

No-hartal Option Beaconing

BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia does not seem to be a pro-hartal person by nature. Leave aside her prime ministerial aversion to it, even as opposition leader she has not basically sounded like a hell-bent protagonist of hartal. In fact, as her inclinations prior to the last three days' shutting down had shown she was gradually distancing herself from the hartal option until she deemed it fit to go for the three-day standstill ending last Wednesday. Not long ago she had admitted to having benefited enormously from car cavalcades, way-side rallies, processions and sit-in demonstrations she staged without taking recourse to any hartal.

It is in this context that Begum Zia's response to the BGMEA's latest appeal for eschewing hartal as a political programme ought to be seen. BNP chairperson told the BGMEA president Anisur Rahman Sinha who had gone to see her on Friday that she would forsake hartal if the government agreed to resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner and restructuring of the Election Commission. That she has not spurned the no-hartal suggestion outright is welcome; but basically she has revived an old demand which one would have thought has been overtaken by events of the last couple of months. Only the other day when she called for the three-day hartal this issue did not figure at all. Instead, the strike call was made to protest 'transshipment-in-the-name-of corridor' given to India by the AL government. This creates an unnecessary impression on the public mind about the BNP being confused in its thinking about where its focus or priority should lie in a new political scenario.

Has it crossed the Opposition Leader's mind that if the government were to ensure the CEC's resignation and restructuring of the EC under opposition pressure what a bad precedent would all this set for the future?

It is imperative therefore that the opposition leader rethink her position on this. Consonably, she has moved pretty close to a no-hartal position. All she needs to do now is to adopt it as a policy plank of her party and thereby endear herself to the people.

The BNP can take a no-hartal stance refusing to be tied down to the narrow agenda of a CEC's resignation which hardly befits its position as the principal opposition party in the country.

Speed Up HPSP

WHILE the snail's pace of health sector reforms, especially in the context of the five-year Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP), has received criticism, the concept of Essential Service Package (ESP) has been greeted with acclaim and enthusiasm. Community clinics at the thana level and below have been largely viewed as the vehicle for making general and reproductive health services accessible to the rural populace through one-stop outlet. However, a couple of experts have, albeit in their opposition to the very concept, highlighted some areas which, in our view, if not addressed beforehand, may dilute, to a great extent, the efficacy of the reforms programme.

Dr. Sirajul Islam and Dr. Morshed Chowdhury have rightly identified lack of accountability and supervision, and also dearth of competent personnel, as prime reasons behind the failure of existing public health-care outlets at union and thana levels. However, their comments about the very rationale of the HPSP and ESP are sweeping based as they are on the presumption that the programmes would be a means for attaining financial gains by a few. We believe that the HPSP advocates pro-people reforms and its proper implementation would result in a wider coverage of the primary health-care needs of the country's rural populace. Still, on the merit of it, the argument set forth by the two practitioners, obviously representative of the opposing thoughts, on the question of accountability and human resource development should be taken into cognisance by the people involved in planning and execution of the reforms package.

After years of neglect, the rural people, the majority of the country's population, have finally been made the centre of our healthcare-related activism through HPSP. We are sure that the HPSP proponents have thought out the exigencies that might arise in the course of implementation and formulated responses thereto. If not, we believe that they will pay heed to the doctors' observations and act accordingly.

A Timely Suggestion

WE strongly endorse the suggestion made by the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh (IAB) for the computerisation of Rajuk's archive section 'to prevent theft of important files.' The highest body of professional architects in the country has put forward the idea in a bid 'to contain increasing irregularities in building construction and town-planning'. One can hardly have better counsel for improving the quality of service and standard of maintenance of important documents, plans and papers.

The unprecedented building boom in the country, specially in the metropolitan areas, has also its darker side. Quite often one comes across complaints of unregulated and unlawful construction that spells danger in the surrounding areas. But when actions are planned, these cannot be taken because documents have been missing from Rajuk. The present system of documentation and record-keeping has become obsolete since the arrival of computers. It is a pity we have not yet computerised Rajuk's archives section.

The suggestion for publication of addresses and details relating to newly approved building plans in important newspapers regularly and also the addresses of the cancelled plans should be accepted by way of creating social awareness and resistance against unauthorised construction.

