

## Glimmers of Hope for a Troubled Nation?

### Tone Down the Rhetoric

JUST when there is silverlining around the cloud top-most government and opposition leaders pounce on each other. After her long march to Pan-chagarh, albeit facilitated by a government-opposition deal on it, Begum Zia now threatens a Dhaka-bound people's march to topple a legitimate government. As well as calling upon the people to pull down the government she is also asking the government for a mid-term poll. This rather self-contradictory posturing by her is compounded by her strident remarks that people in the present government would be sent to the 'red building' (goal) for plundering public money. Sheikh Hasina has been no less bitter and aspersive in her comment's either: the opposition chief Begum Zia has become 'unbalanced' since losing power and BNP leaders and workers have lost their senses because they no longer have the chance to plunder money, said she. Neither Khaleda Zia's words behoved of her position as former Prime Minister-turned-leader of the opposition nor Hasina's as leader of the government. More so perhaps in the latter's case because she being at the helm of affairs her discretion is at a greater premium than Khaleda's. Moreover, she was the one to react and her less than a tit-for-tat attitude could have a big difference.

The abrupt intensification of the vitriol soon after a patch-up of sorts makes one suspect that the clutch of advisers on both sides may have been stoking up the fire of mutual vilification to keep the state of confrontation alive. It could have been just an advisory failure to put across the right message, or maybe the supreme leaders themselves have been unwittingly serving the interests of trouble-mongers. Whichever way the initiative or lack of initiative went, the net result can only be further polarisation fraught with the danger of destabilisation.

As it is, they stand poles apart in their politics and no one in a democracy expects them to fly a white flag of complete peace fluttering between them. Even so, if they relapse into frequent exchanges of foul words totally un mindful of any opening that might have been made by a certain rare deal in between, then what they are obviously doing is burning all boats to a dialogue. For you have had the tempers rise, sensibilities hurt, positions hardened and options vanish.

Under the circumstances, we demand an immediate halt to personal vilification and character assassination campaigns, not merely between top-most leaders but also down the line, and as a rule, please concentrate on issues not on personalities.

### Save Osmany Udyan

THE citizens' rally at the Osmany Udyan Tuesday certainly spoke of our eco-consciousness. Perhaps, for the first time in the country the civil society went afieft to garner support for an environmental cause. The credit goes to the organisers of the rally called to protest the government's decision to compromise the lone patch of greenery between the old and new parts of the city for construction of the Bangabandhu Convention Centre. While we extend our sincerest support to the cause, we expect greater participation in the human chain programme and the signature collection campaign set for May 23.

The issue of disturbing the eco-balance aside, the government should take into consideration the enormous impact the centre planned on the edge of the city's busiest commercial hub will have on the already-overburdened traffic system. The extant road network has already proved inadequate to accommodate traffic to and from the old city. If the centre is eventually built on the designated spot for the NAM Summit, it will mean an additional load of two to three thousand cars on the system, transports that will be attached to large visiting delegations from 100 odd member-countries. On the whole, it poses a logistic nightmare. Besides, why put the bad face of the city forward to the guests?

The government's hell-bent attitude to go ahead with its plan appears even more illogical when there are sites available within the city that will not only ensure smooth traffic movement and less impact on the environment but also lead to development of adjoining areas. The national parade square, 130 acres of government khas land opposite the Gulshan shooting range, the open space near the army museum could have been selected.

On her return from the Hague Conference on Peace, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said at a press briefing that her party did not believe in ego-centric politics. We believe that ego would have nothing to do when the government has second thoughts about re-locating the convention centre somewhere else. We earnestly expect an immediate step from the government towards a change of the construction site.

### T-bund in Rajshahi

IT seems the crucial Town Protection Embankment renovation work in Rajshahi is in a bind.

Tensions are rising at the Water Development Board offices on the question of issuing work orders to the contractors. The WDB officials are sandwiched between the contractors and the terrorists, the former in a body asking for an immediate issuance of work orders and the latter pressing for grant of contracts to their favourites. We wrote in these columns only a week back about the situation and the predicament in which the officials found themselves.

