

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 Chhatra 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.

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.

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 internecine warfare is a great disappointment for Hasina since the party that she brought back to power after the political wilderness may become her anathema now.

The higher courts in

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" dreading its national leaders as well as the local upholders whenever and wherever it could. Such terrifying 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 showing 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 bid even a facade of political pluralism. Whenever a suit 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 conflict 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 Bangladeshis! 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 to 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 Bangladeshis. 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 authoritarian rules 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 unashamed 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 internecine 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.

The growing perception of a failing ability to govern and manage the organizational solidarity of the party, and the reality of an escalating opposition challenge cannot be realistically dismissed as little more than a "conspiracy" for "freeing the accused Mujib-killers" whose death sentence is still held up by the judicial process!

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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

Arun Nehru was a vehement opponent of the BJP. In fact, the entire Nehru family has been. For him to join the BJP is to turn back on all that he believed in or apparently stood for. The family too feels let down. The case of Jaipal Reddy is worse. He was a committed socialist whose anti-Congressism got sharpened during the emergency. It seems that parliament membership is all that he wanted. Either he had no commitment or he has compromised on his principles to get the Congress ticket. Either way, Reddy has not enhanced his stock with the public.

The worst betrayal has been by the small parties or groups. They had reached an understanding on supporting a particular candidate. But they ditched him or her at the last moment. Such examples have been laughed away as "friendly contests". But it confirms the impression that every party or group is after increasing its strength in parliament, by hook or by crook.

It shows more than ever before that power has come to be concentrated in parliament. Social movements are effective up to a point. But they have to knock at the door of state legislatures or parliament if they want their demand to be conceded to. All other avenues for redress are getting clogged.

It can have a dangerous fallout. If and when people find out that the elected leaders do not deliver the goods, they may think of other remedies. It is already happening. The increasing violence in the country is indicative of disappointment leading to desperation. The effort by criminals to become members of parliament or state legislatures is another evidence of how these bodies are important for them. They confer on them sanctity which helps them cover up their misdeeds.

Sadat Omar Dhaka

Culture and films

Sir, Noted personalities and others are always found to be saying in meetings, seminars, interviews, that our film-makers should reflect the rich cul-

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 be marked "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 apologise.

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 Mahzabeen (Meena Kumari)? But Amir Khan, Shahrukh 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 complimentary to Pakistan, extols 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 party still has to understand that anti-Muslim feeling in a pluralistic society is counter-productive.

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

all, the beatings, is getting strengthened.

What has probably contributed the maximum to the importance of Muslims is the elections. They have become arbiters. Even the BJP 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. 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. Muslims and others have seldom doubted Vajpayee. What about L K Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi who tolerate Vajpayee's views, in the present circumstances but not follow him?

OPINION

Transit Facility to India

One Concerned

Transit or transshipment or corridor? The subject has been confounded in such manners that most people are perplexed and bewildered as to what is the history repeating itself. Many of us should remember how Pakistan was seeking similar facility of transit through India between its two wings and how then Indian prime minister Pandit Nehru reacted. In his own words the reply was, "It is a strange demand from a peculiar country. A passage to go to their own country through a foreign country. It is unprecedented. This facility if provided has to be governed by rules and regulations enacted by the Parliament as these are not covered by any international rules of Customs and Immigration and Indian Parliament does not have that time".

Pakistanis left no stone unturned from New Delhi to New York but in vain. I cannot still understand why the Indians did not make the agreement charging heavy transit fees like a good shopkeeper should. The reason is simple. The national security outweighs economic gains. No country does any favour to other country. Indian proposal of through surface passage across Bangladesh dictated by her self-interest only.

India is constructing barbed wire fencing at its border with Bangladesh, not transferring Tinbigha, creating trouble for Talpatti and isolating the enclaves of Anguarpota and Dahagram. Everyday newspapers re-

port of cross border firing by BSF killing and wounding the innocent villagers. These go against the concept of friendly neighbour. So is the erection of Farakka Barrage unilaterally without regard for any canon of justice and thereby laying the country in the slow death trap of environmental disaster. Taking part in our War of Liberation cannot condone all such misdeeds. It was Indians who were the beneficiary of capturing a Pakistani market and the defeat of the enemy. Bangladesh is got back their land only.

Echoing Panditji's words, transit of Indian goods is a complicated issue. This is not a simple matter of Dhaka-Delhi talk show. Bangladesh has also other powerful neighbours and SAARC countries' interests to deal with in this respect. Beyond the borders of Bangladesh within their own territories there exist similar need for transit facilities for the SAARC countries for unhindered trade and commerce.

The issue of transit passage between western and eastern India over Bangladesh surface and similar other transit requirement of the neighbouring countries should be discussed and agreed upon and a common legal framework made under UN supervision with guarantees and protection by UN Security Council. Every right minded Bangladeshi citizen is very much in favour of good neigh-

bourly relations restoring peace and prosperity to these third world countries not resorting to futile arms race wasting national resources.

Bangladesh's utmost need of the moment is of peaceful neighbours and not big brothers. The transit passage is a step in the right direction, but fraught with apprehension. We from this sub-continent entering a new millennium without breaking away from the Albatross around our necks, without hope of expiation or redemption. Are we the cursed nations lost in the wilderness of hatred and agony? Who shall be held responsible for this malady — the politicians or the people?

The public is a scapegoat. Money and muscle that's all one needs to be a political leader to patronize the cult only and nothing else. Time has come for a change to resolve all the backlog of disputes and enter the New Millennium of the People with great expectation, with the motto: charity for all and malice towards none. We can grasp the passport to prosperity, a vision of a great society of the sub-continent.

Let this transit passage to India be the beginning of the New era of understanding to harmonize the strained relationship between the neighbours who must pledge to abide by the UN sponsored Arbitration. Verdict to all disputes which could not be settled in any way thus far. We are dying to see a new life in this part of the world.