

Hartal Free Politics

NO sooner had the BNP chief declared that her party would shun hartal if the government replaced the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and restructure the Election Commission (EC) we are informed that she has called for hartal on Sunday after next, that is 3rd Oct. Can anybody please explain to us why this hartal?

How much more do we have to suffer before our leaders realise that hartal is killing the economy and making our poor still poorer? Giving the most constructive interpretation to Khaleda Zia's statement, business leaders belonging to the DCCI, MCCI, FICCI, BCI and BGMEA (why is the FICCI missing from this list?) have urged the government to respond positively.

They have referred to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's earlier declaration that AL will never call hartal again even if it goes to the opposition in the future. As the business leaders see it, since both parties have promised to opt for a hartal free politics, the only obstacle that remains is the resignation of the CEC and restructuring of the EC. We appreciate the concern of the business leaders. This paper has always advocated shunning of hartal and will continue to do so till it stops. However, what is being demanded of the government is directly against the interest of democracy and free and fair polls. Should the government be allowed to change the CEC? Can the government do so under the Constitution? EC and its boss are guaranteed independence by our law and no government has, nor should it have the power to change the CEC at will. The opposition's demand itself stands against the institutionalisation of democracy. By making such a demand on the government isn't the opposition opening the door to the possibility of a CEC who will always be subservient to the government or even to the opposition?

We have made these arguments before. And, as before, they will no doubt fall on deaf ears and the unjustified demands will continue. Considering the imminent danger to the economy and further division in an already polarised politics, we suggest, though we are aware that it is fraught with danger, that the CEC himself should undertake serious communication with leaders of both sides. He should test the water as to whether any change in his stance really does hold the prospect of a genuine rapprochement or is it just a part of our bankrupt politics that is tearing the country asunder. If there is seriousness in the opposition's proposal and if there is a fair chance of success in this direction then the CEC should explore it. The initiative must necessarily come from him and not from the government, so as to uphold the independence of the Election Commission.

The Fees Row at JU

THE agitating students of Jahangirnagar University have intensified protests against the authorities' proposal for a raise in their annual fees. They went as far as locking the office of the Vice-Chancellor, stopping the transports from plying, organising processions and staying away from examinations and classes. The talks between the student representatives and the authorities broke down on Wednesday.

This paper feels that the students must realise that when price of everything has, over the years, gone up, the cost of education, particularly at the college and university levels cannot remain at the level as it was 30 or 40 years ago. Why should you expect university education to be imparted for only Taka 12 or 15 a month? Stand in front of a mirror and see the changes in your life-style and habits. Think of your rising pocket expenses, to say nothing of your other essential costs. Why should you oppose a reasonable increase in the admission fee or the monthly tuition fee? Can you expect to get even primary education at Tk 12 or 15 a month? When you cannot buy a book for Taka 5 which you could 50 years back, how could you expect to buy education at a 50 years' old-price?

If you want to speak for your poor friends, please pay more and thereby shoulder part of the letter's educational expenses. Ask the university authorities to start an endowment fund with contributions from solvent people so that the really poor but meritorious students can get higher education free of charge. You are entering a new millennium, broaden your outlook and open your eyes to comprehend the radical changes taking place around you. Authorities at the Dhaka University attempted a modest raise in the tuition fees but had to abandon their plan in the face of students' stiff resistance. The Jahangirnagar University students have also taken a similar attitude. But they should ask the self-searching question as to whether they themselves are convinced about the rationale of their stand.

Choked Sewage

HEAVY rain over the last couple of days has once again betrayed the dismal condition the capital's drainage system is in. True, the city experienced in the last 24 hours ending at 6 pm Wednesday evening the heaviest downpour of the monsoon this year at 125 millimetres. However, should a 'metropolis' not have at least an adequate system that drains out rain water from the streets within a reasonable period of time? Evidently, it doesn't. Clogged drains and incomplete storm sewer made life miserable for the residents, forced to make their way through stinky water and floating wastes. Obviously, recurrence of similar scenario puts a big question-mark over the incompetence, if not sincerity, of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), WASA and other relevant public agencies. While they invest a substantial time round the year in maintenance and enhancement of the drainage system, often impeding mobility of the pedestrians and the traffic; on the ground, there hardly is any appreciable change. Why? It seems that the service providers have failed to identify the problem areas which renders any curative measures rather inadequate.

