

## Step in the Right Direction

Finally, the Criminal Investigation Department has gathered 'substantial evidence' to warrant ruling party legislator Muhibur Rahman Manik's arrest on charge of bomb-making at his residence. Belated though, the move certainly manifests CID's commitment in uncovering the truth about Chhatak bomb-blast that left two people killed and one, a cousin of the ruling party MP, critically injured. Also, it dispels a growing suspicion among people that the initial inertia at the police end was just a ploy to shield the perpetrators. Full marks to the Home Ministry for their relentless pursuit of the case. The government's commitment towards rooting out terrorism has surely been reflected in such a bold police action. We hope that the Minister's advice to his partymen not to go for *tadbir* for his release as a step towards correction process and there would be no looking back.

The arrest is made exactly 75 days after the incident. The gory incident was widely reported in the press and pressure brought upon police by all party leaders in Chhatak for the arrest of Manik. But the authorities had remained apparently indifferent. As days went by without any palpable development in the case, many had started believing the whole episode of investigation into the incident was nothing less than a farce. Many even went to the extent of predicting a premature end to the case without even framing of charges against the alleged perpetrator. Thankfully, the speculations have been proved wrong. The investigation officials were not sitting on the case, and the home minister's public avowal to punish the criminal was not mere rhetoric.

Although the minister has solicited cooperation of his fellow partymen to let the law take its own course, the possibility of ruling party interference can not be entirely ruled out. That the CID "has gathered substantial evidence" that implicates the MP in manufacturing bombs at his residence is itself disconcerting. If a Member of Parliament is engaged in such an atrocious trade how can the people feel safe living in his area? This also calls for immediate intervention of the ruling party in the intra-party feud that shows up in many places across the country and also the rift and clashes among the cadres of BCL that put the government in embarrassing situations. A right step in this direction will set example of governance by the ruling party.

## Ostracise Them

Majeda's new-born may have cheered her a little after her six-month stay at the hospital as a acid-burn victim, but a dramatic increase in acid attacks on women all over the country, as reported in yesterday's *Daily Star*, comes as a reminder of the menace coming back in a spate. Devastated by the trauma of pain and shock, female victims of male violence have few places to turn to for treatment or legal action.

Our focus seems to have shifted from "acid-attacks" to "rehabilitation" of victims. Projects, driven by purely altruistic motives and funded by individuals, private hospitals and external donors, are welcome signs. But as far as the legal action against the barbarian acid-throwers is concerned it's yet to extend any hope, both for victims and the security of the women.

During the 1980s, incidences of acid-attacks on women reached such proportions that the government was forced to think about capital punishment. Even though acid-throwing was made punishable by death it got women of Bangladesh practically nothing. Incidences of acid-attacks on women continued and reporting of such cases to police — and even to the media — still remains low. The severe punishment provided in the law has not deterred the attackers, possibly because the application of the law has been found to be half-hearted.

Until the constabulary efforts are energised to efficiently investigate every single reported case, and the rate of conviction in the courts goes up dramatically, the protection of the law will remain elusive for women. On the other hand, authority concerned must make it an established affair that the sale of acid to individuals is overseen with strong commitment to stop this vice. If the law falls short in protecting acid-burn casualties, we suggest a heightened public awareness to ostracise the throwers could be complementary to the process.

## Voter ID Woes

The way things are the Election Commission appears headed for another round of turning back on its commitment as regards the voter identity cards project. The latest update shows it has only been able to prepare ID cards for 55 per cent of nearly six crore voters across the country, of which only 36 per cent has been distributed so far. Since making public its determination to complete preparation and distribution of cards by June 30 in mid-April, the commission has made very little progress, which vindicates our editorial comment on April 17 "the plan is ambitious, if not preposterous." The commission should realise that turning back on commitments actually decimates its credibility and its credibility is of paramount significance for a nation struggling to establish free and fair electoral process.

The project has been a non-starter from the very beginning. Nearly two years were lost on investigation into allegations of gross irregularities and subsequent hibernation. Also, things are not quite as smooth as the commission may have expected. Of the cards distributed so far, some have errors hinging on the ludicrous, calling for more caution in this regard. Photo collection has proved to be another problematic proposition. Photographs of 64 per cent of the country's eligible voters have been collected so far. Coverage of 75 per cent would be possible by June 30, says one EC official, but one wonders whether that would be possible either.

Voter ID cards need to be fool-proof for they will also be used as supportive documents for such purposes ranging from handing over assets to application for passports and driving licences. The EC is certainly aware of that and, we hope, would, therefore, be more prudent to concentrate more on doing away with the ridiculous errors than on mad rush to meet the deadline. Also, unnecessary haste may result in issuing cards for the "ghost" voters. We expect the commission to come forward and make public their failure to meet the deadline they had injudiciously set, and plan one that is attainable and stick to it.

