

BNP's Alternative to Hartial

FROM a change of strategy it now sounds like a change of heart. The BNP had earlier scaled down the duration of hartial to a half day. 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 call 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 hartial.

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 hartial. As a matter of fact, if the objective is to garner public support, why then alienate the same by resorting to hartial? There is no question about the pervasive antipathy towards frequent disruptions of life on an increasingly violent note at that as well. Hartial 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 hartial calls when she had been in power. The points she made then against hartial 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 hartial and adopt alternative means for voicing their protests.

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

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

not treat Pakistan the way she did Bangladesh and the other countries of the region! Notwithstanding one's basic disagreement with this perception, one has to state that one found his reference to 'Urdu Speaking', an euphemism for a person of Indian origin. This does sound odd in uninitiated ears, for Urdu, after all, is the State language of Pakistan. But then an usage can at times defy rationality. Urdu speaking is important actors on the national scene is usually noted in today's Pakistan, if not, talked about, and the General happens to be 'Urdu Speaking', an euphemism for a person of Indian origin. This does sound odd in uninitiated ears, for Urdu, after all, is the State language of Pakistan. But then an usage can at times defy rationality. Urdu speaking

According to General Parvez, a stable Afghanistan was in the interest of Pakistan. India did not wish it and was therefore likely to carry on a 'low intensity conflict', to keep the pot boiling.

At the outset, General Musharraf identified what he thought were the major areas of concern of the United States' concern in this region. Those were: (a) nuclear proliferation, (b) narcotics proliferation, (c) Islamic fundamentalism and (d) increasing global influence and military power of China. Russia, he thought was still grappling to prevent a political and economic collapse. Pakistan's nuclear explosion, had, according to the General, needed to be attended to. That included, (a) economic breakdown, (b) breakdown in law and order and (c) provincial disarray, including the ethnic and sectarian situation in Sindh and the Punjab respectively. Of these, there Armed Forces were in a position to deal with the first two problems. However, before taking on a task, the Army had to be satisfied as to whether (a) the security of the country would be jeopardized if it did not, (b) whether the matter was of national importance, (c) whether any other organization could perform the task and (d) whether the armed forces could at all succeed in the assumed task.

General Musharraf then referred to the take over by the Armed Forces, of the operations of the Water and Power Development Authority of Pakistan — a job in which 35,000 soldiers were now engaged. He said that they had succeeded in realizing unpaid bills and related water and electricity charges of 350 crore rupees from individuals and organizations and the hope was that his collection would reach 1500 million rupees over the next six months or so. That was how the Army was contributing to the rehabilitation of Pakistan's economy, he said. Citing examples of further involvement of the Army in national affairs, he said that it was now engaged in computerizing the national database and was also trying to modernize the Information Technology in Pakistan. In the agricultural field his hope was that with sound water management the armed forces would one day

succeed 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

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?

If change can bring stability, why not support it?

A Veteran Voter
Dhaka

The taste of governance

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

Parking lot

Sir. May I draw the attention of our city fathers, private entrepreneurs and the government authority concerned to actively consider constructing multi-storyed 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.

Tanzia Choudhury
Chittagong

going 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 Tazikistan, 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.

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 turbanned Afghan costume? This, the clean shaved 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. 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. Some of these madrasas mushroomed deep inside Pakistan's borders, many in even the major cities, into which, besides the Afghans, thousands of Pakistanis enrolled as well. These madrasas apparently targeted a wider catchment area, so much so, that in February 1996, the Taliban governor of the Afghan province of Herat, one Maulvi Mohammad, warned the Iranian government that Taliban 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 Bangladeshi and Indian connections. These madrasas gradually and expectantly came under the influence of the Jamaat-i-Ulema of Pakistan and turned out, as many

Pakhtoon friends in Peshawar, equally aware 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 Taliban country. The Punjabi ethnos 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 strug-

OPINION

The Political Mela of 1999

Alif Zabr

Former president Gen Ershad has 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 pre-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, by friend, foe or any observer, neutral or not. He simply cannot be 'dismissed', regardless of the venom 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.

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

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 claimed to have done in the mid-90s. Politics is a game of chess, and the Bangladeshi players are not doing bad in this actual game of chess at the regional and international levels.

The Bengalees love politics as a gladiator sport, as personalities are built up, and 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; the mousie 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, causing sustained political instability. 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 the 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 country'? Bloody means a lot of blood has been shed, and might be 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?