Not long time back, to be precise on May 7 this year, this paper carried a front-page item *Sitting on filthy, fatal explosive* on some WASA engineers' apprehension of a total collapse of the capital's sewerage system "inundating vast city areas with two to three feet of untreated sewage." Also, they warned that "the risk of overflow is very high during the coming rainy season and in case of natural flooding", underscoring the need for immediate and effective overhaul of the 500-kilometre network. However, it appears that the authorities have paid no heed.

Even the layman understands that polythene bags, dumped indiscriminately into the drainage system, cause clogging. Unfortunately, five-year phasing-out of polythene bags has been of theoretical significance only, without being implemented. Nevertheless, we would want to believe the latest reminder would trigger off adequate activism in the authorities concerned.

Groaning under Grievous Governance

Bangladesh needs to nurture its nascent democratic institutions, establish rule of law and invest more in social sectors to have the touch of good governance. Only a liberalized economic system could force upon the society the need for a good governance.

That — excepting few doses of improvement here and there — governance was no better before than it is now. Think of the state of political and economic governance of the 1980s and 1970s. Bad governance shook the nation even at that time. The marginal improvement that I am referring to is in the realm of realization about the utility of a good governance. Why are international organizations (like World Bank), domestic NGOs and private business communities are on their feet to raise fingers against bad governance? Why is the business community so much concerned about business environment?

The answer could, possibly, be sought in terms of the differential economic management that the successive periods are witnessing. For example, in a restricted economic regime — as was experienced during the 1970s and the 1980s — the price of bad governance could hardly be assessed. While, with the opening up of the economy in early 1990s and with gradual deregulation and privatisation, the need for good governance began to assume capital importance. It could be so that liberalisation of the economy forced on the business community an "effective demand" for good governance that could lower cost of doing business in Bangladesh. The other day, a Bengali daily — *Prothom Alo* — organized a dialogue with businessmen in old part of the city. In fact, what the businessmen shouted against

appears to be toll collection, mastani and other constraints that bedevilled their doing business in their areas. The recently released World Bank report on the Impact of Trade Liberalization also cited the sample respondents' demand for improving business environment in Bangladesh. "With respect to the key constraint to doing business in Bangladesh, only 4 per cent of the respondents considered competition from imports as

administration, law and order and the reform of the state-owned enterprise sector would have undoubtedly led stronger benefits from the gradual removal of trade barriers. Indeed, addressing these business environment problems will be the most essential undertaking that the government can do to boost industrial development and therefore economic growth and poverty reduction". En passant let me lend another observation made by

sively because of the undue pressures from trade unions. One can, therefore, easily understand the economics of good governance and its impact on the cost of transactions and comparative advantage. While toll collections are rampant, the major political parties seem to squabble on ownership of the collectors thus squashing any scope for suggesting solutions to stem the rots. While the nation is debating over whether a shipment facility should be provided or not, none seems to take note of the fact that our transport system is seized by toll collectors countrywide and hence could discourage others to avail of such opportunities. Like the recent crackdown on terrorists in southern part of the country — a laudable move so far to contain criminals — good governance also implies similar crackdown on transport toll collectors. If it's difficult countrywide at the moment, why not try to stop toll collection at least at two bus terminals in Dhaka city on experimental basis?

But the most pertinent question is — a question that seems to be overlooked in discussions — whether it is only the government in power that should be responsible for the state of governance in the country or the opposition should also be blamed for the 'bads'? I think that the opposition has a relatively more positive and powerful role to play with the issue of good governance. For example, the opposition could force upon

the government to hold parliamentary committee meets regularly and effectively to ensure accountability and transparency. In those parliamentary committees, the issue of governance in every sphere could be highlighted. Some of the issues raised in some of the parliamentary committees (e.g. purchases of Migs, allocation of plots, corruption in customs etc.) point to the effectiveness of the process.

A failure to provide good governance to the society thus is not a failure of the government alone but also of the opposition, in or outside parliament. The fact that Bangladesh has been groaning under grievous governance is partly attributable to the absence of an effective opposition in the game of politics. With strong opposition appearing after 1990 general elections, the system of government seems to be improving albeit slowly. The fact that governance is now widely talked about — while the same was rare in the past — is itself an improvement. Bangladesh needs to nurture its nascent democratic institutions, establish rule of law and invest more in social sectors to have the touch of good governance. Only a liberalized economic system could force upon the society the need for a good governance. A restricted economic system appears as a hinterland of bad governance. In other words, a truly democratic system and a liberalized economy could enable us to get rid of the menace called bad governance. We can no more groan under grievous governance at least in the wake of stepping into the next millennium.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



their primary obstacles to pursue their business activities. On the other hand, 21 per cent of the respondents saw the lack of business support services as the foremost problem. This is followed by access to credit (20 per cent), inadequate supply of infrastructure (13 per cent), corruption, theft and toll collection (18 per cent). In other words, most of the constraints directly or indirectly have to do with the status of governance in the country. An important implication of these findings is that faster improvements in the areas of infrastructure, financial sector reforms, business support services, the customs

Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud — the BEA President — while addressing a seminar on Infrastructure and Development. Citing an estimate he informs us that the cost of loading and unloading a 20 feet container is USD 640 at Chittagong port. This sharply contrasts with USD 360 for Bangkok and USD 220 for Colombo. Whereas the cost of loading and unloading should have been the least in Bangladesh with abundant labour supply and low wage rate. A part of the rise in costs could, possibly, be attributed to infrastructural bottlenecks and around the port but perva-

Rigmarole over Rape

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Those of us who intellectualise over rape, like this article I am writing, are adventurous with the hyena's share of the lion's kill. We are courageous enough to choose the safest act in the state of fear. That makes us the third party on the rape scene besides the victim and the victimiser. We are the vainglorious vanguards of vicarious morality.

pressure. Then how does one explain the sudden upsurge of libido in this country where lustful men don't hesitate to violate toddlers at the height of their hormonal attack? Not all of them have a full stomach or soft bed to stoke their lewdness, if you leave out the policemen who are lucky to wallow in the good food and clean bed of the barracks as well as "the absolute power" of their uniform. Dr Li writes that the Great Helmsman of China suffered from bouts of impotence and stimulation under political stress. As tens of millions starved to death during the Great Leap Forward the Chairman temporarily gave up meat. But he needed more women. Could it be that what was true for one man is also true for the men of an entire nation? Have our men who are low on diet abruptly decided to go high on lechery?

Of course, I am referring to the spate of rape in this country. Think about that schoolgirl who was raped in Shyampur and then dumped dead on the roadside. Or, about the garment worker who was gang raped on the rooftop of a multi-storied building in Mirpur and then flung to her death on the street

below. Like fish cannot live in pure water, mankind cannot live in a pure world and some level of sexual molestation is as natural as theft or murder. After all, even the gods in heaven are said to have committed this crime. According to Greek mythology, Zeus was a notorious rapist who violated Leda while camouflaged as a swan and Europa as a bull. Poseidon had raped Kainis of the horse-trading tribe.

A character named Millie says in Alan Friedman's 1972 novel *Hermaphrodite* that certain violations were sacred, while certain violations were sacrilegious. That contradiction is embodied in the story of Hymen, the beautiful Greek god who was in love with an Athenian maid. When that maid and her friends were kidnapped by pirates Hymen stirred up the captives to slay their abductors. Thereafter, he became the symbol of protection of womanhood. If Zeus and Poseidon proved that violation of woman was sacrilegious, Hymen proved it sacrilegious.

Lance Morrow once defined in a Time article that "Evil is bad elevated to the status of the inexplicable." Similarly, rape

is sex escalated to brutality, when lustful men descend upon women like an invading army and ruthlessly plunder the jewels of their bodies. But why is it on the rise in this country? Why the sensual storm raging in the groins of our men has been suddenly ransacking the moral shorelines of this nation? Is it the sign of decadence — the crumbling of our moral edifice in the impulsive anxiety of a declining culture? Etymologically, the word decadence has been derived from the Latin *decadere*, meaning "to fall down or away", hence the decay imputed upon an exhausted society. Does the sexual voracity of our men affirm that an increasing void has been sucking up social vigour with the roaring appetite of a vacuum cleaner?

Perhaps rape is the symptom of a deep malaise that is eating away the vitality of this nation, its violence and cruelty indicative of the festering ligaments of human bonds. John Webster wails in *The White Devil*, "A rape! a rape! Yes, you have ravished justice; Forced her to do your pleasure. The rapist is a something that I own I lack from the feudal days whose mindset

inculcates women as the chattels of lust. In that sense, a rapist isn't different from the snatcher on the street or the musclem who collects tolls. All of them are injured to the instinct of intimidation.

This was the central theme of Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* published in 1975. She attacked the concept that rape as a sex crime, arguing instead that it was a crime of violence and power over women. Throughout history, she wrote, rape has played a critical function. "It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation, by which all men keep all women in a state of fear." As a matter of fact, if Susan's claim is magnified to a larger perspective, our society is one vast rape scene where all men try to keep all men in a state of fear. Take for example, the opposition threatens to force the government to step down. When the opposition recently demanded Home Minister's resignation, he warned that they had seen nothing of him yet.

