

Go Back to Parliament

Of late there has been a marked shift in the agitational policy of the opposition BNP. Frequency of hartal is on the wane as other forms of demonstration, geared to mobilise public opinion, like the road marches, gain ground. The principal opposition party has so far organised four road marches with the Dhaka-Aricha one on Sunday being the latest one staged to protest what the BNP termed as grant of 'corridor' to India through Bangladesh territory. Begum Zia addressed way-side public rallies as the motor cavalcade rolled along the Dhaka-Aricha highway. The 'road march' which was once the butt of joke for her cynical detractors is now an established method of garnering support for her party's causes. She must be exuding a new confidence in the process. This should strengthen her belief that democracy is working somehow. In spite of the official electronic media's preoccupation with the ruling party's agenda and programmes, she is being able to get her messages through to the people by exercising the alternatives to hartal.

Why is then Khaleda Zia saying that the government should be given 'one push' to topple it? The unconstitutional methodology conjured up by such an utterly irresponsible call for ouster of an elected government could only have been an expression extreme which does not sit with the new strength of the BNP derived from the successful rallies they have been organising lately. Begum Zia's call for pulling the government down by a 'nudge' may be recalled in the reverse: Sheikh Hasina, while in the opposition, had used similar words against Begum Zia, the then prime minister of the country, but the latter's government did not fall. To the credit of our history, the February election was held as scheduled with Begum Zia's government having run the tenure it was elected for. The BNP chief should get the benefit of a flashback and get it into her system of beliefs that our elected governments cannot be made to fall except through another election.

As part of strengthening the democratic process BNP ought to go back to the Parliament now, without ado.

East Timor on Fire

EVIDENTLY, overwhelming verdict in favour of independence in the UN-brokered referendum has brought about little respite for the East Timorese, who have been subjected to repression, in one form or the other, under different regimes for centuries. With pro-Jakarta militiamen, an obvious minority given the result of the referendum, unleashing a reign of terror in the capital and tens of thousands fleeing their homes in mortal fear, the former Portuguese colony appears headed for a civil war. So fiercely violent and menacingly audacious the machete and automatic weapon-brandishing anti-independence exponents are that even the journalists and foreigners based in Dili have not been spared. Already more than 100 pressmen and many foreigners have been evacuated. The UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) has not had any immunity, either. Four local staffers have been killed and six others have gone missing since the vote. Also, the UNAMET compound virtually came under siege since Saturday's announcement that 78.5 per cent of East Timor's voters have chosen independence, not autonomy within Indonesia sought by the militias.

Regrettably, Jakarta's role in ever-escalating violence has been dubious, to say the least. While itself mooting independence for East Timor in January, President BJ Habibie's government has turned a blind eye to the marauding acts of militiamen. Thousands of soldiers and police stationed in the province to maintain law and order have allegedly made no attempt to stop the hoodlums. Even worse, members of Indonesian army's special Kopassus forces are alleged to have been playing a 'central role in the militia violence'.

Apparently, the situation in East Timor has gone way out of hand. At this point of time, the pro-Jakarta militiamen clearly hold the upper hand; however, in all likelihood, the pro-independence activists would regroup very soon and retaliate. If and when that happens, it would certainly lead to an orgy of killing and getting killed. Added to the mass exodus now taking place, it would be a humanitarian disaster of a colossal magnitude. Although a high-level delegation from Jakarta has already reached East Timor, suspicion lurks that it may just be an attempt to hoodwink the international community. Yet, one can only wish that the Indonesian authority would be true to its commitment and respect the verdict of the East Timorese people.

Violence at Rangamati

IN the backdrop of angry demonstrations by Pahari Chhatri Parishad (PCP), supporters of CHT peace accord and Shantu Larma, the latter met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Sunday at Ganobhaban and discussed matters of mutual interest with her. Larma was aided by two of his lieutenants. They discussed status of implementation of the peace accord including the Regional Council's point of view on various unresolved issues.

But the situation in the CHT has not improved much even after the Regional Council started functioning under the stewardship of Larma. Reports of clashes between tribals and non-tribals and between pahari community members and the police have appeared in the newspapers. Only on Sunday last, the PCP activists clashed with the police in the collectorate compound. Thirty people were injured, one of them seriously, as a result of police firing. The agitated students also ransacked shops and offices damaging properties of innocent traders and shop-owners. The latter protested the ugly incident by calling hartal on Monday. The students, it is reported, were demonstrating against the murder of two hill people at Baghaichhari thana allegedly by some Bangalees. Both sides, according to reports, have asked for the removal of the Police Super for his failure to tackle the situation.

