

BNP's Alternative to Hartal

FROM a change of strategy it now sounds like a change of heart. The BNP had earlier scaled down the duration of hartal to a half day mould. In the next phase they opted for demonstration programmes like gheraos, mass rallies and processions by MPs. Only the other day all these were crowned by a road march to Panchagarh which in the words of Begum Zia has been 'a grand success.' Other leaders of her party were so impressed by the spontaneous public response to the long march that they tended to almost equate the impact of the three-day march with that of all other programmes carried out in the preceding three months including hartal.

So, a public support mobilising programme such as the road march has dawned on them as being a more viable tool of mass campaign than hartal. As a matter of fact, if the objective is to garner public support, why then alienate the same by resorting to hartal? There is no question about the pervasive antipathy towards frequent disruptions of life on an increasingly violent note at that as well. Hartals at the drop of a hat cannot endear any political party to the people. That the BNP has read the public pulse and is acting accordingly has heartened us a great deal.

This is also consistent with Begum Zia's persistent criticism of the opposition AL's rampant hartal calls when she had been in power. The points she made then against hartal hold equally good today as these will tomorrow.

We welcome the fact that the BNP is going through a process of metamorphosis, not merely in its choice of issues but also in its methods of demonstration. Now it is for the BNP to take a leading role in persuading its allies to shun the path of hartal and adopt alternative means for voicing their protests.

The ruling party needs to build on the oppositions' present bent of mind to eschew hartal and clinch a mutually binding no-hartal deal with the opposition sooner than later.

Begum Khaleida Zia is on record to have said in April last year that if AL as the ruling party commits itself to abjuring hartal when in the opposition she would be willing to do that too. Prime Minister Hasina offered a hartal moratorium in November last. Let us pick up the threads from where they were left off and get our act together quickly to put hartal behind us.

Awry Goes Health Reform

RED-tapism seems to have become a major snag to the much-needed reforms programme in the country's health sector. Unification of the health and family planning services at the thana level and below under the five-year health and population sector programme (HPSP) has already been stuck up — thanks to the mess over the health ministry's exaggerated concern over the statutory regulatory order (SRO). And, now, it seems, as pointed out in the annual performance review jointly prepared by the government and the World Bank, delay in signing memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the UN agencies would spark a serious shortage of drugs for malaria, tuberculosis and acute respiratory infections at the government health care centres. The Essential Service Package, a major component in the five-year health sector reforms programme comprising reproductive and child healthcare, communicable disease control, limited curative care and behaviour change communication, looks set to bear the brunt of scarcity.

However, the health directorate remains unmoved by the disconcerting discovery, confident that the present stock will see them through till the year-end and that signing of MOUs with Unicef and UNDP in a day or two will do. Although alarmed by the annual performance review, we would very much like to believe in the health directorate's version on the state of affairs and their assurances that the reforms programme is going on at the right pace.

Reforms are necessary to make the country's ailing health sector effective and easily accessible to the common lot. The thana health complex in Chandina has shown what difference investment in the right direction can make to the situation. It now boasts an efficient health service system and a highly satisfied clientele. The complex under a European Union pilot project that covers 55 thanas in six districts has in fact underlined the need for reforms. Our development partners are eager as well to bring about a positive change in the sector. At our end, we need an efficient execution mechanism. The bureaucratic dithering on key issues is certainly not what the health sector can afford at this moment.

Internecine Killings

TWO youngmen, leaders of the ruling party students wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), were murdered by the cadres of the party within an hour at Bogra on Thursday. According to press reports Tanvir Hassan Samar was the president of Chhatra League town unit and Farhad was the joint secretary. It is alleged by the people of the locality that both of them were known toll-collectors and had been locked in fierce battles to establish supremacy over each other in the area. They are also alleged to have been in the clandestine 'phensydl' business in Sultanganj area of the town. Those who have been arrested in connection with the murders, nine of them, are also identified as cadres of the BCL, according to press reports, though leaders of the student organisation denounced them as miscreants who did not belong to their party.