The town protection embankment is extremely important for Rajshahi. Hundreds of thousands of town dwellers and lacs of hectares of agricultural land are protected from flooding every year by this T-shaped embankment built during the British rule. The embankment needs periodical renovation and constant maintenance; but these are more acutely felt now in the wake of the last flood.

This year's job has been estimated to cost around Tk 15 crore, and a section of unscrupulous public leaders allegedly belonging to the ruling party and some 'genuine contractors' are in the fray. The Daily Star report on Wednesday says that the contractors' association gheraoed the Chief Engineer's office and demanded removal of 'irregularities' in offering tenders for the renovation work. If the situation like this goes on unabated then we are afraid the work may not start in time for the monsoon floods. We call for an intervention of higher authorities in the WDB and the ministry concerned to set things right immediately so that the important work can begin without further delay.

HOPE is one of the richest miracles of life. Hope sustains us through difficult times, helps us overcome the unpleasantness, stumble into the sojourns of our lives, gives us courage not to accept defeat and helps us to seek equivalent benefits out of any adversities of our existence. Without hope, therefore, there is no life. When the hope is gone, everything else is also gone. In this context, have we in Bangladesh, reached to such a state of affairs that even the hopes for the better have been brutally extinguished due to the prevailing socio-economic and political situation of the country? Otherwise why would the people begin to feel that it is even futile to have hopes for a changed situation which would bring this troubled nation out of the abyss it has managed to get itself into? Answer to that question is not far-fetched.

One simply has to just go through a few newspaper articles (The Agonies of Democracy, Confrontational Politics and Terrorism, and the Overpoliticized Democracy. The Daily Star, May 15 and 16) and the findings of numbers, facts and developments would all point to a stark reality that the destiny of our nation may be at grave peril. Hope under the circumstances, is difficult to sustain.

Its existence becomes precarious in the midst of the prevailing conditions, especially when the country is besieged with persistent political stalemate between the two contenders for power and lack of signs for a quick turnaround of our negative political culture. A culture, which according to a political analyst, has kept us mostly busy fighting amongst ourselves after the Pakistanis were driven out.

It is all the more difficult when we witness a great divide in our civil society. The swelling frustration and dismay is natural when the civil society in Bangladesh also seems politicized. The reaction of a large majority of our civil society to the incidents of police brutality during the opposition called half-day hartal on May 11, 1999, against the opposition political activists, especially

when a woman activist was almost stripped of her saree in public and assaults on elected Members of the Parliament, is disturbing. One is perturbed at the discovery of this schism, which prevents our civil society to play its designated role — a role most crucial in bringing about the much needed equilibrium between the state and the society and thereby building the foundation of a political system in which the state would act according to the needs and demands of the people.

Anybody who is familiar with the evolution of democracy knows the importance of its role in the evolution of the system itself. Can anybody then blame us for the waning of our already flickering hopes? The answer is uncertain but still one continues to hang on to this feeling that every cloud has a silver lining. And we may be witnessing some positive developments in this regard, which would provide us with glimmers of hope and give direction to our leadership so that they can put their acts together. One feels that there are signs now, however nascent they may be, which if nurtured would act as catalysts in bringing about the much needed qualitative change in the nature of our politics.

The first sign is the maturity of our print media. It seems it has come of age, which is evident in its commendable role highlighting shortcomings of both the government and the opposition. Its recent coverage of police brutality, in particular, is praiseworthy. Observers of Bangladesh political scenario are relieved to note that the print media on the whole is on people's side.

There is not any shred of doubt in our minds that it is due to this media that we have been getting the glimpses of police brutality in recent years. Of late, the major Bengali and English dailies, despite their alleged political alignment, have

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condemned the police actions of May 11 opposition called hartal in union.