This paper has always maintained that strong measures are needed to be taken against any attempt to disrupt peace in the CHT. We hope that supporters of the peace accord will not create any situation in which peace is disturbed and the people, local and non-local alike, suffer from any apprehension of a breach of peace in the area.

New Challenges for the Awami League Government

by M. Rashiduzzaman

Her government may survive the feared tumult and shout of the opposition, but it's a political defeat for Sheikh Hasina if the BNP emerges as the resilient and indispensable platform of forces opposed to what the Awami League stands for, and the way that party governed the country since 1996.

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has a monumental challenge to stem internal factional strife, vigorously enforce law and order, and, above all, effectively run the affairs of state until the next election. But that is not the only fear casting shadows on the Awami League government. The BNP-led opposition decided to boycott the national parliament until the government revoked its decision to give transit facilities to India that some critics consider a strategic threat to Bangladesh. It is possible that the opposition-led hartals, intermittently jolting the nation, may explode into a strident anti-government protest all over the country. More seriously, Hasina's ability to unify the nation, her commitments to pluralism and her actual treatment of the opposition since her party came to power in 1996 are very much under scrutiny — by the domestic antagonists and also by those international observers who generally oversee the worldwide democratic governance. This article focuses on some of the critical issues that the Awami League government faces now.

Kader Siddiqui, a well known freedom fighter turned politician, was recently suspended from the Awami League for his apparent rebellion against the party. What was intended as a warning against insubordination to the party leadership did not really work since Kader Siddiqui resigned as MP as a protest with a litany of grievances directed towards Prime Minister Hasina. The disciplinary steps and rhetoric against Kader Siddiqui could be trickier than fighting the known political opponents. RAJUK's controversial allocation of (301) residential plots recently created so much of internal bickering among the Awami Leaguers that it became the talk of the entire country! Hasina, on her return from England, quickly rescinded those allotments to save her name from what is better known as the RAJUK (plot) scam that has irreparably tarnished the image of her party, and created a fissure within the Awami League regime itself.

Yet, all of these could only be the tip of the summer of discontent inside the ruling party! Do the feuds and scandals indicate the Awami League's internal instability? Are these the bitter harvest of the ruling party's patronage distribution to certain groups, individuals, friends and relatives while ignoring others within the party? It is a well-known political logic that when a party elite relies exclusively on cronyism without aggregating the diverse forces and expectations, it creates adversaries from within. As a result, Hasina will have more angry and recalcitrant Awami Leaguers who did not get what they expected from their own people in power. Bengali appetite for proliferating factionalism is not new and even the main opposition parties are not immune to this, but sitting atop a volcano of unfolding inter-party warfare is a great disappointment for Hasina since the party that she brought back to power from the political wilderness may become her anathema now.

The higher courts in

through the national capital that was a severe blow to the prestige of the Awami League government although the ruling party has recently taken some steps against him. It was not a routine vandalism by the armed gangs, but an outburst of extreme personal rivalry inside the Awami League which the party has been trying to repair, but not with evident success since its influential leaders are divided over the appropriate steps to deal with the perpetrators of the UCBL incident. The battle over the UCBL management also spilled in the streets of Chittagong as the rival factions exchanged gunfire with each other.

Evidently, the strong undercurrents behind the facade of party solidarity could be trickier than fighting the known political opponents. RAJUK's controversial allocation of (301) residential plots recently created so much of internal bickering among the Awami Leaguers that it became the talk of the entire country! Hasina, on her return from England, quickly rescinded those allotments to save her name from what is better known as the RAJUK (plot) scam that has irreparably tarnished the image of her party, and created a fissure within the Awami League regime itself.

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On August 27, there was a startling and "unique bank robbery" in Dhaka City! Akteruzzaman Babu, a bigwig of the Awami League, allegedly accompanied by armed goons, broke through the collapsible gate of the United Commercial Bank Ltd (UCBL), beat up and forced the existing chairman (Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury, also a prominent Awami Leaguer in Chittagong), and the directors to resign at gun point, and declared himself as the new chairman! It has also been accused that the police watched the entire event but did not intervene. The unprecedented incident sent shock waves

Bangladesh have not only rebuked the government for what amounts to a disrespect for judiciary, denial of the due process and disregard for certain constitutional provisions, but also fined the government for gross abuse of power. Respect for law is not a matter of rhetoric, but a matter of actual practice, and seriously speaking, due process cannot be half-hearted. Khaleda Zia insists that her supporters were being arrested under the pretext of apprehending the anti-social elements. The front page newspaper picture of an allegedly pro-government "terrorist" chasing the presumably opposition strikers with a "nine-shooter shot gun" gives some credence to the opposition charge that the ruling party was out to use force to crush political agitation. No steps, as of this writing, were taken against the Awami League MP and his armed accomplices who allegedly shot and killed a pro-opposition student activist in broad day light during a hartal.