## Fear of a Single Party Dominance in Bangladesh

M. Rashiduzzaman writes from Glassboro, New Jersey, USA

*With 37 per cent and 33 per cent of popular votes shared between the Awami League and the BNP respectively in the last election and the gathering of messages from recent opinion polls at hand, there is a balance of political strength between the two largest parties. One cannot easily rout the other! But there is no dizzying public euphoria and extravagant admiration for any of the main parties or any of the top political leaders. In the present equation, a single party control, no matter who ventures into this dangerous political enterprise, will not work!*

At the threshold of a new millennium, Bangladesh is torn by a fear — the fear that the ruling Awami League might become the single dominant party by wrenching the opposition, which would rupture the dream of diversity and democracy that many Bangladeshis dream. It is such misgiving that contributes to the present uncompromising impasse between the government and the major opposition parties. Such alarming accusations against any party in power should not be made lightly, nor such proclivities, if confirmed, should be treated lightly or judged only by the rhetorical thunder that we are familiar with. Politics is hardly a good predictive science, but I don't think a single party or a single leader or even a single ideology, right or left, can dominate Bangladesh; may be for sometime, but not for long. If history is any road map to the future, we have plenty of historical evidences to support that statement.

For a better comprehension of Bangladesh party politics, the language movement, the demise of the once powerful East Pakistani Muslim League, the rise of a myriad of competitive political groups, and the circumstances leading to independence and what transpired since then are critical. But I can't discuss the full story within this limited space, nor do I pretend to narrate a hitherto unknown account. The Muslim League fought for Pakistan as the embodiment of Muslim separation in British India, and arguably, it could have become a single party regime, but surely it had met resistance in East Pakistan where the opposition politics took its roots slowly but steadily. It is believed that the idea of making the Muslim League the sole party crossed the minds of some of its leaders who hated dissent.

Indeed, for a while, the only opposition that survived (in Pakistan) was the remnant of the old Congress Party, which

consolidated itself for the protection of the Hindu interests in former East Pakistan. It was under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhansali, Ataur Rahman Khan, Shamsul Huq, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and a band of young as well as old leaders that the Awami (Muslim) League was born on June 23, 1949. The Muslim League looked upon the Awami League as a threat to its political survival, and tried to suppress its protests. Although the BNP and the JP were, in their eyes, the "usurpers" of their "rightful inheritance", they were "installed" by the military turned civilian regimes that ruled Bangladesh since the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. One could discern a voice from the past in such political hyperbole. In the 1954 election campaign, the Muslim League's battle cry was "Muslim League achieved Pakistan for you, and it's the only organization which can sustain her". The Muslim League campaigners also stumped "Pakistan will be in danger if the Muslim League is defeated in the elections since the enemies of Pakistan are at large to utilize any opportunity to destroy us". But those campaign slogans did not inspire many in what was then East Pakistan.

There was hardly any strong dissenting voice to match the Awami League government in the early 1970s; there was no real challenge to the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, widely acclaimed as the father of the nation. Mujib's totalization of power was personal; before he was assassinated, the BKSAL, the new political arm that he quickly forged was still

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The Awami Leaguers maintained that they represented the "pro-liberation forces" that brought the independence of Bangladesh, so they deserved the mantle of power that they initially held for barely three and half years before being overthrown by a violent coup that we all know about. Both

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in its infancy and soon died after the coup. So the BNP argues that when the military coup came in 1975, there was no pluralistic democracy in Bangladesh. It's still mystifying why did Mujib, so popular and politically strong, opt for a single party regime.

More likely it was Mujibism, the new ideological brew that led the country to a single party route. But above all, it was his undisputed leadership and his populist pantheon that helped him in easily converting his long nourished (AL) party into the BKSAL, the only legal political platform that was allowed to exist. What Mujib did to his Awami League/BKSAL was very different from what M.A. Jinnah did to the Muslim League that was under his tutelage, some analysts contend. But the similarity between the Awami League/BKSAL under Mujib and the Muslim League under Jinnah could be superficial except that for both it was a quest for dominance under two highly popular leaders. Still, more important differences. While the East Pakistani Muslim League became more isolated and exclusionary after 1947, and while there is a long list of intimidation that it used against the opposition, it did not become the only party allowed by law.

Moreover, with the internal factionalism, personal rivalries, the anger over the language questions, the inter-wing economic disparities, their sagging public support and absence of any charismatic leader in former East Pakistan, the Muslim League was not strong enough to

assume the full status of a single party regime in Pakistan. On the other hand, the Awami League had an overwhelming victory in the 1973 election with more than 70 per cent of votes and 291 out of 300 seats in the parliament. Sad to say, this was taken as an endorsement for Mujibism, and gradually the party stumbled into authoritarianism against the backdrop of economic chaos, a spiraling inflation, famine, lawlessness and increasing militancy in the Awami League's student organizations. The fear of that fusion of charismatic populism and undoubted authoritarianism still haunts the nation in 1999.