In a front-page commentary, an English daily expressed its outrage at Motiuljel Thana O.C.'s audacity to threaten people, including Members of the Parliament, who were only exercising their democratic rights, with dire consequences. Another English weekly was so exasperated by the event that it called upon the people to rise in a body to protest against the government's excessive misuse of power. And thanks to the photojournalists, who refused to be cowed down by the police, the front pages of the dailies were splashed with the humiliating pictures of the assaulted political activists. A deep sense of anger, which became prevalent among the public, thus,

all very encouraging signs for which the press is to be congratulated.

It has to be congratulated for its role, however meager that may be, in the backdrop of acute paucity of constitutional and statutory laws which clearly acknowledge people's right to know and seek information regarding the governance of the country. This right is synonymous with that of democracy and goes a long way in keeping the government on its toes. For without the access to information it is impossible to know whether the state power is not being used to violate the fundamental and democratic rights of the citizens. Without an independent press providing an alternative view as against the information meted out by the government source, main-

tenance of a healthy democracy is difficult if not impossible. But repeatedly this right was denied to the people of Bangladesh. Successive governments could not be convinced that denying people of their right to information and keeping them in dark do not actually serve the interest of the people and the nation. Deliberate attempts by the government through the suppression of information which not only deny people of their democratic rights but also keep them in the dark about the affairs that shape their lives and destiny have been a routine matter in Bangladesh's political culture.

Struggle for a free press began in the Pakistan days when colonial mindset and various restrictive laws inhibited the flowering of a truly independent media. Even after the independence the struggle was not over. But with the recent development it seems that the print media in Bangladesh has come a long way since it was first subdued through the Printing Presses & Publication (Declaration & Registration) (Amendment) Bill, 1974. The situation may not be ideal if compared with Indian Press, which is vibrant and enjoys genuine freedom, but its role and the freedom it enjoys compared with Pakistan is much more encouraging. Unlike its counterpart in Pakistan it is not getting muzzled by the government. We feel confident that no government in Bangladesh would be able to harass our journalists the way journalists are being treated in Pakistan.

There is no doubt that the print media has made its undeniable mark on our political culture. This indeed gives us a glimmer of hope.

Another encouraging sign is that there is now a voice, though a feeble one, about forming citizens' groups, which would discharge their duties towards the Republic and protect its interest. Greek citizen-state concept of citizens' rights and duties is a necessary condition for maintaining a democratic culture. In order to fulfil that obligation, conscious citizens must come together on non-partisan basis and raise their voice in order to try to cure the malaise, which is afflicting the nation.

Voices are being heard about how to make our leadership behave and fulfill their part of obligations. Dr. Kamal Hossain of Gono Forum, for example, has recently expressed his views about the independence of our electronic media and remarked that he is prepared to go to court if it is not made independent. Other instances indicate that citizens' claim on democracy is on the rise — claim that no democratic ruler

can ignore. Another glimmer of hope.

Lastly, take note of the subtle and almost invisible change in behavioural pattern of the two major political parties. The ban on the BNP march over Jamuna Bridge was lifted through discussion between BNP and AL and the Leader of the Opposition thanked the government.

A newspaper commentary hopes that it marks a new beginning. The opposition leader was given bouquet of tuberoses while she was at her party's students' front fresher's reception by the members of Awami League's students front — a gesture greatly appreciated by the public. One hopes that such reciprocity and understanding would be transmuted at the national level politics as well. Hopefully, both parties will come to the terms that it is only through the art of negotiation, compromise and spirit of tolerance can a democracy be sustained. The realization should be there that the social forces represented by the two major parties are to be reckoned with. There is no other alternative to it. Luckily, the effects of globalization are also at work in favour of bringing about this qualitative change.

The march for democracy is undoubtedly an irreversible one. The only question is how and in what form do we practice it. The nature of that polity would very much depend on the chief method through which transfer of power takes place and it is subsequently used. In Bangladesh, it is now a well-established fact that it can take place only through election. The main task of our polity is to make sure of free and fair election and constrain the holders of power to remain sensitive to people's pulse.

