

Can't be Condoned

NONE of it appeared to be incidental or accidental at Bijoynagar during the half-day hartal on Tuesday. It was a clear case of the police coming mentally and physically ready to commit the excesses it did. This would seem corroborated by the widely reported haughty remarks of the Motiheel Thana OC that he even had 'orders' to shoot any journalist or picketer. We cannot regard this as a slip of tongue because here the question is not so much of whether a bullet was actually fired or not as that of a frame of mind at play.

We are so thoroughly outraged that we find no word strong enough to condemn the three specific incidents that took place on the day: (a) the scandalous, obnoxious and utterly obscene stripping of the saree of a lady opposition activist; (b) hell-bent onslaught on BNP MPs; and (c) the audacious assault of journalists on duty.

Those who committed these offences deserve absolutely no mercy because they have stained and undermined rudimentary democratic norms and constitutional rights. Why did the police obstruct and attack the BNP demonstrators? They were taking out a procession and marching peacefully. Even assuming that when they were stopped by the police there was a bomb blast, could the situation be not handled short of a heavy handed pounce that was made on women protesters and the BNP MPs? And what was the photojournalists' fault 'except' that they were covering the incidents?

Basically the questions we would like to put to the government are: Is there a ban on processions? If not, then why should the police have prevented the opposition from taking out the procession through the route they wanted to. If the police were constrained to redirect the procession from 'sensitive' spot they could very well do so without resorting to violence.

The Home Minister has expressed his regrets over the incidents and not unsurprisingly a probe committee has been promptly formed to go into them. Hopefully, these are not palliative pacification measures, and they would stave off such a gross mishandling of political demonstrations in future including deterrent punishment meted out to the hyperactive offenders.

We would like the Home Minister to make it clear whether the opposition has any right to conduct demonstrations to press home what they deem to be public demands. If this is not done then one might be free to assume that it all happened through the ruling party's indulgence.

System at Fault

CHAIRMEN of the country's five education boards at their Tuesday's review meeting with the education ministry have revealed an ugly truth: influential people in the society and their hired hands, teachers and, in some cases, district administrations are abetting the examinees' resorting to unfair means in the ongoing Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations. Violence at different centres and huge number of expulsions on grounds of cheating have marred this year's exams from the very start. On completion of the fourth day of the HSC schedule, more than 15,000 students have been expelled under the five boards. Besides, there have been numerous incidents of violence, engineered by expelled students and their accomplices, turning some centres into battle-fields. That the education secretary has advised the deputy commissioners to seek BDR's help is a strong indication of how grave the situation has become.

It seems, however, that the solution to the problem, which has snowballed into a crisis, does not lie in such knee-jerk reactions. The education minister's prescription of engaging people courageous and determined to fight the evil in place of the ineffective and allegedly indifferent lot would not work, either. What holds the key, it appears, is a deeper look into the crisis and, as the meeting observed, a change in the examination and the education systems.

The meeting has come up with certain recommendations which, in our views, have touched the heart of the problem. The minister's directive for a change in question format should go a long way towards controlling the alarmingly increasing trend. We expect the government to give more thoughts on this and come up with remedial measures. The policy-planners must realise that the extant system is dysfunctional. Teachers are not helping either. Imperative at this point of time is formulation of an education system that, by eliminating scopes of resorting to unfair means, instills in the students the urge to learn and deliver.

Scared WDB Officials

RULING party goons have allegedly terrorised Water Development Board officials and their families to flee Rajshahi Monday last for safety of their lives, according to reports published in The Daily Star. Till Tuesday they did not return to Rajshahi and nobody knows where they have gone. The situation at the Rajshahi Divisional Office of the WDB took a dangerous turn as persons belonging to the ruling party demanded the whole of the fifteen crore taka Rajshahi town protection embankment renovation work. It is also alleged that local AL leaders took an advance of Taka fifty lakh from the contractors for 'managing' the work for them having already 'contacted' highly placed persons in Dhaka and Rajshahi to land the contracts. Armed hoodlums not only ransacked the offices of WDB but manhandled senior officials also threatening them with dire consequences. Scrapping of the hitherto existing system of awarding work by lottery, irrespective of the high or low bidding, and reintroduction of the old system of lowest rate have been identified by some sources as the cause of trouble. The interested persons have been visiting the WDB offices as well as the residential colony and threatening the inmates there to get the work.