The police recently issued warrants of arrest against 158 "top terrorists" that allegedly included mostly the names of the BNP activists (it is further known that during the last three years, the police issued warrants of arrest against 200,000 people most of whom were claimed to be the BNP supporters). The BNP considers the 3-plus year of the Awami League rule a "reign of terror" dredging its national leaders as well as the local upholders whenever and wherever it could. Such terrorising accusations are the political danger signals for a ruling party in any democracy. With the press revealing who gets arrested and who gets punished, the Awami League government will have to do a lot of explaining to the non-partisan human rights groups peering into such arrests and detention.

Sheikh Hasina misunderstood the message of the 1936 elections; the Awami League in power has spent more time in cursing the opposition than cursing the country a new direction — a flawed tactic that will cost the party politically. All the invitations to join her "consensus government" are now considered loose talks about democracy and political cooperation — she failed to build even a facade of political pluralism. Whenever a fault of the administration is pointed out, the Awami League leaders'

favourite response is: "Oh, the BNP government also did similar things!" People are fed up with such blame shifting, and the government's credibility is on the slippery slope. Even the annual GDP estimates are questioned not only by the political rivals, but also by the international donors. During the last three years, the habitual government-opposition contest has been turned into a "war of the two ladies" between Prime Minister Hasina and Opposition leader Khaleda Zia that has reached the lowest ebb. The Awami League has indeed limited its political world by its vociferous claim as the SOLE party of patriotism, the freedom fighters and the "pro-liberation" forces — an act that narrowed its appeal to an exclusionary paradigm. It is also confusing to the post-1971 (Bangladesh) generation that does not fully understand or rigidly follow the ferocity of that distinction between the "pro-liberation" and "anti-liberation" forces. The Awami League's vocabulary of "political correctness" has not changed over two decades except briefly in 1996. A time bomb is ticking against the Awami League unless it broadens its appeal to a larger constituency of Bangladeshi. Its political rivals are already attacking the fact that the Awami League has been dependent on the minority voting blocks for winning elections. Of the 37 per cent popular votes that the Awami League received in 1996, about 12 per cent are considered minority votes. Recent opinion polls in Bangladesh indicate that election in the near future will also have similar outcome for the Awami League.

So far the ruling regime has failed to come up with a coherent governing philosophy — a question that was also raised against the BNP government reeling under the opposition-led hartals. The Awami League no longer enjoys the massive popularity of a single unifying leader as it happened in the early 1970's. What the Awami League is doing now is not a statesman-like, all-embracing and all-inclusive initiative for the rough and tumble of the political game. The Awami League's exclusive claim to patriotism is already challenged by the BNP and several other political groups and leaders who also made significant contribution to the armed struggle

in 1971. Ironically, Kader Siddiqui now blames that the present Awami League government is an "anti-liberation" regime if he succeeds in forming another party of his "genuine" freedom fighters that he threatens to do, the Awami League's monopolistic claim of being the "only" party of those who fought for the independence will further go down in public esteem. The Awami League has put its own house in order while fighting the angry opposition forces and successfully contests election possibly in no so distant future.

By overstretching its historical role in 1971 and by harnessing it for exclusively partisan and personal purposes, the Awami League, at its own peril, divided the country into the two opposing camps — "Us" over "Them" respectively! "Us" represented the Awami League, and its intellectual and political cohorts. And "Them" are the non-Awami Leaguers, those who did not enjoy the assumed credentials as freedom fighters and as "pro-liberation" forces, those who did not flee to India in 1971, those who were suspected to have collaborated with Pakistan in 1971 and those who are loosely considered as the pro-Pakistanis. The worst ramifications of such a dubious split of the nation are yet to come! Hasina moved from the left to the centre and sought reconciliation including forgiveness for the "past wrong doing" — a moderating voice that generated public confidence on the new leadership, and greatly helped the Awami League to win the 1996 poll but remained, so far, unfulfilled in the eyes of many Bangladeshi. Sheikh Hasina enjoys the name recognition of her father, but not his mesmerizing charisma; as the leader of one of the largest parties in Bangladesh, her best option is to reconcile the conflicting impulses that go with democratic pluralism.

For over two years, most observers dismissed the anti-Awami League accusatory voices as little more than the outpouring BNP frustration and Khaleda's impatience to get back the power that she lost to Sheikh Hasina in 1996. When a party considers itself as the monopoly of patriotism, ignoring or suppressing other groups and views, it comes closer to the identification of the party with the state — a fearsome prospect even for Bangladesh that has

been oscillating between democracy and authoritarianism since independence! Faced with numerous allegations of suppressing dissent, the Awami League government is suffering from self-inflicted wounds. Few politically motivated cases against the opposition leaders have been withdrawn, and now the charges of opposition bashing and intolerance towards diversity are increasingly putting the ruling Awami League on the defensive side of the political aisle.