A free and independent press and a vibrant citizenry are two most authentic ways to ensure those possibilities. Slow but steady development of these vital segments of our civil society indicates that perhaps behind the dark clouds of the present political scenario there is a glimmer of hope for our troubled nation.



PANORAMA  
Dilara Choudhury

must have been taken note of by the government.

Righteous indignation does well to the individual as well as to the community. It's only irrationalism that must not be entertained. The ruling party also could sense the people's mood about its ban on BNP's march through the Jamuna Bridge thanks to the public sentiments expressed through the press. The ban was lifted and the country passed through a day when the opposition exercised its democratic rights in a peaceful manner.

The opposition, on the other hand, has taken note of public sentiment about the culture of hartal, and seems to be moving away from it by adopting peaceful and democratic means to make their points. These are

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## Letter From America The China Syndrome

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

*Democracies have to be accountable to their people. President Clinton on down every top American official admitted that an intelligence failure resulted in the bombing of the Chinese embassy. NATO and America always owned up whenever Serbian or Kosovar civilians were hit by bombs accidentally. My Chinese American colleagues, who lived through China's cultural revolution in the 1960s, tell me that millions of Chinese people perished during cultural revolution.*

China profusely and repeatedly. What is barbaric is ethnic cleansing of an entire minority population; rape of women, murder of men, women and children only because they happen to be different. What is barbaric is the policy of governments that support the legitimacy of the ethnic cleansers. Excuse me, what is truly barbaric is the hypocrisy of those governments that have nothing to say when hundreds of thousands of an ethnic minority are massacred, but are up in arms when a few of its own citizens are killed accidentally in a war zone.

According to Robert Kagan's opinion piece in the *New York Times*, while America continues to yearn for a "strategic partnership" with Beijing, China's leaders make no effort to conceal the fact that they consider the United States an enemy — or, more precisely, the enemy. Six years ago, a report prepared by top Chinese foreign and military specialists declared that the United States was China's international arch-enemy. When its military conducts war games, the primary adversary is the United States.

When Chinese leaders map out their ambitions — taking control of Taiwan and becoming the dominant power in East Asia — they see the United States as the main obstacle. "China wants to overturn 'American hegemony.' The American position is that China is a great regional power, but not a superpower, nor is China America's equal militarily or economically. And that if we don't treat China as an enemy, it won't become one."

Smart young Bangladeshis men and women students were attracted to the Chinese philosophy in the 1950s, 60s and early 70s. China was for national liberation everywhere, so were they. Therefore, the first

shocker came in 1959, when China apparently did not think much of Tibet's desire to remain liberated, and sent in Chinese army to subjugate them. If there ever was a straight forward case of who was right and who was wrong, it was during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. Once again, instead of supporting the democratically elected majority in East Pakistan, China supported West Pakistan's brutal military dictatorship. Fast forward to 1999. Ethnic Albanians who constituted 90 per cent of the population are being decimated in Kosovo, and yet China has sided with Milosevic's murderous regime, and calls Kosovo Yugoslavia's 'internal affair,' not the world's. For weeks Chinese citizens have been barraged by Government propaganda, depicting the United States and its allies as vicious aggressors against an innocent and helpless Serbia.

Innocent Serbs? According to Tom Friedman of the *New York Times*, "This notion that we are only at war with one bad guy, Slobodan Milosevic (who was popularly elected three times), is ludicrous." The blunt truth is that since NATO's bombing began, more Serbs than ever support the regime's actions in Kosovo, "wrote Mark Mazower, a Princeton University European expert, in the *Washington Post*. "Hatred of Albanians is not something invented by Milosevic; it has deep roots in Serbian political culture. The majority of Serb intellectuals are not liberals where Kosovo is concerned. The prevailing popular mood is an intense, if shortsighted, Serb nationalism — resentful and narcissistic, claiming victimhood for itself and indifferent to the suffering of the real victims of the past few months and years."

Clearly, Milosevic connects deeply with his people. Adds Friedman: "Milosevic can stew in his own hatred. In fact, I can think of no greater punishment for the Serb people for what they have done, and what they have tacitly sanctioned, than having to live with him (Milosevic) forever."