Whatever may be the reason, the action of some undisciplined persons has totally disrupted the normal working of an important public office. Local leaders of political parties and the contractors' association have strongly condemned the attacks on WDB officials. If party members indulge in such vandalism and prevent the officials from discharging their responsibilities how can the government function? We strongly decry this and urge upon the authorities concerned to restore peace and discipline in the WDB office and at the same time ensure safe return of the fugitive officials and their families to Rajshahi.

Stalemate in Political Chess Game: What Next?

Without undermining the importance of hartal as a highly effective political weapon, more emphasis now appears to have been laid on holding a string of peaceful meetings, long processions and road march, etc. as means of opposition's political movement.

THE political climate has again vitiated itself and the situation is positively taking a dangerous turn, heading towards the precipice. The ruling party and the opposition are poised in juxtaposition, clad in shining armour and dangerously confronting each other. The cool facade easily betrays the inherent suspicion, animosity, anger and even fear to the plectating eyes of an incisive beholder. General public appear highly apprehensive for not being able to realise their dream of living in a sovereign land of peace and prosperity and of ordering their life in a democratic manner. The current political stalemate is the creation of their political leaders. The people appear disappointed at the failure of the latter to amicably resolve their differences and to encourage evolution of a democratic process. They are generally frustrated, sad and dismayed.

It is ironic but true that both the ruling party and the opposition claim that they want a dialogue with each other. Both sides made public statements on several occasions to that effect, but the much talked about dialogue never took place. Is it not ridiculous to read in the newspapers and the media that the Minister for Information and Public Relations, Mr. M. M. Rezaul Karim, made a telephone call to BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, who, on his turn, said the latter did not come out with a definite proposal for dialogue? Most of the newspapers,

which generally tow government line, highlighted the news of Nasim's making the telephone call, whereas the few journals generally supporting opposition parties drummed up Mannan Bhuiyan's assertion that no proposal had emanated from Nasim's talk. How disappointing, if not ludicrous, it is to perceive that we went to the river, hesitated, faltered and refused to cross before turning back. It has been typical of our current political culture.

What conclusion can one derive out of these claims and counter-claims? It may not be quite out of place to recount a story. Disraeli, a great orator, statesman and Prime Minister of England of the last century, faltered and faltered badly while delivering his maiden speech in the parliament. He started, — I conceive, I conceive, I conceive — and he stopped. A lady in the audience hurled her frustration loudly. She said, when we conceive once, we produce a baby, but Disraeli conceived three times and produced nothing. Our Hon'ble Minister indeed made telephone calls to opposition leaders more than once but these bore no fruits. Does it imply that the Hon'ble Minister failed to do certain things which he, in fact, had really intended to do? No, it cannot be so. On the contrary, he is a very capable and skilful politician and an anchor pin of

his political party. He is able to do many and more things which ordinary politicians are not in a position to do. So, his half-hearted effort with the BNP leader appeared deliberate and, therefore, failed to produce the "desired" result.

An analysis of the above leaves one with no alternative than to suggest that the government is not really serious to

participation of opposition political parties as a success and wants to go ahead with the holding of the ensuing elections in the same manner without opposition participation. In that way, they hope to steal a march on the opposition and enhance their chances for improvement in the next parliamentary election. Some even go so far as to speculate that the Awami League would, if possible, like to create conditions so as to require the opposition parties to boycott the parliamentary elections to fill up the vacant seats and easily gain two-thirds majority in the parliament. This would enable them to amend the constitution and rule the nation at ease for a time longer than expected.

A typical speculation on the line mentioned in the preceding paragraph has alerted the opposition and they are preparing themselves to take effective counter-measures to frustrate the possible designs of the ruling party. According to some observers, they appear to have slightly deviated from their earlier policy of using hartal as the principal weapon of political movements. As per oft-repeated assertions made by BNP leaders that their party does not support hartal but had to use it scarcely and as the last resort, only when other peaceful and democratic means of voicing

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their legitimate demands and grievances in and outside the legislature had been deliberately thwarted by the government. That is why the hartal called on the 11th instant has been a half-day hartal instead of continuous hartals for days together, as many had earlier apprehended. This was done in order to reduce inconvenience of the people and to avert consequent harm to national economy.

