, but to contain, marginally at least, aggressive overtures by the outsiders in the DCs, LDCs, and NICs. In diplomatic jargon, there may peace on the western front, but reality is coated with virtual cosmetics. The regional configurations in Asia have to unite; as also the Muslim world. It is time to call the spade a spade.

Aliif Zabr
Dhaka

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.