In support of Milosevic, high sounding clichés are being floated: "You cannot violate the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation." International laws were not written for international outlaws. These are man-made laws, not the word of God. These laws are for civilized people; they do not apply to criminals like Hitler and Milosevic, who made it to the top of their nations, and were hell bent on destroying ethnic groups they did not like.

There are stark differences between open democratic societies and closed totalitarian regimes. Gandhian nonviolent tactics work only against democracies, not against totalitarian or fascist regimes like Milosevic's. Mahatma Gandhi had enormous success confronting the British democracy, as did Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his civil rights movement taking on American democracy. When Chinese students attempted their nonviolent movement in Tiananmen square ten years ago, it was massacre!

Democracies have to be accountable to their people. President Clinton on down every top American official admitted that an intelligence failure resulted in the bombing of the Chinese embassy. NATO and America always owned up whenever Serbian or Kosovar civilians were hit by bombs accidentally. My Chinese American colleagues, who lived through China's cultural revolution in the 1960s, tell me that millions of Chinese people perished during cultural revolution.

Usually, they present sex exhilarating dances and awful bodily movement with finite dresses. Most of the rickshaw and van pullers, vendors and other young people who spend their day in the roads enjoy and make a decent living out of the showrooms and entertainment of the converted sex with number of different size of TVs at the same time.

Though the satellite channels are the main key players for that type of activities but it seems that no body cares for the future.

Unfortunately our pious Prime Minister (a frequently Hajj pilgrim) and the nationalist opposition leader, all the patriotic political leaders and social activists do not see the nation's Waterloo. We do not want to decorate ourselves erroneously. The offensive showroom activity should be stopped immediately. The showroom easily can display science, health and educational programmes.

Dr. Nadira Sultana  
UJHP, Gulshan, Dhaka.

## To the Editor...

### Can't we store water?

Sir, Bangladesh is a land of thousands rivers, rivulets and canals. Naturally there should have been the availability of plenty of water throughout the year. But it is a great misfortune for us that due to various geo-political reasons, on one hand there is acute shortage of water for nine months and on the other hand there is outrageous supply of water for three months. As a result almost every year due to drought, heavy rain and flood, our economy, agriculture, roads and highways worth billions of dollars are lost and ruined and the sufferings of our people know no bound.

In winter, summer and autumn we pump out underground water for our day-to-day necessities and cultivation of land endangering our environment. In the rainy season, millions of ceases of surface water flows into the Bay of Bengal and is lost. Can't we store and preserve the water of rivers in rainy season for use in winter, summer

and autumn and overcome our water crisis?

We can do so by simply digging giant wells or by building water reservoirs of 20 to 30 feet deep and one to two miles long in all the villages, towns and cities of the country.

Self-help is the best help. We are overburdened with foreign loans and we cannot look towards India for supply of river waters. But by building giant wells/water reservoirs with our own labour, materials and limited resources we can solve our water crisis for good and bring economic prosperity to the country and happiness to the people.

O. H. Kabir  
6, Hare Street, Wart, Dhaka.

### Trees at stake

Sir, Government's decision to cut down some 11000 trees of Osmany Udyan is really a very unfortunate one. Dhaka has already been termed as one of the most polluted cities of the world and definitely the city's oxygen is in short supply. In this scenario, the decision to cut down such a huge number trees from a

place located in the heart of the city is close to suicide. It is beyond understanding of any sane person as to what prompted the government to take such decision.

However I am a bit encouraged to see a news item informing that a body has been formed to resist government's destructive move. I offer my full support to its resistance body and wish them all the success.

Nurul Bashar  
Khilgaon, Dhaka.

### It should be stopped

Sir, The poor Bangladesh is always trying to get rid of this title "poor" by decorating herself with different type of mimicry jewelry. One of the mimicry items is the different size showrooms of different electronic company. These showrooms are well decorated with various electronic products. TV is the most popular item. It is true that TV is metamorphosed as a main amusement media of all types of viewers but what the showrooms present are really hurtful for the general people.

