

## Editorial

## The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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## We Demand Action on Bank Loan Default

We only wish last Wednesday's seminar on Bank Default Problem: A Dialogue Between Borrowers and Lenders had a slightly wider format. Depositors were left out. Although speakers admittedly must have been bank account holders, and several of them perhaps also commanded detachment for not being indebted to any bank so as to claim to have spoken for the depositors up to a point. Even so, it would have been perfect if the seminar organisers had formally invited a select group of depositors to their colloquium. They are not an amorphous entity nor are they any inarticulate lot. Given the way they are actively taking part in the various banks' Annual General Meetings of the share-holders to defend their rights and their growing sensitivity about bank default it is imperative that we include them in the civic society discussions on the subject. Understandably the banks' governing boards are going to have an increased proportion of directors from the depositors' community. This augurs well for a well-rounded and symmetrical decision-making process in the banks.

Several factors are behind the stubborn and wily nature of bank loan default and one cannot be absolutely certain about the weightage of one factor relative to that of the other so that it will be a waste of breath to be engaging ourselves in an endless discourse over the relativity theories of blame-worthiness. Professor Rahman Sobhan's pointer to political godfathers' patronising bank loan shirkers could not be squarely demolished by some politicians who reacted by saying they were not to be held 'solely responsible' rather it is the nexus between lenders and borrowers that has mainly caused the problem.

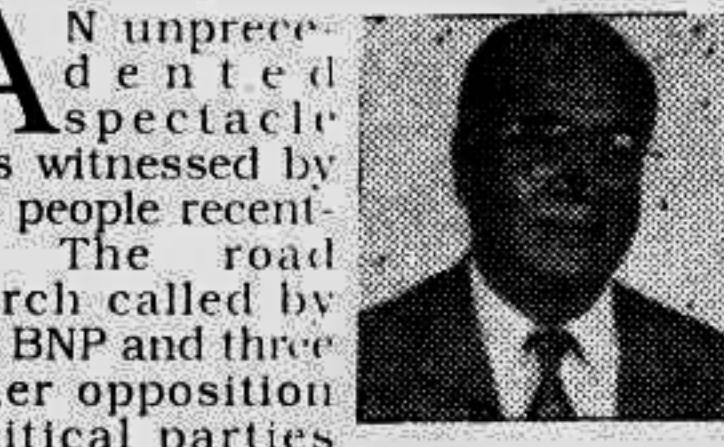
**We know the lenders and borrowers together made the 'loan deals' click to their mutual benefit but our focus is primarily on the lenders, i.e. the bank functionaries, whose business it should have been to make sure about the viability of a project before they sanctioned any loan for it.** They also had the lever to discontinue lending when field investigations at early stages pointed to misuse of funds. Even in their assessment of the capacity to repay they might well have slurred over the need for checking on the value of collateral assets claimed by the loan seeker. So, there are rules on the book the bank officials chose not to go by and hardly have they ever been forced to pay for their misdeeds. The axe should fall on the recalcitrant caller of the shot and no amount of paper-work decorated with a connective issue of weighty signatures should come to his rescue. Passing it off as a squeaky capitulation before 'political influence' should not do either.

And how do we deal with the endemic 'inside lending' by the directors of private banks whose number is a tell-tale 47? We have to apply the law which requires their relinquishment of directorial positions and, happily, this is happening now at some pace.

In the final analysis what is crucial to the whole issue is that we do not compromise half-way through a remedial step. For instance, it was injudicious to have allowed loan defaulters to participate in the last general election after they had made only a 10 per cent down payment on the rescheduled terms. Some of them ceased to abide by those terms once the election was over. Are they being held accountable for the breach of contract? That is the crux of the problem.

## BNP's Road March: A Much Desired Democratic Method

As for the BNP, there was more than one reason to be happy at the general outcome of this road march. The love and affection manifested by miles and miles of crowded people lined up on both sides of the route were more than a product of curiosity of personally seeing a celebrated national leader. One had a feeling that people wanted to hear her as much as to see her.