We have heard the ruling party leaders say time and again that *mastaans* and miscreants do not belong to any party and they will be dealt with severely by the administration.

The effects of terrorist killings on the society can never be exaggerated. The impressions that are left behind are awesome and at the same time painful. These are youngmen dear to their families and friends. Think about the damage and loss their families will be suffering. There has been a vicious trend to take to murder even on trifling issues. This trend has dangerous repercussions over the young minds in particular and the society as a whole. Despite the disclaimer of the student leaders, the arrested ones seem to belong to their party and so did the murdered ones. If it was true then why did not the police take them into custody long before? Why were they allowed to continue with their unlawful activities? Was it because they belonged to the ruling party? There may be many more pertinent questions but this paper would very much like to see the real culprits brought to book according to the law of the land, irrespective of their political affiliation.

Pakistan's Security Perceptions and the Taliban Phenomenon

The government's critics feel that, the country's pro-Taliban attitude is taking its toll on domestic politics of Pakistan. They point out at the proposed 15th amendment of Pakistan's constitution, which inter-alia provides that it will be for the government to determine whether a particular law is according to the 'Shariat' or not. This amendment, now awaiting passage in the Parliament's upper chamber, will, they feel, put the executive head of the government in an arbiter's position, encouraging a dictatorial behaviour pattern.



Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

succeeded in turning arid Balochistan province into 'a California'. In reply to a subsequent question, he also saw the armed forces performing a role in the country's education and literacy programmes. He took pains, to recommend the employment of the armed forces in civilian affairs as the final alternative in the event of the failure of the civilian authorities, not going into the economic justification and socio-political advisability of doing so.

General Musharraf then made the point that Pakistan should behave as a responsible nuclear and missile state. In his view, it was therefore necessary to control the deployment and development of nuclear weapons 'under one command' and to have a separate secretariat for strategic planning. He did not further elaborate on the suggested concept of 'one command'.

In conclusion, the Pakistani Chief of Staff referred to Afghanistan and the Taliban phenomenon. He said that with 26 out of the 31 Afghan provinces under their control, the Taliban, who were the only well organized force in the country, had the capacity to bring stability to Afghanistan. Since it was in its interest to have a stable neighbour, Pakistan, he said, should continue its support for the Taliban. It may be recalled that it was as far back as 1997 that Pakistan government in Afghanistan General Parvez termed Pakistan's Afghanistan policy as a 'success story'. Alluding to the fear of those who were concerned about the fundamentalist nature of the Taliban, he said that, in time, by putting 'economic pressure' on Afghanistan, Pakistan should be able to bring about moderation in their behaviour pattern.

This optimism of the Pakistani Chief of Staff is not shared by many in Pakistan. In fact there is considerable worry in the country that the socio-religious extremism of the Taliban may, in future, spill over into Pakistan. The Taliban happen to be Sunni Pakhtoons inhabiting an area where there

are substantial number of Shias and non-Pakhtoons tribes like the Taziks and the Uzbeks. Pakistan's total support to the Taliban is disapproved by those who feel that Pakistan's actions in that area should cut across, what may be viewed as ethnic and tribal parochialism.

Who are these Taliban, who within hardly three years of their formation as an armed cadre succeeded in occupying most of Afghanistan, on such broad sweep? The meaning of the Arabic word 'Talib' is a 'seeker'. The Urdu language derives a great deal from Arabic and thus the Urdu word for a student is 'Talib-e-ilm', which literally means a seeker of knowledge. 'Taliban', is the plural of 'Talib'. The advent of the Taliban ideology is recent but Taliban seeking religious knowledge, in the area that now constitutes Afghanistan, a country carved out by Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1747, have been around for centuries. Their way of learning was to go for religious education to the 'Alims' or religious scholars, of whom there were thousands in the country. Came the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and President Zeal Huq of Pakistan set up hundreds of religious schools or Madrasas along the Pak-Afghan border for Afghan refugees. The idea was also to ideologically motivate the Afghan youth of fight the Soviets — an idea that at that time the United States found to be quite palatable. The establishment of the madrasas, President Zia felt, would also endear him to the substantial religious circles in the country, thus politically helping him.