## OPINION Ecology and Politics

Iftekhar Iqbal

*I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree —  
Joyce Kilmer*

*A fool sees not the same tree  
As a wise man sees — William Blake*

The sweet, motherly trees at the Osmany Udyan are not the first victims of our insanity. On the highways from Meherpur to Jhenidah, Jhenidah to Jessore and then Jessore to Benapole border, most of the trees have been cut down in the last few years and the process is going on. These giant and elegant trees were planted hundred of years back to beautify the highway and thereby to soothe the tired eyes of the long-tourist travellers.

But now trees are not mere aesthetics; they are absolutely vital. Everybody knows that trees prevent ecological imbalance and thus weaken the impact of the catastrophe that results out of such imbalance. Given this nature of the elements, the countries of the world are doing things accordingly. For instance, for any country crossing the Benapole border to further west into India, gradually it's a different picture in sight. Right after the no-man's land one inevitably encounters the mighty shadows of the same kin-trees that have been cut down a few meters east of the border. And as for Delhi, the Indian capital and the veteran host of so many NAM and other big international conferences, the whole city is almost like our Ramna Park. NAM summits were there in Delhi when the group was at its prime. But fortunately for the dwellers of Delhi, not a single tree had to be cut down for that matter. (Neither have we heard that in Bandung, Cairo, Belgrade — sites of historical NAM conferences, there were cases of construction of giant buildings only for holding an international conference. In Bandung, Indonesia, where NAM conference was held in 1955, there was even no good arrangement for lavatory which Nehru resented. But it was Bandung which created a spirit that commanded the superpowers' respect during the Cold War. But it does not seem, given the changed international context, that Dhaka Summit is enough to bring any big difference in global norms and order). And in the developed countries, green politics which deals with the infra-structure of the very existence of our lives are taking root. Recently, the party which defeated Helmut Kohl, the most popular leader of

millions of your own citizens, and not okay if someone mistakenly kills a few of your people and genuinely apologizes for it!

On the topic of open and closed societies, President Ronald Reagan once told Mikhail Gorbachev the following joke. An American and a Russian were arguing who had more freedom. The American said: "I can walk into President Reagan's office and say: President Reagan, I don't like you or the way you are doing your job!" Not to be outdone, the Russian retorted that he can do the same thing: "I too can walk into President Gorbachev's office and say: President Gorbachev, I don't like President Reagan and the way he is doing his job!"

Germany for the last sixteen years, is a green-leaning party whose election agenda upheld environment issues.

Against this global backdrop, we seem to be the odd one out. Having already destroyed the trees in the forest, the old trysides and the highways thereby lowering the big tree-forest areas to less than 8 per cent of our total land area during the last couple of decades, now we are heading for slaughtering those 11000 trees in Dhaka, the most densely populated and the most polluted city in the world. The present move to cut down the trees in Osmany Udyan does not only dishonour our previous leadership who showed enough wisdom to transform the Race Course Field into the green Suhrawardy Udyan, but also grossly violates the very principle of sustainable development and the UNESCO draft declaration of 'The Responsibilities of the Present Generation Towards Future Generations' adopted by a working group of government experts at Paris, September 1997 meeting in Paris. Article 5 of the Declaration states:

1. In order to ensure that future generations benefit from the richness of the Earth's ecosystems, the present generations should strive for sustainable development and preserve living conditions, particularly the equality and integrity of the environment.

2. The present generation should ensure that future generations are not exposed to pollution which may endanger their health or their existence itself.

3. The present generation should preserve for future generations natural resources necessary for sustaining human life and for its development.

4. The present generation should take into account possible consequences for future generations of major projects before these are carried out.

Now if the 300 crore taka Conference Centre is a must for holding the NAM summit, then there are many other and better alternative sites, pointed out in various newspapers published in the newspapers that might be considered. But, in view of the protests from all strata in our society, please don't kill those trees in the Osmany Udyan because "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin" (Shakespeare), not colossus conference buildings.