Without undermining the importance of hartal as a highly effective political weapon, more emphasis now appears to have been laid on holding a string of peaceful meetings, long processions and road march, etc. as means of opposition's political movement. The mammoth public procession led by the BNP Chairperson on the 3rd instant was a great success, which was marked by unprecedented participation. But, unfortunately, attempts were made to disrupt the procession by hurling bombs and crackers, fortunately near the end of the procession. The forthcoming road marches of the BNP and other opposition parties to be held on the 16th instant may hopefully be over peacefully. Unfortunately, the spectre of deliberate but ill-planned obstruction to the BNP's long march to the Chittagong Hill Tracts looms large in the minds of many. Hopefully such an attempt will not recur this time. If it does, it would herald even darker clouds in our political horizon.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

hold parleys with the opposition and to make an amicable settlement of the moot issues. On the other hand, one can also argue that the BNP Secretary General could have seized the opportunity of the Minister's telephone call and himself asked for a meeting. It was possible, but it did not happen. BNP advances the reason that they had already laid their cards on the table by way of making their 5-point demands and that it was the turn of the government party to respond to it in a reasonable manner, and surely not by rejecting all the demands summarily, if the latter really

As the government is able but appears unwilling to work for a solution of the current political issues, then what political motivation, one wonders, prompts them to adopt this adamant and uncompromising policy? There are interesting and manifold speculations on this subject. The one that has been gaining currency rapidly and firmly is that the government really does not want opposition participation in the coming elections — the Upazilla and Mayoral elections, which are now on the anvil. The government considers the holding of city council elections without

British Prime Minister's Gamble Pays off in Regional Elections

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

The term United Kingdom (U.K.) describes England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. UK is constitutionally a unitary State, (same as in Bangladesh) as distinct from being a federal in character (such as Germany or India). All political powers rest with Westminster Parliament in London. Neither Scotland nor Wales has a legislative body.

ON May 8 historic elections took place in Scotland and Wales to constitute their local Parliaments. The elections were termed in the media as those of Britain's "identity crisis." The result of the election brought relief to the governing Labour Party in Britain as it was able to defeat the separatists in Scotland and nationalists in Wales.

However, the elections did not go all the way as the Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted because his Labour Party candidates were not able to secure absolute majority to form governments on their own right in Edinburgh and Cardiff. There is a view that the governing party did not obtain the required majority because the election was based on the proportional representation.

Mr. Tony Blair belongs to the post-Second World War generation and has many novel ideas to reform the political institutions in Britain such as, reform of the House of Lords and decentralisation of power by giving Scotland a Parliament after almost three hundred years and Wales, a less powerful Assembly, its first ever.

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The devolution of certain legislative powers from Westminster Parliament to Scottish Parliament and Welsh Legislative Assembly is perceived in some quarters that the United Kingdom will finally disintegrate as it will lead to Scotland becoming an independent political entity. The vision of Labour Government in the decentralisation of powers within the United Kingdom was criticised by its opponents as being the first step to end the United Kingdom.

England and Scotland came under one monarch, Queen Anne, in 1707 as both English and Scottish Parliaments passed an Act of Union. Despite the union, for almost three hundred years the Scottish people have been able to maintain their cultural identity, Presbyterian Church and separate legal system. A section of Scottish people have always continued to aspire to be separated from England. The Scottish National Party (SNP) represented the separatists and for most of 1998, SNP led the polls and the Labour Party got scared that SNP might obtain the majority

of seats in the Scottish Parliament. However, that was not to be the case in the recent election to the Scottish Parliament.

Seven out of ten people in Scotland rejected the separatist SNP candidates in the election on May 8. Labour elected up with 56 seats out of 129 in the Scottish Parliament, the SNP with

35, the Conservatives 18, the Liberal Democrats 17 and others 3. Although the Labour Party could not secure absolute majority, it is expected that it will form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats in Scotland.

The vote was similar in Wales, where the Labour won 28

seats in the Assembly while the nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, won 17, the Conservatives 9 and the Liberal Democrats 6. The Labour has to form a coalition government in Cardiff. The regional Assemblies will take responsibility for local government, housing, education, health and the Scottish one will have additional powers in taxation matters within a specified range. London will retain foreign affairs, defence, fiscal and monetary policy and social security.

It appears that head instead

of heart played a crucial part in the mind of the voters in the election. The result demonstrated that the Scottish people recognised the tangible benefits of being a part of a larger political entity of the United Kingdom, given the growing integration of European countries under the banner of the European Union, the globalisation of markets and financial sectors and the revolution of information technology. The voters did not wish to go in the opposite direction.

The leader of SNP Alex

Salmund was obviously disappointed at the result. If SNP had won the majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament, a referendum on independence would have been likely within a few years. Now that threat is gone from Scotland, perhaps for ever. In Wales, the idea of independence is not strong and therefore there is no political problem at hand.