Diminishing Return, Static Equilibrium and Market Failure

In Economics, as in any other discipline, there are concepts, so simple yet so fundamental that one tends to forget how much of our world gets built around it. The law of diminishing returns is one such concept. Simply stated, it means that after a certain point, every successive addition produces less of an outcome. Diminishing returns is the basic principle that drives economic transactions to the point of equilibrium. Equilibrium in turn gives us concepts of market failure, and market failure is how we justify the rationale for governmental intervention. To illustrate just how fundamental is this notion of diminishing returns vis-à-vis market failure it suffices to state that both liberals and conservatives structure their argument around this principle. Conservatives who strafe for limited government argue that if left alone, the scope of market failure is small and it is government actions that distort the equilibrium and makes markets inefficient. Liberals on the other hand champion the view that if left alone, markets are highly inefficient, and the size of market failure is so large that governmental involvement needs to be more and less.

Obviously, I am glossing over some other critical distinctions particularly relating to equity but my point here is to illustrate the centrality of the market failure argument in both conservative and liberal thoughts. Given the pervasive nature of the concept, actions by the civil society and non-governmental institutions are also guided by the same principle as both try to account for market and government failures. There is very little disagreement among thinkers of all kinds and persuasion that the combined effect of market and government failure in Bangladesh is as large as it could be. It is thus no surprise that non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh can be seen doing everything from providing micro-credit to calculating damage from an environmental disaster. It is also no surprise that when non-resident Bangladeshis try to help for their ancestral land, the general tendency is to start with the very basic and think of building everything from the ground-up rather than look for ways to complement the current structure.

Could there be a market failure in politics? Better yet, could there be a political equivalent

of a market? Well if we stretch our imagination a bit, given that people are making choices from a set of alternatives, given that there are winners and losers, and given that people have the opportunity to reward and punish by virtue of votes, there could be a similar notion in politics. This is illustrated by the fact that when we speak of politics in any mature and stable democracy, our approach is very analogous to markets. We think of diminishing return and political equilibrium in the same way we think of them in economics and prescribe measures of adjustments when the system fails to clear. When the legislative and executive branches are unable to resolve an issue, we approach the judiciary. When the judiciary fails, we approach the legislative. When all of them fail we approach the media. When the media fails we approach the civil society. The gist of it is that there are multiple avenues for exerting corrective actions should there be a case of market failure in politics.

Hartal in Bangladesh — A Market Failure or a Case of Increasing Returns?

For many of us accidental writers, Hartal and street level

politics of violence and destruction has been the central piece of many prescriptive articles. And who could blame us?

The newspaper speaks of violence, destruction and carnage all over the nation as a result of the opposition's attempt to stage a sit-in much in the tradition of its predecessor that now sits on the other side. What would otherwise be the conclusion of an unhealthy and undemocratic political discourse was now the point of initiation of a countrywide movement as another sixty-hour Hartal was called. We are simply baffled by the resiliency of this form of political activism because our frame of reference of diminishing returns and market failures tells us otherwise. We believe that social systems, like economic systems, tend to favour equilibrium whereby countervailing forces oppose any attempt to take the system to one extreme or another.

The situation is analogous to being inside a bowl where a dropped marble will roll from one side to another but surely would come to rest at the bottom at some point. This presumption has led to two basic groups of opinions. One that believes in external intervention

and the other that believes in internal defences. The first group, present company included, suggested various measures ranging from legal to institutional that could, so to speak, take a bite out of Hartal. The other group suggested doing nothing counting on the fact that when losses and sufferings cross a critical threshold, conscientious individuals would rise to the occasion and bring a quick end to this reckless behaviour. It suffices to say that both groups are working from a diminishing returns point of view, which may not be the case we have at hand.

Increasing Returns, Complexity and Path Dependence

Although no match for its converse, the concept of increasing return is also slowly creeping into the realm of contemporary thought and social actions. The best way to understand the notion is to go back to our bowl analogy and think of the marble being on the outside of an inverted bowl. When one releases a marble from the summit, not only will it continue to gain speed as it goes down the surface, there is no telling in what direction and

not suddenly begin to sprout during the caretaker government movement of the Awami League, but during the overthrow of the dictatorial regime of Ershad. The toppling over of a sitting government, elected or otherwise, was accomplished through street level political activism. This was the primary lesson of that experience, which cast a much stronger imprint in the socio-political psyche than the subsequent elections. It naturally follows that the path that Awami League took to come to power went to reaffirm the same set of learned behaviour for activists in both parties.