But two developments of potential significance then took place. One of these madrasas mushroomed deep inside Pakistan's borders, many in seven of the major cities, into which, besides the Afghans, thousands of Pakistanis were enrolled as well. These madrasas also apparently targeted a wider catchment area, so much so that in February 1996, the Taliban governor of the Afghan province of Herat, one Maulvi Yar Mohammad, warned the Iranian government that Taliban forces from Bangladesh and India would fight by the side of their Afghan brethren in the event of an Iranian attack against Afghanistan! This points at the certainty of the Taliban's Bangladesh and Indian connections. These madrasas gradually and expectantly came under the influence of the Jama'at-i Ulema of Pakistan and turned out, as many

believe, to be the breeding ground of the Taliban ideologues.

The decade of the eighties had seen the Mujahids, irrespective of their tribal and sectarian affiliations, fight jointly against the Soviets. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, it took them three years to dislodge the communist government of Dr Najibullah. With the removal of Najibullah, the common enemy that had kept the Mujahids united disappeared. The period from 1992 to 1994 saw the Mujahids jostle for power on tribal, sectarian and even on the grounds of personal loyalty. A war which had been largely viewed as ideological transformed into a series of petty, internecine conflicts for supremacy in the region. Broadly speaking therefore, the armed Taliban movement was a reaction to the sad degeneration of an ideological conflict into a civil war.

The Taliban, now ruling over most of Afghanistan are extremists, not inclined to brook any compromise in their socio-political beliefs and in their life style. While travelling through the Khyber Pass in a tourist train, during my recent visit to Pakistan, I heard of a first hand account of an experience in dealing with the Taliban authorities from a fellow traveller, Salman Rashid, a Pakistani travel journalist. He had been, he said, invited by the Taliban to visit Afghanistan on condition that, being a Muslim he wore a beard and put on turbaned Afghan costume. This, the clean shaven Salman Rashid, having a preference for trousers and shirts, refused to do and his proposed visit to the Taliban, country went down the drain. Salman Rashid regards the Taliban as religious lunatics and there are many in Pakistan who share this view. Taliban influence is reportedly growing fast in the Khyber and other tribal regions of Pakistan and thousands of Afghan refugees still remain in that area. Salman Rashid, who is a Punjabi, wants these refugees to go back to Afghanistan immediately, whereas some of my Pakistani friends in Peshawar, equally fearful of the spread of the Taliban ideology, take a sympathetic view of these Pakhtoon refugees. They say that the refugees who have indeed nothing in Afghanistan to go back to should stay on in what they regard as the Pakhtoon country. The Punjabi ethos vis a vis the Afghan refugees therefore does differ from that of the frontier.

A cricket-loving Pakhtoon friend of mine, in Peshawar, citing a recent report that had filtered through the Khyber Pass, which conveyed that the Taliban authorities do not find anything objectionable in men-only cricket and that as result the game was fast catching on in that country. As a Bangladeshi, with our struggle for a long time to get rid of the game, I was not surprised to hear that. Success is unpredictable, as experienced hunches also fall sometimes. Add to the hidden agenda, the secret agents of the big powers (it is present in every country, no use denying it), Bangladesh is a strategic prize at the global level. So it is a guessing game who would be used for what assignment. 'Mission Impossible' is found only in fiction.

Ershad's nuisance value is great, considering his notorious abilities and talent for the unexpected. There are several levels of this nuisance or irritation. A mosquito might be irritating for a while, but mosquitoes are a nuisance, as also a nagging wife (some say). Willy craftsmanship is evil if it harmed many, and benefitted few. Derailment is another weapon; scorched-earth policy is another (in military parlance).