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

A unprecedented spectacle was witnessed by the people recently. The road march called by the BNP and three other opposition political parties

may have caused surprise to some and satisfaction to many but provided relief to all. Surprise it was due to the unprecedented nature of this method of voicing political protests, satisfaction was derived mainly by opposition supporters for what they considered a stupendous success and relief came to all citizens due to relatively peaceful and non-violent completion of this gargantuan operation.

The motorcades of the opposition parties set out from Dhaka on the 16th morning and followed separate routes to reach different destinations. The BNP "kafela" took the longest 3-day route travelling north through major areas in Gazipur, Tangail, Sirajganj, Pabna, Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur before turning back from Panchagarh. The Jatiya Party's procession went through Mymensingh, the Jamaat-e-Islami's to Jessor-Khulna-Satkhira and the Islamic Oikya Jote chose to march towards Sylhet. Despite the different routes taken by them, the objectives of the four opposition parties remained the same. These were to hold meetings en route in order to apprise the public of what was termed total failures of the government in various sectors and that the government, thereby, lost all moral authority to govern the country. The opposition now strongly demands that a mid-term election be held to obtain mandate from the people to form the government of their choice and in order to achieve that the government must resign.

The people were receptive, overwhelmed by the strong pleas and gleefully flattered by the visit of so many top national leaders at their doorsteps. It was, indeed, a superb and highly successful public relations exercise through establishing personal contacts with people. Such exercises may be put to repeated use in future as effective instruments of political protests and expression of popular grievances. This method also holds the potentiality of political leaders' putting less reliance on some other means of political protest, which may cause violence and loss to the people.

Despite the road march having passed off peacefully, the government ban on crossing the bridge on Jamuna two days before the commencement of the march had created a tense, if not, an explosive situation. Some of the top BNP leaders contacted concerned government leaders and informed them that the government's apprehension of a possible security breach on the bridge was totally unjustified, as they themselves would like to ensure that no harm is caused to the majestic structure, the major part of whose construction the BNP government took pride to complete after having mobilised all financial and material resources for the project. They called it to be lifted. The government leaders invited opposition leaders to discuss the matter at their office and it was so done. The meeting amicably settled the issue. The government lifted the ban on receiving further assurance from the two emissaries that BNP would also help ensure security

of the bridge and that no political rallies would be held within a specified range from either end of the bridge.

This was a rare example of fruitful outcome of a government-opposition parley and encourages people to nurture hope of similar dialogues in future to resolve political crisis. The BNP had already decided to continue with the march and peacefully demonstrate by staying put before the bridge till the ban was lifted. This would have caused a virtual blockade on the major route from the capital to country's northern region and increased risks of police and similar actions with consequent maltreatment, violence and bloodshed, besides inflicting enormous loss and distress to people. The government-opposition dialogue leading to the lifting of the ban, therefore, was greeted warmly by the people as a welcome gesture from both sides. They heaved a sigh of relief at the outcome of the talks which helped restore their confidence about future prospect of peaceful resolution of political disputes. The credit, undoubtedly, was earned by the political leaders concerned and their chiefs.

As for the BNP, there was more than one reason to be happy at the general outcome of this road march. The love and affection manifested by both sides of the route were more than a product of curiosity of personally seeing a celebrated national leader. One had a feeling that people wanted to hear her as much as to see her. Her personal charm and grace were matched only by her poise and dignity which made thousands of men, women and children waiting for hours braving scorching heat only to get a fleeting glimpse of her. She commented that smile on the face of hundreds of thousands of people she met and addressed on this march more than fully compensated the rigour and pains sustained during this long arduous journey. She was happy, indeed, very happy.

