

Sense and Nonsense

Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia's Palitan Maidan speech on Monday contained some observations and arguments that neither stand to logic stretched to its most liberal limits nor do they reflect well on her sense of responsibility as head of a government in-waiting. On top of the harangue that the government has handed over the CHT region to the terrorists, armed and trained by India for decades, she has drawn this baffling conclusion that the reported threat to declare Swadhin Bangabhum comprising 10 southern and western districts from New Delhi on 26 March was, according to her, an outcome of the signing of the CHT agreement.

That as a political party chief she would have a natural concern for the country's sovereignty and independence is not to be normally contested, but that hardly leaves any room for her connecting things that do not mesh and in the process make herself sound utterly naive and irresponsible. Here she is talking about a peace treaty that is internationally regarded as having marked an end to a two-decade-old conflict with a potential for development in the hitherto insurgency-ridden region. By being sweeping in her remarks, she is also straying into the delicate turf of bilateral relations with neighbouring India, a country she has to be interactive with, if and when she became the head of government again.

Setting aside the question of what others might be thinking, how are our own people judging her by the latest irresponsibility swing to her utterances? Surely they cannot accept the reputations without proof, but what is even worse and dreadful is that they tend to make the confusion worse confounded for all practical purposes.

But it is Khaleda Zia who should be actually providing the nation with an alternative vision of the future, thereby creating a high prospect of gaining confidence and greater credibility for her image among the people. As an instance of what positive vibes she can generate by constructive remarks and suggestions let's cite this one: Speaking at the concluding session of the SAARC conference of Speakers and Parliamentarians in the city on Sunday she put 'out a call for the promotion of the role of the opposition in countries of the region. We endorse her views fully adding that speakers ought to be not only the custodians of parliaments but also the protectors of the opposition. Indeed, we cannot think of making the parliament effective without zeroing in on the role of the speaker and ensuring that it is played in an absolutely non-partisan manner. If necessary, he should tilt a bit towards the opposition to err on the side of neutrality.

Khaleda Zia for her part needs to return to her responsible mould of earlier days, both in words and deeds. If she is present at the parliament more often than not then it would be difficult to ignore the opposition.

War against Arsenic

Water has become synonymous to woes in recent years for a large segment of the country's population, especially those living in the rural areas. First, they came to know, thanks to the international donor agencies and the non-government organisations, that surface water they had been using for generations worked as a carrier for different diarrhoeal diseases. Ground water, they were told, was the way out. Now, when they have just made the switch from surface water to ground water, they are faced with even more potent a danger called arsenic. Arsenic contamination has exposed them, approximately two-thirds of the population, to health hazard that may often lead to fatal consequences. Remedy, they hear now, is a switch back to the age-old source — ponds and other natural water bodies — for potable water after necessary treatment, of course. One wonders should the concept of combining traditional wisdom with modern innovation in finding safe alternatives to drinking water, bounced at Monday's seminar on Arsenic in Ground Water: Searching for Alternatives to Rural Water Supply, not have been entertained in the first place.

Our efforts towards elimination of water-related health hazards, beyond an iota of doubt, has been exclusively donor-driven. So busy have we been in acting on their plans that we have not felt the need either to weigh the potential of our own resources nor to frame a policy in this regard. Even worse, we have not cared for a comprehensive study of the country's water chemistry before execution of these donor-devised projects. The arsenic aggression has indeed been an eye-opener for the think-tanks. Time has come for realisation that the donor input in this area, to whatever extent we need it, must come into play according to our plans that take into account the country's bio-chemical disposition. Unless we come up with a comprehensive plan, people will continue to switch from one solution to another.

Ordeal for the Homebound

Season for a quick buck at the expense of innocent passengers has arrived once again. City's inter-city bus and launch terminals are the hubs for such activities by organised gangs known as 'aggyan' (trancing) and 'tana' (pulling and snatching) parties. As Eid-ul-Azha is round the corner thousands of city-dwellers, who have roots in the towns and villages of Bangladesh, will make a dash for sweet home to offer 'Qurbani' and spend a few days with near and dear ones away from the din and bustle of the metropolis.

Many of these people will take the surface route by bus and the queue is already growing longer and longer. This is the most appropriate time for the swindlers to strike. And this is nothing new in this part of the world. What is alarming is the alleged involvement of some unscrupulous members of the law enforcing agencies, especially the police and the Ansars, in these nefarious acts of cheating and robbing the innocent homebound passengers at these terminals. Police are already active in some terminals and have arrested two persons, according to press reports. According to them, these parties become active at bus and launch terminals during the festival holidays when the rush of passengers is pronounced. Knowing the area and extent of their operation and, in some cases, the operators and their mentors, police must act timely and boldly to nab these anti-socials for making the journeys of taxpaying citizens free from such hazards and also comfortable. Extra posse of police should be deployed in strategic points to ward off attacks by the 'party men' and if necessary plain-clothesmen should be put on duty to help the uniformed personnel. This will act as a definite deterrent against the snatchers and muggers at the terminals.