Putting a spanner in the wheel has a more common level. If these negative activities are multiplied and the frequency of occurrence and operation increased, then correct decision-making and maintaining law and order becomes difficult. The situation reaches the provocation stage. The next stage is confrontation.

Open confrontation means the law is safe within the pages of the book, and tempers are out in front in full frenzy. We all have witnessed such situations more than once in our political life-style in this country of flowing rivers and blocked ambitions. 'If you can do it better, we can make it worse.' It is safer to evaluate all options in the book. What is decided is kept secret (we all do).

Above was a preamble. Now Ershad and his party have joined the opposition officially, and henceforth will formally criticise the government and the party in power, or the ruling regime. JP is openly out with a derailing movement, as press reports indicate, and has quickly ditched one of its leaders who is still a minister in the government.

Imperious and 'untouchable' Awami League (that is the image projected by its egoistic leaders; it is not a vision created by this observer) is getting more and

gleng cricket, one found little cheer in this news? The thought that cricketers like Shahid Afridi and Imran Khan are basically Pakhtoons of the Pakistani variety and that those of the Afghan variety are likely to be as adept with the bat and the ball, should be disconcerting to the cricket supporters of any country!

Pakistanis opposing their country's Taliban policy fear that this may encourage the spread of the retrogressive idea of the Taliban. In their view this policy has created avoidable tension with Iran, Pakistan's Shia majority neighbour, and has soured relations with non-Pakhtoon countries of the region like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Turkey, one of Pakistan's closest friends, is also wary of the Taliban. This, they further fear, has offered India an opportunity to play a role, in conjunction with Afghanistan's anti-Taliban neighbours that may not necessarily suit Pakistan. They also point out that by lending their total support to the Taliban, Pakistan may have put all their eggs in the same basket. Tribal friendships, they point out, can be fickle and that it may not take much in turning today's Taliban friends into tomorrow's adversaries.

The government's critics feel that, the country's pro-Taliban attitude is taking its toll on domestic politics of Pakistan. They point out at the proposed 15th amendment of Pakistan's constitution, which inter-alia provides that it will be for the government to determine whether a particular law is according to the 'Shariat' or not. This amendment, now awaiting passage in the Parliament's upper chamber, will, they feel, put the executive head of the government in an arbiter's position, encouraging a dictatorial behaviour pattern.

On April 10, 1999, in a meeting in Islamabad, with Mr Sartaz Aziz, Pakistan's amiable and experienced Foreign Minister, I raised the question of the proposed constitutional amendment. He felt that fundamentalism should be viewed as a problem facing the entire Islamic world. He however maintained that the proposed 15th amendment of the constitution would steal the fundamentalists' thunder and would render their public appeal weaker. The opponents of the amendment generally differ with this view. They fear, that this 'undemocratic' amendment may encourage the enforcement of fundamentalist ideas in the country.

This on-going constitutional debate in Pakistan reminded me of a speech in Dhaka, about a decade ago, in 1990, by the first Prime Minister of the country. A college student as I was then, I listened to the speech with great interest. Pakistan, though then three years old, was still without a constitution and the basic principles of the yet to be framed constitutions was being debated in the country. Justifying the delay in finalizing the constitution Liakat said that it was being framed with so much thought and care that when promulgated, it would attract world acclaim. It is ironic that fifty years and three constitutions hence, the debate on basic constitutional principles still rages on in Pakistan.

OPINION

The Political Mela of 1999

Alif Zabr

Former president Gen Ershad is still drawing power in the press in spite of his notorious media image as an autocratic ruler for long nine years, followed by six years of meditation in the red-brick mansion (facetiously called *shashur-bari* or father-in-law's house in the vernacular). Any inferior personality without the necessary qualities of leadership could not have ruled that long, autocratically or democratically, with or without backing, ethical or otherwise. Hence this qualification (it may be applied on any personality) to be able to bring about macro changes into a situation is a point beyond dispute or debate, and could be validated from many examples in world history.