I had an interesting rather enjoyable time, while travelling together in one car in the company of three distinguished members of parliament, including former Finance Minister Saifur Rahman and former Special Envoy M. Morshed Khan. It is not true that all along we talked about politics and philosophy and shared cynicism in our assessment on many issues. Witty remarks and words in jest interposed as much, if not more, in our serious treatment of even more serious topics. Once Saifur Rahman said that he had told Minister Mohammad Nasim that if he were obstructed half way on the bridge, he would get off his vehicle and cross the river swimming. We became proud and somewhat jealous on hearing the ability of our senior and older colleague to undergo the physical strains of swimming even a part of the mighty river. But after proceeding halfway through the bridge when we looked down upon the river we saw, to our surprise, that mighty Jamuna's turbulent waters had already given way to dry land easy for any one to cross on foot. How had the former Finance Minister known this in advance, we wondered. Anyway, it was a matter of satisfaction for the former Finance Minister that he had not really promised the current Home Minister to do something what he was not physically able to undertake.

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## Israel Opt for Peace!

Now it's time for both Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to understand each other and above all each other's problems. Barak's overwhelming victory clearly indicates that Israelis opted for peace with proper security. However, that peace with security is valid immediately for both people — Israelis and Palestinians — but in the context of comprehensive M-E peace and security it has to be for all the people of the region — the Arabs and the Israelis.



## Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

thus justifying his hawkish policies.

In terms of peace with the Palestinians, it seems that Israelis wasted long three years by electing Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, who defeated Shimon Peres' only by less than 1 per cent vote (about 30,000 votes). Even Israelis never considered him a man of peace. This is my impression my wife and I got when we visited Jerusalem and Israel about two years back. We were told that over 90 per cent of Israelis believe in peace with Palestinians. But unfortunately Netanyahu did everything to thwart the peace process. He signed Wye Peace Accord in the presence of President Clinton and King Hussein of Jordan but he did not implement it on flimsy grounds. He allowed Israeli settlements to grow in Palestinian territory despite US's repeated call for "Time Out".

The latest debacle was Netanyahu's decision to close down the Palestinian offices in the Orient House which is the symbol of Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem. This he did against the advice of his Security Minister and also of the Mayor of Jerusalem. The "Peace Now" group went to the Israeli Supreme Court which ordered temporary halt to the closure of the Orient House offices. Netanyahu was trailing badly in the polls and he deliberately tried to create some law and order and security situation in Jerusalem. He knew that any attempt to close Palestinian offices in the Orient House would lead to terrible bloodshed and that would help him in turning the table of Israeli politics. However, Supreme Court judgment frustrated Netanyahu's bad political move.

Netanyahu put the US also into embarrassing position by ignoring repeated calls for stopping the settlements and finally by refusing to implement the Wye accord. A politically interesting but diplomatically embarrassing situation was created when Netanyahu was in Moscow to collect sympathy and support of the Russians while Arafat was in Washington to continue to ask for US support for peace. Earlier it used to be the other way round.

Now it will be interesting to see how the situation turns up in the area of M-E peace process. There is an immediate need for the resumption of the Peace Process, which can happen only on immediate full implementation of the Wye Accord. Then actions will have to be taken for final phase of Israeli troops withdrawal from the occupied territories leading to the "Final Status" negotiations which will not only mean determination of the final borders of the proposed State of Palestine but also determination of the status of Jerusalem. The issues are difficult and certainly explosive unless both parties deal with them with maximum understanding, caution and enough flexibility.

Now it's time for both Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to understand each other and above all each other's problems. Barak's overwhelming victory clearly indicates that Israelis opted for peace with proper security. However, that peace with security is valid immediately for both people — Israelis and Palestinians — but in the context of comprehensive M-E peace and security it has to be for all the people of the region — the Arabs and the Israelis.