But the dynamics of 1975 and 1999 are very different. Sheikh Hasina earned the appreciation of most of her party followers by winning the 1996 election after a 21-year hiatus. So far she has reigned in the radicals in the party, but the omen of internal rift is rising on the horizon. She may still be able to build a more organized and competitive party with help from the keepers of the Mujib mantle, but she does not command her father's charisma. So far, she has not publicly rediscovered the thrill of BKSAL-type single party rule, nor did she openly rekindle the flame of Mujibism. Hopefully she realizes that the Bangladeshi political leadership is not so amenable to the feared control by a single party, either directly or through indirect means.

Contrary to what the political pundits predicted, both the BNP and the JP, the creation of

the Dalits's own political action. As Ambedkar told them: "Believe in your strength.... You must abolish your slavery yourselves.... Political power is the master key....

The Dalits' experience with the Republican Party and Bahujan Samaj Party has been unsatisfactory. These have done a lot to promote Dalit self-awareness and self-respect. But they have not gone much beyond identity politics. They remain wedded to the politics of patronage. That may be inevitable in, say, Uttar Pradesh. It is possible that if the BSP wields power for three to five years, it could substantively empower Dalits. As of now, however, Dalit politics has not crystallised in a transformative mould.

Dalit emancipation is not about the rights of 160 million people alone. It is about the liberation of this entire society from centuries-old bondage and virtual slavery, including slavery to karmic fatalism.

The author is an eminent journalist in India and a regular columnist of *The Daily Star*.

## Unfree, Oppressed Dalits: Reality of the 160 Million

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

*Hardly a week goes without reports of some outrageous anti-Dalit act: segregation in a medical college hostel; being forced to drink tea from separate cups; carrying nightsoil on the head; being forced to bathe in the same pond as buffaloes. There were three Dalit massacres in Bihar in 1999 alone. Yet, there isn't strong moral anger at this.*

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## OPINION

### Towards a Twenty-first Century Foreign Policy

Esam Sohail

Like most of the rest of its Third World brethren, Bangladesh has long pursued a so-called non-aligned foreign policy which is based on several well known and long worn out themes: opposition to the United States, hatred of Israel, fear of India, begging aid from the West and the United States, and profound display of affection for brotherly Arab-Islamic countries. The results of this lacklustre and ideological foreign policy are pretty obvious. Americans are weary of giving any more money to countries which, on most occasions, go against them in international fora, the Europeans are tired of a basket case, the Indians are unwilling to keep any promises and the Arabs are expelling our wage earners by the thousands. In other words, Bangladesh, the ninth biggest country in the world, has been taken for granted by its fellow members of the international community. And for good reason too. For too long we have played the typical Third World role as assumed of us. On the doorstep of the new millennium Bangladesh should revise its foreign policy fundamentally so that our role in world is less what is assumed given our image and more what is necessary given our reality.

Such a revision involves several paradigm shifts. Firstly, the policy makers must realise that they are agents of Bangladesh, not of some imaginary Non-Aligned, Arab, Muslim, Afro-Asian coalition. "Bangladesh first" is a novel and a timely idea. We love our brethren in the Arab world and would like to see a Palestinian homeland too. But not at the cost of our national interest.

Secondly, foreign policy in an increasingly small world is too important to be left at the sole discretion of amateur politicians who are anti-American out of office and pro-American when in power. A strong and permanent foreign policy infrastructure needs to be set up

bluntly, Bangladesh has no business trying to help every downtrodden people from Palestine to Papua New Guinea. Aligning ourselves with all these liberation movements only makes our most important potential investors jittery. Nor does it help Palestinians or Papuans or whoever. Let us face the fact that investments and export markets are found in the United States and Europe. It makes no sense for those governments or their businesses to do business with, or in, a country whose rhetoric is anti-Western and, by extension, whose public officials rarely condemn terrorist acts perpetrated by various Third World guerrilla groups. War ravaged Korea and tiny Singapore have gone a long way in attracting Western trading partners by being prudent in their choice of friends. So should we. Except for one particularly notable occasion when Bangladesh extended a friendly hand to the US-led alliance in 1991 against Saddam Hussein, our foreign policy choices have been dictated by a nonsensical "non-aligned" ideology. It does not make much sense to condemn American policy at the foreign office and beg for US investment at the commerce ministry. Neither are Americans going to change policy nor their investors rush over to invest in our industries. So why do we do this self-delimiting *faux pas*?

This republic needs to find its proper place in the world. That place cannot and must not be in the shadows of any pan-national movement like non-alignment or Islamism. If our national political or economic interests lie with the West, or even with Israel, so be it. Let the word go forth that Bangladesh is not the drummer boy for rich Sheikdoms or totalitarian dictators anymore. It is the master of its own foreign policy.

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