In *The Transparency of Evil* written by a Frenchman named Jean Baudrillard, the author

talks about a post-orgiastic age, in which all liberations have been accomplished, all barriers torn down, all limits abolished. Perhaps he also meant to say that all values were abandoned, because values are nothing but limits imposed on conscience. In simplest terms, rape is sex without consent and consent is harmony between the conscience of two adults. In that sense, how is sex with a woman against her will different from extortion of money from a shopkeeper or ballot from a voter? In each case the rights and honour of the victim are violated, while the trauma of humiliation varies in degrees of psychosomatic implications.

Unlike spectator sport, which is enhanced by cheering crowds, crime is inspired by the silence of its victim. When Yasmin of Dinajpur was raped and killed by three policemen, it caused a national uproar; the politicians and intellectuals had lent voice to the victim's family. That uproar has subsided although police and pervers have committed grislier acts of sexual harassment ever since. Those of us who intellectualise over rape, like this article I am writing, are adventurous with the hyena's share of the lion's kill. We are courageous enough to choose the safest act in the state of fear. That makes us the third party on the rape scene besides the victim and the victimiser. We are the vainglorious vanguards of vicarious morality.

The writer is a banker.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

BPDB's comments on The Daily Star news item

Sir, This letter refers to an item published in The Daily Star on 15th September '99 item on price power 'more competitive environment'. The Power Cell of Energy Ministry prepared a draft policy statement on power sector reforms to fulfil the conditionalities imposed by World Bank and Asian Development Bank. According to the conditionalities, Government should declare a policy regarding unbundling of existing power entities (BPDB, DESA) to create a number of new entities which will run commercially under a regulatory authority. The ultimate aim of WB, ADB is to privatize the newly created entities.

There has been on going debate about this sort of Western style reforms which may not be equally applicable in the developing countries. Countries like Venezuela, Indonesia, Mexico are facing lot of problems, as US energy companies are trying to grab the energy market of those countries.

The objective of the reform should be to provide reliable electricity at a lower tariff by increasing efficiencies so that poor people can afford the electricity price to raise their living standard and to boost the economy through industrialization. But unplanned reforms effort under WB pressure will increase our tariff due to unnecessary wheeling charge which BPDB should pay to PGCB. Not only the wheeling charge, IPP's bill in foreign currency will have adverse effect on tariff. Moreover, if distribution sector of DESA, DESCO, REB and BPDB is not addressed properly the situation will be grim. Unfortunately, neither the donors' conditionalities nor the policy statement framed by the Power Cell, the real problem in distribution sector was addressed.

According to the policy

statement, "generation, transmission and distribution will be completely separated and commercial arrangement will be introduced for bulk sale of power because there is no competitive environment at present." But it is not understood what they mean by 'competitive environment' and introduction of bulk sale of power when they are advocating for wheeling charge to PGCB which is contradictory.

More separation of generation, transmission and distribution cannot establish competitive pool system for bulk power marketing, a lot of technical aspects should be resolved before going for competitive spot market. Above contradiction in the policy statement will create havoc in the whole power sector.

Already business circles like DCCI have given their opinion regarding tariff hike due to creation of so many entities. They were especially very critical about the creation of PGCB, describing it as extra legal and punishable act. Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB) after a brain storming workshop with the power sector experts, also prepared their comments on the policy statement in which they seriously criticized the said policy statement by saying, "The creation of Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB) was undesirable. It has already destabilized the power sector."

BPDB strongly feels that NEP (National Energy Policy) is enough for the policy related aspects of power sector reforms. We have no other option other than to improve efficiencies in distribution sector. This is a decade old problem. A number of policy and social aspects are related to this problem. Strong political will and commitment is required to eradicate this problem. Distribution system should be the focal point of reforms rather than generation and transmission sub-sector which is running efficiently

without much problem. Without distribution sector improvement, companies created by separating generation and transmission entities as stated in the policy statement, will not survive.

Mir Raziuddin Haroon, Director, System Planning BPDB, Dhaka

Barlow impressive?

Sir, I was appalled by the standard of reporting in your sports pages. Please go through the main item of Tuesday's (21 Sept) issue and you will know what I mean. Can I ask the following questions?