Two BNP lawmakers were allured to junior cabinet positions that was widely criticized as an unabashed attempt to fray the opposition, and disregarded the constitutional restriction against such floor crossing: it is very much a live issue in Bangladesh through a new legal flash point, won by the opposition recently. With a barrage of politically inspired cases against the opposition leaders, Hasina is facing a no-win situation — overt manipulation of bureaucracy and judiciary to prove those allegations will bring condemnation for her, but a belated withdrawal of those charges would further destroy her sagging credibility.

The interne conflicts, the political isolation and the very apprehension of instability are destabilizing specters by themselves but the convergence of those forces cannot readily bring down the government as long as Hasina's parliamentary majority remains intact. But with the swirling factionalism and the challenging prospect of a continuing agitation against the ruling party, Hasina's deadlocked governance will have little initiative for new policies. The Awami League has possibly a different vision about the future turn of events but the sympathy that veered to Sheikh Hasina herding her party back to power in 1996 is downhill. Her government may survive the feared tumult and shout of the opposition, but it's a political defeat for Sheikh Hasina if the BNP emerges as the resilient and indispensable platform of forces opposed to what the Awami League stands for, and the way that party governed the country since 1996.

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Communalists on the Defensive

Vajpayee has said that the BJP, as a party and not as a member of the National Democratic Alliance, is committed to the three issues: non-construction of the Ram temple at the site where the Babri Masjid stood once; non-abolition of Article 370 which assures special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and non-adoption of a uniform civil code.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Such being the case, the voter should have the right to reject a candidate. When the result is announced, the number of "notes" should also be declared. The Sevagram Initiative Group proposed to the EC that the ballot paper should have a column to register 'no'. The Commission rejected the suggestion on the ground that it has no such authority and that only parliament could frame rules on such matters. If this is so, the next parliament should take up the proposal on a priority basis.

I wish the EC had at least agreed to the posting of non-official observers at key centres.

The bureaucrats, whether from Delhi or elsewhere, are essentially government servants. Most of them are not beyond influence. The explanation that the EC gave is that parliament should amend the Representation of the People Act to provide for the appointment of non-officials as observers. I think the commission is trying to pass the buck. When it can nominate bureaucrats, why not non-officials, who will give credibility to the polling process?

There are so many deficiencies in the electoral system. But one good thing about the current polls is that there is less of religion, although the caste factor remains as explosive as before.

Secular elements, although far from united, have started joining issue with the fundamentalists.

It is not my case that the

Muslims do not suffer due to

discrimination or suspicion.

Only recently did many Mus-

lims in Mumbai face a government order to prove their citizenship. The raid by the intelligence Bureau — it rarely does so directly — on an Islamic institution in Lucknow, without the knowledge of the respected Muslim head, suggested suspicion. But the reaction of non-Muslims and the media was so strong that the authorities had to beat a hasty retreat and apologize.

Communalists are on the defensive now. The upward line in the graph of Hindu-Muslim rioting has dipped abruptly after the Mumbai killings.

The declining trend is also visible from the number of communal riots. It is not an earthshaking development, but it is worth

nothing that when Yusuf Khan

joined films in the forties, he had to adopt a Hindu name — Dilip Kumar, so did Mahabir (Meena Kumar)? But Aamir Khan, Shabir Khan and Salman Khan did not have to do so. They are not less sought after because they are Muslims.

RSS chief Rajinder Singh

himself sent word to the government to exempt the film,

Sarfarosh, from entertainment tax.

The film, not complimenting

the commitment of Indian Muslims

to the country. The film's producer had not even applied for exemption.

Such a public demonstration on the part of the RSS may be part of its strategy.

The Ram temple at the site

where the Babri Masjid stood

once; non-abolition of Article

370 which assures special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and non-adoption of a uniform civil code.

One can see the equation between Muslims and Hindus taking shape. The Muslims are

not afraid of being swamped

culture-wise as they were at one

time. The secular policy, after

the Mumbai killings, is getting strengthened.

What has probably contributed the maximum to the importance of Muslims is the elections. They have become

arbiters. Even the BNP has

realised that the party cannot retain the gaddi at the Centre if it does not have the Muslims on its side. They are 10 to 12 per cent in the country of 1,000 million. In the joint electorate their number is decisive in some constituencies. And they can affect the outcome in some 200 Lok Sabha seats.

Prime Minister Atal Behari

Vajpayee has ticked off RSS

ideologue KN Govindacharya.

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