Therefore Ershad's moves have to be watched carefully, if friend, foe, or any observer, neutral or not. He simply cannot be 'dismissed', regardless of the reason, or sympathy aroused, if he goes down, he won't do it alone — he might cause havoc all around, because he is not alone, and there are other ambitious and ruthless people in this tiny and crowded land, who are fond of gambling now and then, at least for high stakes.

It is also a game of cards. Ershad holds many tricks in his hands, and could make many personalities uncomfortable with his 'secret' database of bits of juicy information which might be leaked out from time to time, with telling effect. It is all a part of this nasty game of politics. A successful politician does not reveal his mind prematurely (he is 'unreadable' or 'undecipherable') and keeps his opponents guessing all the time.

He had been given enough time to ponder over the lessons to learn and unlearn. So it may be presumed that he has done his home-work, whatever the importance given to it by others. It is a disturbing factor for the observers, he being the most experienced politician in the country, like it or not, and he was powerful as he wielded (or misused) power for many years, to the dismay of the honourable competitors.

There is heart-searching, soul-searching, and searching the minds of the people, namely mass psychology. Politicians make or unmake their careers using this potent

more isolated; but not unapproachable, as AL's supporters claim. Let us watch this chess game closely, as AL's opponents try to corner the party into a situation of stalemate, as AL stated that it was a game of mid-90s. Politics is a game of chess, and the Bangladesh players are not doing bad in this actual guess of chess at the regional and international levels.

The Bengalees love politics as a gladiator sport, as personalities are built up, and then the chasing starts, all in good fun initially; but then bitterness takes over, as it did in 1975 and 1990, and now again in 1999. It is a no-holds-barred game; so the meek and the mousy type keep away from the arena. There is no human rights discrimination, as the ladies hold centre stage in the battle of the gladiators, now a winter and spring mela attraction of 1999.

Politics in this country is still a one-way autocratic game of dictating postures (reacting to public feedbacks contemptuously) and one-way communication is the preferred mode. Such an uncharitable attitude on the part of the political leadership is an insult to the credibility of the voters; but it must be remembered that the public always have the last laugh.

It is good for the country if the coming confrontation can succeed in removing the accumulated political garbage since 1950s, when the Language Movement lighted the fuse. No body wishes to carry the excess political baggage decade after decade.

Clean the blackboard and start clean all over again, because the country cannot get any more chances the way the global wind is blowing. Keep pace, or lag behind (as Dr Yunus of GB feels).

The vision of 1971 will continue to remain a dream. Why nobody can run this 'bloody' game? Bloody means a lot of blood has been shed, and shed again, it is feared. There is no scope for mass blood transfusions in view of the AIDS or HIV scare, now available in political models. We are waiting for the next liberation. From what?

To the Editor...

Please be merciful

Sir, From the very day people learnt about the government's intention to construct International Conference Centre at Osmany Udyan by cutting down 11000 trees to make room for it, they have been vehemently opposing this decision. Conscious citizens from all walks of life had been treating the government to let the trees, live which is very important because air pollution in the adjoining area would worsen if these trees are cut down.

We were hoping that the government would pay heed to people's plea though we had to wonder why the people had to point out the peril of such a step. Is it not the government's duty to look after the welfare of the people?

Anyway, all hopes have been dashed when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina while inaugurating the Dhaka City Theatre said, "We will plant three trees if one is cut down for building the conference centre." But would it be the same?

Eleven thousand saplings have grown into the full grown trees enduring the weathering branches giving shelter to birds and other creatures and also fighting the air pollution. We feel very sad thinking about the fate of these unlucky trees.

But all is not lost yet, we fervently request the government to consider the matter and if at all the conference centre has to be constructed, choose another plot for it.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Foreign loan

Sir, For some people foreign loan is a blessing in disguise and for many it is a forthright curse. Foreign loan entices the government of a developing country to always look towards the donor countries and it also helps spawn corruption in the government offices and public sector corporations.