Diminishing Returns Measure for a Case of Increasing Returns

Many of us caught in the market-failure paradigm advanced the view that the demand for a caretaker government was justified on grounds of institutional failure. Hence installation of such provision would eliminate future demands surrounding the issue of fairness in any subsequent elections. Nothing could be further from the truth as we see that while the cause has been changed, the form of action by

the same players are involved in the game, their learned behaviours will off-set any of these institutional defences and accentuate the negative lesson that has been reinvigorated through the coming to power of two successive governments.

It is possible to argue that the reason why Awami League lost the first elections was that the NGO and garments industry led women empowerment movement was only as more of an ally than Awami League. It can also be argued that BNP lost the last election not because of Awami League's street level agitation, but because the former chose to proceed with a farcical election. In the end, all these arguments will come to no avail as the receptors of those who do politics in Bangladesh and those who fund them, are attuned to filter out these 'noises' in favour of the only path they have come to know, 'overthrow' a sitting government. Hence the question is, should we allow the opposition to succeed in overthrowing the government and reinforce its misguided convictions? Should we count on institutional defences to prevent a reenactment of the same political behavior for the next iteration of this never-ending nightmare? Or should we abandon our obsolete frame

work necessary. We would need to vote into power the same political party. No matter how indigestible this may seem to admit my utter disappointment with the Awami League administration — electing BNP will simply put the political process in the same path from which there now seems to be no point of return. On the other hand, given another five years, Awami League will have to prove its commitment to our freedom and independence beyond its promise of rendering justice to the killers of Bangabandhu and fending off anti-liberation forces. This will be a true test for the party's resolve in emerging as representing ideas and values that have currency in modern times and not some childish notion of political tit for tat.

At the same time if it could be established that street level political activism has indeed hit the point of diminishing returns, the opposition would be forced to use institutional means for guiding its actions. Only then the notion of coming to power by virtue of fear and intimidation would become a thing of the past. Though slightly more palatable than the first, the second proposition may also be unacceptable for many of us. Even as I write, I quiver in fear to even think of another five years of Awami League in government and BNP in the opposition with the leadership of both parties remaining unchanged. In that case there remains for those of us who care, I mean really care, only one available option — get involved either by forming new political parties or by taking over the leadership of the existing ones.

As was pointed out to me by someone, there is no point in saving the 'good people' from politics if there remains nothing to save them for. The hope for salvation through institutional tinkering is all but gone and it's time we took stock of the fact that changes will not come unless we consider becoming a party to that change. In the wake of a recurring nightmare, this is the only dream I am able to conjure up at this point, another desperate attempt at appreciative theorizing and wishful thinking, without which it is becoming increasingly difficult to weather one more day of heartbreaking headlines.

The author is a coordinator of EB2000 Inc. (<http://www.eb2000.org>), a global network of Bangladeshi expatriates dedicated to comprehensive development of Bangladesh. He writes from Virginia, USA.

Street Level Political Activism of Destruction and Violence

A Complex Proposition for a Complex Problem

by Mahmud Farooque

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of reference and think of alternatives those defy conventional wisdom?

Defying Conventional Wisdom

To defy conventional wisdom, we could begin by considering changing the players by changing the game. However, that is not possible without a changeover of the political system and even less desirable considering that the alternatives at hand are either military dictatorship or some form of socialism or religious order. Moreover all of these options will require a great deal of will and more importantly a revolution that could be violent and deadly. One will then have to weigh in the fact whether or not the price of eliminating street level political activism is indeed worth the benefits. Which makes the second option slightly more attractive.

The second option will be to allow the present government to serve out its term and let the elections be held when they are supposed to and in the manner agreed upon by the two parties during the previous elections. Since this would accomplish only a part of the 'unlearning', a second set of measures will be

the current opposition, one that was on the receiving end of such movement not too long ago, has followed the exact same path. The learning from its position of being in power has been completely forgotten and superseded by its learning from the overthrow of the Ershad regime, a lesson that was further reinforced by its own losses in the last elections.

It is the world of increasing returns and complexity which tells us about path dependencies and irreversibility of social phenomena, something the world of negative feedback and market failures tend to ignore? It is sad but true that what we have in our hands is a situation of increasing returns from street level political activism that cannot be set off-course through institutional adjustments. On the surface, independence of the judiciary, relinquishing control of television and radio, signing of social contracts outlawing hartals, holding of citizens' roundtable, mediation by foreign dignitaries, etceteras may seem to offer elements to intervene with the system and bring about corrective measures and defences to reduce if not eliminate the problem. However, as long as

not ended up in "rogue-nation" status in the company of North Korea, Libya, Sudan, etc.