In Quest of Democratic Governance

by Prof Ataur Rahman

Despite numerous predicaments that the country is faced with, remarkable resilience of its common people against adversities provide grounds for optimism. It is, therefore, imperative that the political leaders show ingenuity by overcoming their myopic and 'tunnel' vision, and work with broad consensus at least on some vital national issues.

Historical circumstances that led to the emergence of the Bangladesh drew its inspirations from the democratic ideals of free and fair participation, an exploitation-free society, self-reliant economy and a vibrant nationalism based on language and culture. Despite many sacrifices that accompanied Bangladesh's birth and the unique homogeneity of the nation, we are now witnessing an increasingly 'fractured polity', a dual political culture and a political leadership with irreconcilable beliefs, symbols and prejudices. The much-coveted transition to democratic governance from 1991 that rekindled hopes and expectations among the people for a better future are gradually dwindling at the altar of political bickering and unmitigated power conflict of the politicians.

The dawn of 1990s witnessed

successful transition of Bangladesh to a democratic system of government after a hiatus of almost two decades of authoritarian rule. Creation of democratic regime was, however, not easy. Tentative understanding and agreement made among the parties during their movement against the authoritarian rule broke after a consensus on parliamentary system of democracy. No doubt, the democratisation in the country began to face numerous transition problems of establishing constitutional and electoral systems, reducing the influence of the military in national politics, replacing or reorienting pro-authoritarian bureaucracy, repealing or modifying laws that are unsuitable for democracy and revitalising the institutions like the parliament, political parties and civil society.

The major challenge came

from governing a highly turbulent polity with a contradictory tradition of rule and conducting politics in an environment of mistrust, fractious political culture and rent-seeking behaviour of political elite. Despite such constraints, the first three years of the Khaleda Zia regime made some notable success in the governing process: it

was able to reinvoke the bureaucracy, bring confidence in law-enforcing agencies, restore the independent character of the judiciary and revive the image and status of parliament.

Compared to previous four parliaments, the fifth national parliament had representation of major political parties spent

400 working days, passed five budgets, saw the passage of 172 bills and witnessed the formation of 55 parliamentary committees. The government was

also careful not to muzzle the opposition too much through coercive methods despite continuous 'harts', strikes, sieges and 'blockades' given by them.

Advent of democracy by itself could not also produce solutions to the country's serious 'contextual' social and economic problems. On the economic front, the BNP government was able to retrieve the economy from colossal mismanagement and distortions perpetuated during the previous government. Through stabilisation and structural adjustment policy, the democratic govern-

ment took a series of austerity measures, rationalised the tax structure, introduced the new Value Added Tax (VAT) system and streamlined credit facilities of nationalised banks and other financial institutions. New incentives were given to encourage private investment particularly from foreign countries and some measures were initiated to check the widespread loss of confidence in an increasingly corrupt and mismanaged public sector. In fact, in 1993, the public sector lost Taka 20 billion, equivalent to 27 per cent of Bangladesh's Annual Development Programme and two per cent of GDP.

Although, the Khaleda Zia

government could not make a significant breakthrough in economic front the growth rate

began modest hovering around 4.5 per cent annually, did not

face any serious economic crisis.

Investment climate showed

some signs of improvements

during this period, although

political disturbances in the

form of strikes and harts often

put a damper on attracting

significant foreign direct

investment. Export boom in

garnet and comfortable foreign

exchange position enabled the

government to weather many

economic crises and political

setbacks. Main economic wor-

ries came from unemployment

situation, income inequality

and endemic poverty of the

majority of the populace. There

is, however, no doubt that some

progress was made during this

period towards poverty alleviation

and through the government's

human development efforts

and social uplift programmes

of scores of NGOs. Greater awareness was also created

to address rural and urban

poverty issues.

The main challenge for the

regime, thus, came not from the

economic front but political

front. Success of a parliament

government, as experiences

of other countries show, hinges

mainly on the level of

development of political parties

and the far-sightedness of their

leaders especially the prime

minister and the leader of the

opposition. These positions are

more constitutional, limited and

less-exalted, and the leaders

have to sustain their power

and influence on the party and

the state power operating

within certain rules and traditions.

The government of

Khaleda Zia could not properly

handle this crucial aspect of

parliamentary politics in an

environment where political

institutionalisation was diffi-

cult and politicians were high-

power centric.

Politics in Bangladesh has

important linkages with per-

sonality of the leaders. The

personality clashes of leaders

coming from hereditary politi-

cal process and symbolising dif-

ferent values and prejudices of

often brook no compromise.

Therefore, despite many posi-

tions and positions of the par-

liament, the opposition and the

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