- 1. How could Eddie Barlow be impressive without being impressive in a press briefing?
2. Was he impressive for his size in an 'animated bout'?
3. Was the job 'thrust' on him or he wanted it?
4. Can a 'jovial, witty person' be impressive?
5. How was the job 'most sought-after'?

Would your sports reporter/editor please clarify?

Abid Ali, Dhaka-1205

Sudden onset of continuous high fever at times crossing 105°F, lasting 4-5 days, sometimes ending up with rashes all over the body or other complications such as affecting the brain resulting in encephalitis — all pointing to the likelihood of the offending agent to be a virus as rightly pointed out by Professor Nazrul Islam, head of the Dept. of Virology, BSMMUH. His self-admission that the Virology department is the only of its kind in the country but is incapable of detecting the virus as it lacks facilities gives rise to a logical question why during his tenure as the head of the department for more than a decade nothing has been done to 'enable the disabled' Virology department? It is really a matter of pity that the University which is conferring M Phil in Virology to talented doctors has a Virology department but is yet to develop a cell-culture technique for the isolation of viruses — the minimum practical level of a Virology department.

Dr Munir Hassan, 89/2 DIT Road, Malibagh, Dhaka

Hartal and BNP

Sir, Is a hartal called by only BNP (and its allies) a hartal and a hartal (strike) called by others not? If so, then why the Prime Minister, the MPs, the Awami Leaguers, and the intellectuals denounce only the BNP-called hartal and keep silent about those called and enforced by others? Do the hartals called by BNP only affect the economy and cause sufferings to people and those observed by transport owners and workers, port workers, Chhatra League (when one of its leaders was arrested in Chittagong for terrorism), neither affect the economy nor create suffering for the people?

Secondly, after each BNP-called hartal, BTV telecasts pictorial reports saying life was normal in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. Similarly, at the end of the 60-hour hartal from September 13-15, BTV reported that life was normal and showed buses, trains and launches packed with passengers. The government also congratulated people as usual for rejecting hartal. If hartals do not affect normal life and

people reject those, why is the AL government so much worried?

Tarek Shamin, 4/1, R.K Mission Road, Dhaka

Whither traffic control?

Sir, After the sixty-hour hartal (from 13-15 September), I went out and was caught in a jam. The same kind of traffic jam, which occurred before the Army personnel came out to help the traffic police. This really made me, and of course others, very irritated, as once again there were private cars, buses and rickshaws rushing down all over the streets violating traffic laws. This creates traffic congestion, which means, students will be late for schools, people will be late for their work affecting our business and the economy. Yes, the government twice placed the Army personnel on the roads; once when the Wills Cup Cricket tournament was held and again few days back before the hartal. But where are they now? Our Prime Minister said that until the situation improves, they would be on the streets. Then why are they not here now to tackle the situation?

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar, A level student, Dhanmondi Tutorial

Electoral law reform

Sir, Since independence, people of Bangladesh have been struggling against a number of negative forces to establish democracy and social justice. It was unfortunate that during 28 years after independence, the country remained under autocratic rule for a considerable period. For this, democracy remained far reaching and the society fell under the grip of unlimited corruption and widespread exploitation of the poor. But now a democratic election is growing and if we want to taste real democracy, we must take initiatives, among other steps, to change the existing electoral laws. FEMA — a citizens coalition

has — taken initiatives to offer some proposals regarding electoral law reform. At present, 30 seats are reserved for women in parliament. In terms of their numerical strength in total population, their entitlement is much more. FEMA has, therefore, recommended that the number of reserved seats may be increased, if possible, to 100 and direct election as per demand of women activists may be introduced in consultation with the political parties.

FEMA has further recommended that system of reservation of seats of women may continue for another two terms of parliament, and a law should be enacted making it compulsory for each political party to nominate 30 per cent of its total candidates, from amongst women at each general election when the system of reserved seats shall not be in existence.

Mostafa Sohel, Dhaka

Agri Commission Report

Sir, As reported in the press, the tenure of the Agriculture Commission has been extended upto December, 1999. It may be mentioned here that this Agri Commission was set up by the government on November 9, 1996 with a mandate to submit a report on crop sector within a year. But later on, non-crop sectors including agri-education were included in its terms of reference which provided the commission with a logical excuse to take a longer period for preparing and submission of its report. However, the report has reportedly been completed by the commission which is yet to be made public.

Meanwhile, it is sincerely expected that the Agri Commission Report will soon be published for public opinion and expert comments. Let us hope that like the previous ones, the present report will not find its way to the book-shelf but will witness its true implementation.

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