It appears that some ministers, political leaders, policy makers and bureaucrats are always happy, gay and proud when they deal, negotiate and seek foreign loan. They feel that the more they manage and arrange foreign loan the more the credit, appreciation and admiration go to them.

Definitely it is not very difficult to get foreign loan but it is not so easy to make repayment of these loans. With the passage of time and non-stop devaluation of currency of a developing country the amount of foreign loan and interest thereof always go on increasing higher and higher. The donor countries or agencies never lose a single penny, rather they earn more

and more profit and money

from these developing countries. Undoubtedly, a handful of persons of the developing countries quickly become rich with foreign loan, they maintain a higher standard of living and lead a luxurious life but in fact all the liabilities of foreign loans are thrust upon the majority of the poor and weak people of the country.

The people of Bangladesh are overburdened with heavy load of foreign loans which is multiplying by leaps and bounds every year. In fact whoever comes to power — be it Awami League, BNP, JP and again Awami League — each has been increasing the amount of foreign loan day by day.

World Bank, IMF, ADB, USA, UK, Germany, Japan, Canada and Bangladesh Aid Forum, everyone advocates and lays stress upon the need for private sector trade, commerce, industry and investment but we wonder why they prefer giving loan to public sector of the government of Bangladesh instead of granting loan to private sector enterprises/industries of Bangladesh?

We must discard foreign loan in public sector and espouse foreign loan in private sector. Would our Finance Minister, Ex-Finance Minister and MPs of both the ruling and opposition parties kindly take initiative in the matter and ensure maximum utilisation of foreign loan in the greater interest of the country and welfare of the people?

O.H. Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Wari, Dhaka-1203

The taste of governance

Sir, The public has got ample taste of governance by the current regime for about three years. What's the verdict? I do not know about others, but I have some comments.

The weak and inexperienced government, (the preceding regime was also weak, but it worked quietly in the background at its own humble level), back in power after more than two decades in the 'wilderness', and headed by veteran elected representatives of the people brandishing high-power brand names, appear to have needlessly created more problems than it could solve, keeping in view the 'public interest' angle — a cardinal principle of any government. This is understandable for several reasons.

Chanting mantras cannot bestow professional efficiency. Famous names cannot be brokered for providing better services. Unless one knows his job

well, he is not good enough. Add nepotism and politicisation with hunting, corruption, rent-seeking, and internal terrorist cadres run by hidden god-fathers; as per cumulative impression gathered from the scrutiny of the mass media, then the whole system is open to frequent criticism.

Now the cracks are showing.

The rumblings may start sooner than later. Most of the political parties have joined with the major opposition group, planning a one-point movement to stop all errant activities by those who misuse power and influence. The honest workers and employees are dismayed — they feel they are sandwiched between the devil and the deep sea. There appears to be no respect for professional judgement. Ad hocism is the rule of the day. The Parliament has lost its basic objective — the exchange of views. There is no forum for official debates. It is a one-way traffic with lots of red and amber lights. Democracy is supposed to display more green lights.

Such an unstable situation cannot last for long. It may be too late for the regime to try to set things in order. It displayed some degree of premonition by announcing general elections next year. It will not be surprising if this date is advanced, as the opposition demands. The point of no-return has been reached. It is too late to change the course of events (the momentum or flywheel effect).

If change can bring stability, why not support it?

A Veteran Voter
Dhaka

Parking lot

Sir, May I draw the attention of our city fathers, private entrepreneurs and the government authority concerned to actively consider constructing multi-storied or underground separate parking lots for the busy business and commercial areas. This will ease the prevailing traffic congestion caused by illegal and haphazardly parked vehicles, ensure security and provide extra employment as well (not to mention the earnings). The 'developers' may think over this idea which will surely benefit them in the long run.

In the same context, may I suggest to our city planners to ensure sufficient parking space for all types of buildings? A certain floor may be earmarked for this purpose which may as well become standardised for other cities in our country.

Tanzila Choudhury
Chittagong