

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

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.

Of late though, two developments have taken place in the political sound-bites 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 upazilas 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 Polities 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 hartal 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 Cineas 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 polities 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 polities 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



of physicians. "For doctors, as I may remind you, some have gentler, other a ruder method of cure; and as children ask the doctor to be gentle with them, so will we ask the legislators to cure our disorders with the gentlest cures." An insolent and inferior doctor prescribes "what experience suggests as if he had exact knowledge; and when he has given his orders, like a tyrant, he rushes off with equal assurance to some other who is ill".

But the compassionate doctor goes into the nature of the disorder. He "enters into discourse with the patient and his friends, and is at once getting information from the sick man, and also instructing him as far as he is able, and he will not prescribe for him until he has first convinced him. At last, when he has brought his patient more and more under his persuasive influence and set him on the road to health.

he attempts to effect a cure. Now which is the better way of proceeding in a physician?"

What is true for the healer of the body, the physician, is equally true of the Statesman and the lawgiver. An arbitrary command may be law in abstraction like the tyranny of the doctor of a meager sort. Language of conciliation preferring a law, on the other hand, is like the persuasive ministrations of a gentler doctor who prepares a patient for the road to health before administering a cure. As

Plato argues: "All discourses and vocal exercises have preludes and overtures, which are sort of artistic beginnings intended to help the

view. First that the country and the people for which she 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 overthrown 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. Therefore, seeing that human things are just ordered, what should a wise man 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.

Similarly when the lawgiver 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

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 combine the pressure of the powerful West cartels who have been desperately trying to penetrate into the ASEAN region since the early 80s, when Mahathir came into power. The North succeeded in demolishing Suharto after three decades. The instability of the capitals in the SAARC region is no accident.

The oil and gas 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.

Thais went the easy way. Singapore had to be kept surviving for the linkage into the region (now facing erosion 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?

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 the same 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 unsaleable 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 citizens.

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 seal 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 beheaded 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 other's 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 of 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 treading 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

The work 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 defense mechanism, but to contain, marginally at least, aggressive overtures by the outsiders in the DCs, IDCs, 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.

Alif Zabir Dhaka

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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 of 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 southwest.

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.

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-col-

lapse, 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

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 an Obasanjo administration would seek revenge against them.

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