## The Government has a Harder Time Ahead

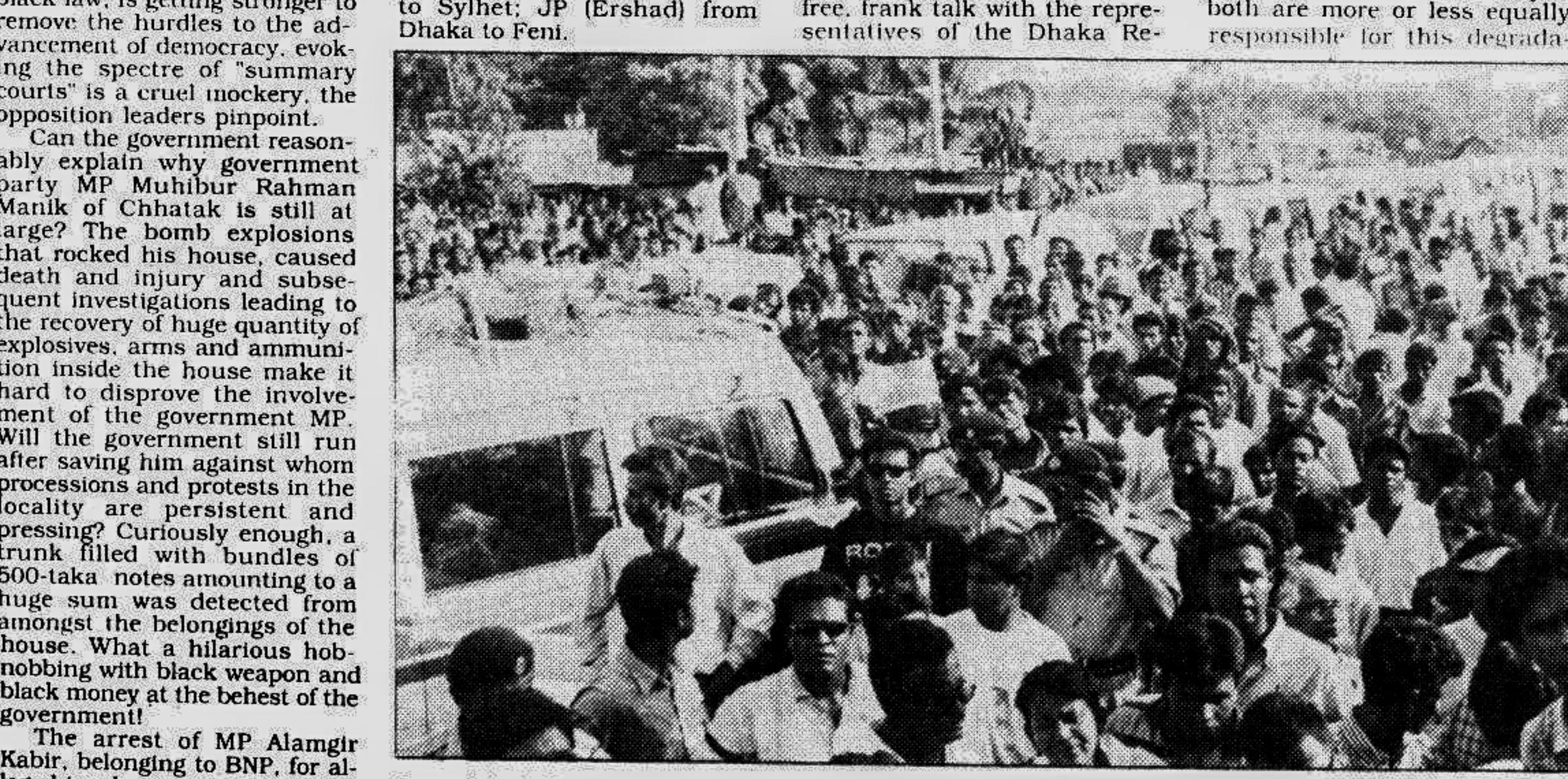
by A R Shamsul Islam

The government may not have enough to worry over BNP-led opposition agitational exercises. But the galloping crises relating to electricity, water, law and order have their own enormous inner weights to keep on burdening and battering the government unless and until remedies are provided, of which the prospect is nowhere within sight.