One thing is however certain that with the existence of regional legislative Assemblies in Edinburgh and Cardiff and a regional Assembly in near future in Northern Ireland, the form and shape of political institutions to govern the United Kingdom have changed for good and so also the politics in that country.

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

Vying for control of Scotland's assembly

Likely-voter survey

Source: Scotsman, May 5

58 seats

Labour
Scottish National Party
40

17

Conservatives

12

Liberal Democrats

1

Scottish Socialist Party

1

Greens



Edinburgh

AFP

To the Editor...

Bio-technology institute

Sir, I understand that the government of Bangladesh is considering setting up a Biotechnology Institute. I would like to make some comments on this proposed institute.

We all know that Bangladesh has many problems—some avoidable and some inevitable. It is important however that we keep on trying for a brighter future. To do this we need to generate new tools and technologies today that we could use tomorrow. Biotechnology is one area where the capital input is relatively low and we have substantial expertise. In addition, the biodiversity in our country, with our abundance of plants and microbes, gives us a further advantage. A central institute with the critical mass in manpower and technology, would be a vital first step in this process of generating new tools and products that we could use and sell tomorrow.

The question then arises of where to situate this institute. It is essential that the location has good communication with the rest of the country and also with the rest of the world.

This is important because of the interactive nature of sci-

ence, with ideas, biological materials and scientists needing to travel. Secondly, to achieve maximum efficiency and unexpected synergies, the new institute needs to be placed within a research community.

One also needs guarantee of the infrastructure: water, electricity and civil discipline. I believe from a consideration of the above requirements, the institute needs to be situated around Dhaka. Perhaps the government could give consideration to a science park, where the Biotechnology Institute along with other science and technology based institutes could be situated.

Dr Sadequr Rahman
Canberra, Australia

Police, the perpetrator

Sir, The people of our country are so insecure that they do not know whom to rely on, not even the police who were once believed to be the symbol of protection. The involvement of the police officers in various crimes have become a common phenomena in our country. We all know about the innocent Rubel who was beaten to death on mere suspicion and also

about Jalaluddin Shafi whose body was found in an overhead tank at the DB office.

To avoid these, our government should make a strict selection for this respectable post. Because some police personnel only take the advantage of being "police" as they know people cannot dare to deny their orders.

Lutfunnessa Jubilee
Dharmundi Tutorial, Dhaka.

What have we done?

Sir, We heard and read that the Pakistanis were looting our wealth etc., and developing the then West. We were also told that should the East break away from the West then they would not get even water to drink.

Let us now access the whole situation—lingering power crisis for last 20 years or so, gas crisis, sky high prices of daily necessities, and the serious law and order situation. Are we all really happy and satisfied with our country?

Pakistan is now a nuclear power which we cannot deny anymore, but till to-date what have we done to improve the lives of our people?

Lal Mohd Iqbal
Chittagong

OPINION

Politics, President's Speech and DS Editorial

Mijanur Rahman

WHILE Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star, is, to a great extent, objective in his comment on the President's address that has lashed out at both the government and the opposition, there seems to have further scope to shed light on the current political impasse the onus of which obviously lies on the intransigence of our politicians on both sides of the government-opposition divide. The President, known for his outspokenness and integrity, has time and again pointed to unwarranted political bickering that has virtually brought the country to the point of political and economic collapse. There is no question about the merit of what he is trying to convey to our squabbling politicians. My comment will mainly outline who our prime minister or our leader of the opposition is more responsible for the ongoing political imbroglio.

I will start with our leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia. The people of Bangladesh, although majority of them are illiterate, have never erred in venting their anger and resentment against recalcitrant politicians. Given the proper opportunity to choose their fate, they have always acted judiciously and decisively. They proved their political awareness and prudence in the elections of 1954, 1970, 1991, 1996. But since her defeat in the election of 1996 Khaleda Zia has resorted to bluffing them by creating political smokescreen through inconsistent and unrealistic political maneuvering, tall talks, imaginary stories of foreign intervention and aggression. In most of the cases she had to swallow her own words.

On her assumption of power Sheikh Hasina was able to strike a deal on the water sharing problem with India. While the technicalities and nuances of the water sharing agreement remained to be vetted by the experts in the field, our leader of the opposition dismissed it outright as a sell-out of our national interest. The efficacy of the agreement does merit at least some commendation. As our leader of the opposition had failed to resolve this problem during her tenure, she found no merit in it. Hence an outright rejection.