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We spend all our waking moments hoping for funds from the IMF, who keep on upping the ante. We have to take some concrete measures, particularly to shore up a flagging financial sector beset with the likes of Bankers Equity Ltd (BEL) scandal and probably about to hemorrhage again for the 'Mera Ghar' scheme, conceptually good but disaster-prone if not implemented under strict control and supervision. The only saving grace is that unlike yellow cabs, these flats will remain in Pakistan and not end up in Kabul or Amritsar. Investment has dried up because we have been trying to tap the wrong sources, we should have concentrated the incentives on expatriate Pakistanis but our bureaucracy froze their entrepreneur instincts out of Pakistan. Because of the freeze of accounts inward cash flow through regular channels has slowed down to a trickle, lack of financial credibility is a major problem.

The combined Opposition struck out after a successful first strike. Unfortunately the government and they are two sides of the same coin and what is to prevent them from striking out each other into oblivion? What we need badly is fresh leadership with original ideas that can be implemented; we do not need rhetoric about dream-castles in the air or on government-reserved land.

Striking Out

What is of most serious concern to all of Pakistanis is the economic slide that simply does not seem to stop. Unfortunately our economic team is bereft of answers for the present, what to talk about the new millennium.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Karachi as a whole belonged to the MQM has now become the subject of myth. One has no doubt about the MQM stamp on District Central but Malir District and District South are definitely out of the MQM camp. Districts East and West being marginal at best. While Altaf Hussain's once dominant party continues to command the greatest majority in the city, its days of total control over the city are over. With sought-after (by the law enforcement agencies) MQM stalwarts surfacing in UK at frequent intervals, one expects that the coming Altaf initiative will be meant to be detrimental to the interests of Pakistan, however one believes we should welcome this now as we are far better equipped to deal with separatism, rather than the early 90s, moreover Altaf Hussain is now increasingly out of sync with the mood of the vast mass of Mohajirs who remain patriotic mainstream Pakistanis. Leadership by remote control seldom succeeds particularly when the leader lives in luxury in contrast to those whom he professes to lead. Karachi is in for interesting times if any attempt is made to turn this city hostage to the anarchy we witnessed for a decade or so at the hands of MQM militants.

And what is Mian Nawaz Sharif likely to do? In the circumstances why should he do anything but continue with more of the same bad governance that has brought us to the verge of various individual dooms as a country, economically, diplomatically and politi-

ically? When the sum total of governance is survival in office, virtually to the exclusion of anything else, what should one expect? It is all very well to say that Mian Nawaz Sharif has not been equal to the task but in the absence of an alternative it is a responsible proposition to attempt bring him down, knowing that in 1977 a somewhat similar situation brought about third party intervention that lasted more than a decade? Does all this mean that the Mian Nawaz Sharif regime may be headed for extinction again? And soon? As much as Mian Nawaz Sharif was incapable of bringing down the government of Ms Benazir Bhutto despite all the excesses of Asif Zardari, the present Opposition lacks the teeth to bring down the PM. And he is hardly likely to repeat the hara-kiri of July 1993 again.

A chain of sorry circumstances that began with Mir Murtaza Bhutto's death in the crossfire near 70 Clifton on September 20, 1977 and the estrangement of the then President Farooq Leghari and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Sajjad Ali Shah brought about Ms Benazir's downfall a second time with the active connivance of the Army, albeit

"acting on the instructions of the Supreme Commander", Kargil has emasculated the Army's hierarchy at least for the month from taking active part in such 'internal' exercises which previously would have been no more than at most a casual whim of one such person. Without the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the Opposition lacks the street power necessary to take the streets to anarchy and thus the country to boil. Very few people in the Opposition compare the type of respect among the masses as credited to alternatives. Moreover, individual motives that bind the Opposition together on a single-point agenda are suspect. So unless something somewhere out of the ordinary happens that jolts the country out of the routine, we should become used to seeing Mian Nawaz Sharif on PTV for the balance of his term. In any democracy, the Opposition has a very crucial role, almost the same as that of the Fourth Estate. It has to keep in check the excesses of Government, to keep those who administer authority within the ambit of the rule of law and thus to protect the citizens in the exercise of their fundamental rights. In Pakistan, the Opposition has shown itself to be generally

toothless except in regional matters, and when they did discover their teeth they were found to be without the basic common sense that governs politics. The result is that millions in the government tend to get away literally with murder as the repeated demise of MQM activists and others in police custody has shown. When bad governance becomes endemic, something's got to give, whether nature plays a part or artificial means succeed is a moot point.