THE country is passing through a bad time indeed. Law and order situation has sunk record low. To check the rot, the suave Home Minister Rafiqul Islam was made to exit with a badge of a Minister without portfolio. Post and Telecommunication Minister young, hard-core, action-oriented politician Nasim has been inducted in his place in addition to his previous responsibility. This change was Prime Minister's desire and directive. Atrai double murder of AL leaders, Jalal murder at DB office overhead water tank, repeated brushfire and butchery in the southern belt by the so-called "Sarbaraha" party, dacoities in residences of the capital in daytime etc. have come in quick succession as if to receive the new Home Minister tumultuously. Nasim is no short of replying robustly by expediting the establishment of additional police camps in trouble-prone southern districts, conducting combing operations etc. Let us see where the game rounds off.

The present opposition alliance headed by BNP has chalked out tougher programmes of movement against the government. The apex item, meanwhile, was a four-pronged road march (long march) on 16 May: BNP from Dhaka to Panchagarh; Jamaat-e-Islami from Dhaka to Sathkhira; Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) from Dhaka to Sylhet; JP (Ershad) from Dhaka to Feni.

Recently PM Hasina had a free, frank talk with the representatives of the Dhaka Re-



Opposition's Road March

porters' Unity. She attributed electricity scarcity to non-payment of electric bills by certain quarters and prevalence of illegal electric connections. She did not refer to the gap between demand and production which is the chief cause of power crisis. Regarding terrorism by students, the PM said that while students of other parties toyed with arms, her youths naturally felt tempted to get them — the same line of reasoning Khaleda chose while in government. Thanks to the PM for her generosity and joviality to speak her mind now and then to the press and people. But the way she says she is seeing to the problems is far from correcting the wrongs.

There is no alternative to all-party participated elections. Lack of minimum understanding between AL and BNP is taking away the life out of the polls. In the recently held Meherpur by-election to the National Assembly only AL candidates, official and unofficial, stayed in the race. Election Commissioner Mushtaq Ahmed Chowdhury himself termed that election as "lifeless". Only 26 per cent of the voters turned up.

In the past, the institution of election was destroyed. After lots of sacrifices, the prestige and credibility of the polls were recovered. People are mortally saddened to see them wanting because of the maddening obstinacy of AL and BNP. Maybe both are more or less equally responsible for this degra-

dation of polls. But who can deny that the ruling party has the prime responsibility of drawing all parties, particularly the major ones, to the polls to make them competitive and credible? Can AL convince the people that it has stood genuinely true and tolerant to performing this foremost responsibility?

Time for the people is no less perplexing. The present government has not responded to their expectations. The question is — is there any better alternative? In the 1991 polls, people tried out BNP hoping it would be a better brand than AL. This accounted for the surprise victory of BNP. But it did not take much time for the people to be disenchanted with the BNP rule. So when the election of 1996 came up, people resorted back to voting AL to power after long 21 years believing that the party would be purged of its former blemishes. Now is the turn of the people to be disillusioned again. The rub is that there is no viable third party for the people to pin their hopes on. In fact, in the next polls the people's choice will stay patently limited to accepting one of the two equally apathetic centre-stage political actors. They will choose not who is better; rather it is more befitting to say that they will choose the lesser devil.

Previously BNP worked up movements on party-orientated issues. These could not shine. BNP has now modified its strategy — people-linked issues are injected into the agenda of movement. It is now desperate to cash in on hot popular issues. But its unpopular mode of operation, like hartal and road march that are associated with confrontation and collapse of economy, will not pay BNP any dividend. Rather it may bounce back to strike at the perpetrator. The government may not have enough to worry over BNP-led opposition agitational exercises. But the galloping crises relating to electricity, water, law and order have their own enormous inner weights to keep on burdening and battering the government unless and until remedies are provided, of which the prospect is nowhere within sight.