The leader of the opposition took a so-called populist stand on the Chittagong Hill Tract Peace Agreement. She not only opposed it in the bluntest terms, she invented imaginary stories of a significant portion of Bangladesh having become a part of India. To destabilise the government as well as to undermine this historic peace process, she resorted to hartals and other destructive activities. Her procession of about 4000 trucks towards CHT, to keep it free from Indian invasion, had kept the main highway of the country blocked for days. While CHT is still an integral part of Bangladesh, ironically, her threat of blocking the agreement through destructive

means has also fallen flat. Politics Pakistan-style in the name of Islam has resurfaced in the country at the behest of Khaleda Zia. According to her assertion, Awami League is an anti-Islamic party, and under its rule Islam is at serious jeopardy. The Muslims of Bangladesh will never hear mazzin's call to prayer, if Awami League is allowed to continue in office. Even a novice in politics can sense political jugglery in such cheap slogans.

Since none of her political predictions is yet to come true, the conscious voters of the country have reasons to question her political integrity as well as maturity. The Daily Star editor is right in his deliberation that Khaleda Zia has seriously eroded her political credibility as well as charisma by taking on the government on insignificant issues or issues that do not bear adequate weight to the voters.

With regard to her hartal-driven politics, her strategy is seriously flawed and lacks adequate rationale. If there is any rationale, it is her tit-for-tat motive. One simple proposition can invalidate her strategy. One cannot justify a bad strategy on the precedent of another bad policy. It is self-explanatory that if Awami League had erred in resorting to hartal politics, BNP is erring on the same issue. Awami League resorted to hartals not to oust the elected BNP government; its main demand was to hold the next and subsequent elections under a caretaker government. While such a demand was not based on usual political practices, its merit lay in the fact that it was not meant to disadvantage BNP or favour Awami League. BNP's apprehension against the proposal of a caretaker government could be explained as its frantic tenacity and effort to hold on to power. Her current hartal-driven politics does have little convincing agenda. While she is unable to convince the people that the present government needs to be toppled by sheer force and intimidation, she has failed, to quote Mahfuz Anam, to offer alternative agenda of how she will rule the country better once the present government is toppled. As she has failed to provide alternative and tangible programme of governance and economic management, her movement and hartal-led politics bear little credibility. By her off-the-cut comments, inconsistencies, populist stance, she has proved that she is politically immature and she is a weaker leader than the incumbent.

While The Daily Star editor is right in saying that the onus of diffusing the present confrontational politics lies flatly on the incumbent prime minister, our leader of the opposition is not altogether innocent. She has contributed immensely to exacerbating the current tension. While there are myriads of constructive means of venting

opposition anger against the government, Khaleda Zia has chosen paths which are blatantly destructive, against nation's political and economic interest. Politics of stoppage seriously hurts the populace of the country, endangers economy and business, destabilises the country's politics itself. While these are unacceptable to the people as viable political ethos and agenda, it is undemocratic as well as unethical to topple an elected government without a convincing programme. In the political culture of third world countries any attempt to destabilise an elected government on the basis of sheer force does never go unchallenged. If Awami League is confrontational, it is part of its strategy to face BNP politically and to foil BNP's threat against its legitimate right to complete its tenure. On the question of mid-term election, Sheikh Hasina has reciprocated by offering a step down on year before her normal tenure ends. BNP should seize this chance and attempt to win over the voters in the coming election.

Where has Sheikh Hasina erred? She is not immune from the political blame-game, which Khaleda Zia is especially good at. Her political maturity is at times susceptible to criticism. Her statesmanship is often marred by unwarranted and off-the-cut comments on her rivals. When she is at the helm of victory, the burden of good governance is on her. She does not gain much by blaming the opposition for her failures. She cannot wash her hands of the current law and order situation; it is the responsibility of her government to ensure security of life and property of her countrymen. However, one important aspect of the current political turmoil in the country is that Sheikh Hasina is fighting disproportionately against many odds. In addition to facing a formidable opposition like BNP, she is facing opposition from anti-liberation forces. Having led the War of Independence in 1971, her party has been pitted in direct confrontation against the still-active anti-liberation forces who had been harboured and patronised by the previous governments. Her party's centre-left and secular stance is often looked at suspiciously and inimically by many of the country's predominant Muslim population. She often finds it difficult to negotiate between her party policy and the strong religious sentiment of the populace. Above all, her bold attempt to bring the killers of Bangladesh under trial and the ongoing trial of the killers of the four national leaders have certainly infuriated the reactionary forces of the country. It is not unlikely that vested groups are active to destabilise her government, and the accusation of conspiracy against her government is not altogether baseless.

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