Domestic affairs already holds pride of place in deepening the crisis of national proportion, however foreign policy also continues to be an active minefield. Despite the lack of voters in occupied Kashmir, the world is not ready to acknowledge any wrongdoing by the Indian Government. The Taliban of Afghanistan continue to talk with the Northern Alliance in a "fight-fight talk-talk" formula that defies logic and our age-old friendship with Iran. Most of our former good friends have a grouse or so against us, some of the facts we are blamed for are blatantly incorrect, not the least being the presence of guerrillas supported by us (and even our troops) in various insurgencies in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Dagestan, etc. This is a real failure of our information set-up, an amateur handling that leaves in personal image projection in contrast to the country, a damaging injury to our credibility that can end up going beyond repair. It is only the resilience of our goodwill among the nations that we have

To the Editor...

Credit must be given where it's due

Sir, It is heartening to note that at least one good thing has been established during this 60-hour hartal. Finally, the government has recognised that it is every person's right to work whether it is a hartal day or not, and it is the government's responsibility to provide that person with the security needed to get to his job. Just as peaceful strike is an inalienable right of every worker, the decision to work during the strike is also an irrefutable right.

I must point out that I in no way intend to support the excesses often committed by the law enforcement personnel during this hartal. But credit must be given where credit is due. The decision to provide security to people and business establishments willing to remain open during hartal hours is the right

one and must be commended. Masud Sohail Dhaka

No bail for criminals

Sir, I had the opportunity to read an article in the Opinion column of *The Daily Star* published on 16 September captioned as "Nasim Vs High Court, Terrorists and Others" written by an appalled citizen. I am totally against his opinion. The writer is a lawyer and his manner of supporting the High Court and other judiciary blindly is very surprising to me. I don't like to go into the details of bailing ethics of the High Court or Supreme Court or any other judicial and metropolitan authority. All I want to say is that what they are doing is not upto expectation of people. Rather people's confidence has eroded in them. I was surprised to see a news

item the other day in all dailies about the bail of the principal accused in Jhal murder case by the High Court. Everybody knows that Jhal was murdered at the DB office and his body was recovered from the water tank of the said office. There is little doubt that the accused (an official) including his other colleagues are involved in the case in some way or other because no outsider can believably have such access to the DB office as to kill anybody and hide the body in the water tank without their knowledge. I want to know from the learned lawyer how he could be bailed out? What could be the justification? Next day Akram of Rubel murder case may also get bail in the same manner. And after availing bail the accused persons are free and can use their power to influence the outcome of the case in different manners. Do you think ordinary and majority of the people of this country are stupid? If things are allowed to continue

like this crime in the society will increase and culprits will be encouraged to do such crime. I plead for a strong rule to deal with the criminals and to eliminate crime from the society. There is no need of such system as cannot save the innocent in our society, judicial or whatever.

A reader Dhaka

Slum dwellers and politics

Sir, Can any one tell us the truth as to why some evicted slum-dwellers assembled at Osmati Udayan in front of DCC's majestic building first, then thousands of them moved to nearby High Court premises and also occupied the pavements in front of the residence of Dr Kamal Hossain? Time and again we have seen our aggrieved and affected people march towards Prime Minis-

ter's office/residence for redressal of their problems and grievances. However, this time it didn't happen. Why?

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

An appeal

Sir, I have been moved to read an 'Appeal' to help save little Nuha's life that was published in the weekend magazine of a national English newspaper on Sept. 10, 1999. The infant really deserves our attention and sympathy. Nuha, the eight months old little girl has reportedly been suffering from heart, eye and ear diseases. A huge amount of money is required to arrange surgical treatments to save her life. Her parents won't like to appeal for financial assistance from the members of the public. They have however made an

humble and praiseworthy way to raise money for their baby-daughter's treatment abroad by composing, and selling a book titled 'Naksha Chitra-Ack' which is a compilation of various block motifs and embroidery patterns. For those who are interested in dress designing, the book offers a step by step guide on how to skillfully do batik, block, and screen-printing. It may be mentioned here that the authors are qualified professionals in the discipline of fine arts. It is sincerely expected that the kind-hearted and sympathetic individuals of the society will come forward in the aid of Nuha by buying a copy of the book. Those interested, have been requested to contact Nuha's mother, Ms Marufa Rahman, Research & Evaluation Division, BRAC, 75, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar,
Dhaka-1207