Containing the opposition alliance movements may not be hard but combating those crises by executing late patch-up works dislinked with actual solution is really tough; that the government should have the wisdom to realise much earlier. This is where the government is found pathetically mindless and deficient. Consequently it may be awarded a harder time ahead to desperately grapple with.

## Friday Mailbox

## Please take some measures

Sir. We were very shocked as more than one hundred people died taking poisonous liquor in Narsingdi district a few days back and also left a number of people with probable physical disability.

It appears that unbridled selling of liquor has caused several such incidents over the last few years. However, stern actions have not been taken by the authorities concerned.

Such incidents reveal the vacuousness of our society and the improper implementation of rule of law. So, questions may arise how far do we tolerate such incidents? What extent of reluctance do we tolerate from police and administration?

One of the causes behind this is the mush-room growth of illegal selling of liquor all over the country which is reportedly under the eyes of police and administration. Moreover, allegations are there that police and some quarters of administration receive bribe and thereby permit this illegal trade. Such heinous and unscrupulous selling should be stopped immediately through rightful measures against those involved directly and indirectly, unless we don't want to face such undesirable death any more.

Md Whaheed Alam

Paikpara, Mirpur, Dhaka-1207

Now, will someone please explain if I was wrong in what I said? In other words, should we say, "what is your father" instead of saying "what does your father do?"

Md Motiur Rahman

Mirpur Road

Sobbanbag, Dhaka-1207

## Is this democracy?

Sir, Allow me to express my felicitations and gratitude to the DS for the three editorials appearing on May 15, 1999. Anyone with a sane mind ought to realise and take note of what has been said therein and act accordingly.

If our people are able to face injustices of the past governments without fear and pressure, then they can do the same even now. Through the War of Liberation of 1971 we proved our worth and no one should try to underestimate us. If the present government has learnt the unmanly practices from the past governments, then we at present are being taught to be vindictive, arrogant, spiteful, etc.

Has the government forgotten the role of the press during the rule of the past governments and how they became victorious when they were unjustly made victims?

The Minister, Nasim, holding to the Home Ministry could not even deny the OC's version in which he claimed he had orders to shoot...including journalists! Is this a democratic practice of an elected government?

Rezaul Karim

8/1-B Lalmatia, Dhaka

## The zulum of the landlords

Sir. The tenants of rented houses/flats in Dhaka city are suffering in a manner similar to the consumers, due to the apathy of the government in enforcing the regulations by the agencies or departments concerned. There are Rent Control Acts (perhaps not updated), but the inspectors are not interviewing the tenants and warning the landlords. How about a "Tenants' Week"?

A relation living in Sit Syed Road, Mohammadpur, told me that the landlord had increased the monthly water charges from Taka 200 per month to 500 due to official surcharges. Surely the authority has not increased the charges by 150 per cent!

The rent of my flat in the same locality has been raised from Tk 6,000 per month to Tk 10,000 per month in nine years! Once the taxation officers came to ask me questions about the rent, I told them that the landlord did not write the amount of the rent in the "official" monthly receipt (without Revenue Stamp).

Where to report and how to prosecute? Some landlords have hidden godfathers who can create mischief in these days of lawlessness. There is need of awareness and publicity campaigns in the mass media to protect the rights of the tenants, who are at the mercy of the greedy landlords, due to high demand for and shortage of housing in Dhaka.

The Rent Controller Office may advertise its location and telephone number for instant advice and action. There are numerous cases of malpractice and irregularities which the government may bring to the notice of the public for ensuring better governance. The landlords appear to have become a social menace, and are not afraid of any one, in these days of rent-seeking culture, all cannot maintain godfathers.

The government should smash up all parallel governments, to earn the minimum credibility of the helpless.

Abul M Ahmad

Dhaka