

## The Dialogue Offer

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has again put out a call to Begum Zia for talks to settle differences on the issues raised by the latter. Characteristically, the PM has used a public meeting to dramatise the offer apparently by way of winning some mileage over her political opponent.

What, however, appears sensible in her approach this time is that she has urged Begum Zia to make up her mind on the demands she wants discussed and resolved. There has been a baffling diversity of demands issuing from the opposition with one agitational programme being spear-headed by a four-point list of demands while another by a simple one-pointer like ouster of the government or that of the CEC. Editorially this paper has been lately hammering on this folly of the unfocused opposition demands and the point seems well-taken as the Prime Minister has very rightly implored the opposition leader to put specific demands on the table.

In the same breath, however, the PM has made an extremely off-putting remark against the opposition. Not satisfied by merely saying that BNP lost its temperance on being rejected by the people in the last election she went on to add: "They became restive as they lost the chance for plundering public money which they did while in power." As if looting public money is the function of a government in power. So, if the opposition is not clear about their demands, the prime minister does not appear to be sincere with her offer for talks either. We believe such an attitude on the part of the government cannot bring about a dialogue.

Whereas basically the initiative for talks should come from the government we are not even seeing any feelers dropped; rather it is a whole series of dampers being administered by the government. Instead of speaking to the opposition leader via public meetings, the PM better write out a formal proposal for a dialogue with the opposition detailing the modalities to start the talks. The idea is to invite suggestions from the other side. The top-most leaders need not meet each other rightaway; an emissary could be sent by the PM to Begum Zia and then at the mid-level or trouble-shooting level the process of engagement could begin in earnest. Eventually, the two leaders meet on agreed moot points.

In the meantime, the Prime Minister will have to exercise utmost restraint in the use of words to keep the environment congenial at any cost. Let the AL leadership be not dismissive about all that the opposition says on transhipment and electoral reform issues. Also, the government should give some space to the opposition's agitational programmes to remove the impression that it is ruthlessly muzzling the opposition.

## Double Standards

MUCH debate has been generated on the home minister's assurance of protection to shopowners if they kept their businesses open during hartal time. The owners' association has very meticulously cited the inherent pitfall in such

an arrangement as offered by the government on the last hartal day. In spite of the assurances of the authority the shopowners had to mostly keep their shutters down during Sunday's shutdown call by the opposition. But a famous market at the centre of the city adjacent to the ruling party office remained open during the hartal, allegedly under pressurisation by the ruling party leaders. A *Prothom Alo* report said that many of the shopowners resented this approach of the ruling party and said they had to pass their time in apprehension of troubles. Heavy police posse and over-enthusiastic party activists who gave protection to the market made the situation abnormal. Similarly, the government's open support to the anti-hartal processionists and their resistive approach to pro-hartal activists illustrate their application of double standards. The show of strength by the ruling party aggravated the situation driving away people from the streets who would otherwise might have come out and continued their normal activities.

This paper has always been discouraging hartals since its inception. We have always maintained that hartal as a political weapon has been overused and it hardly solves any problem of the people. But we also maintain it is a matter of personal choice whether a citizen observes it or not. If the anti-hartal processionists can get police protection the pro-hartal processionists also have the right to movement till they break public order. The only hope lies in the realisation that hartal does not do any good to anybody. The government, the opposition and all social and cultural organisations must work together towards creating an atmosphere where people would be free to observe or reject hartal without intimidation from any quarters whatsoever.

## Good Work at Ctg Port

THE Chittagong Feeder Trade Committee (CFTC), a Singapore-based organisation of feeder vessel operators, who were posturing for congestion surcharge has reportedly retreated. For this to happen, the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA), in a rare example, has succeeded in easing congestion both at the outer anchorage of the Chittagong port and its jetties. The CFTC announced earlier on an imposition of 33 per cent congestion surcharge on all container cargo at the port from August 23 this year. Receiving protests from CPA, Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), Shippers' Council and Chittagong Chamber, the deadline for inspection by the foreign organisation was set a month later. But when the organisation involved in feeder-vessel movement found the port congestion-free, it changed its decision and left the scene. This is a rare piece of good news to come from the perpetually problematic Chittagong port.

The port authority deserves kudos for the good work. A major obstacle has been removed. The CPA could successfully reduce the average turnaround period of container vessels at the port from 12-14 days to 3-8 days. Money siphoned off the country as surcharge payment has been saved. And the traders need not also overcharge the consumers to pass on the burden of surcharge to the latter. Let's fervently request all concerned at the Chittagong port to keep it up.

AS these lines appear, India begins evaluating its 600 million electors' verdict. Regardless of which parties form the government, some things can be said with certainty despite the mutually contradictory exit and opinion polls.

This election does not mark a break from the long-term trend (barring 1984) of fractured verdicts. It confirms an important sub-trend, that of the ruling party/ies going to the people for approval, and getting rejected.

Whatever its faults, the NDA did not run a lacklustre campaign. The BJP went into battle firing all cylinders. Its high-profile, do-or-die, campaign had a central plank: Kargil. Ms Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins, and Mr Vajpayee's favourable "image" among the elite.

All these are issues of identity. They pertain to who you are — Indian, Hindu, government loyalist, etc. — not what you do or stand for.

The BJP has failed at least on the first two counts. Take the attempt to present Kargil as a high point of achievement. Moments of popular protest against the politicisation of Kargil have grown into loud growls, especially in areas like Himachal and Uttarakhand with high war casualties.

Today, people question the claim that an avoidable, costly, military confrontation which

wasted 500 lives and Rs 10,000 crores was a "victory". Mr Vajpayee's record in the Quit India movement, the RSS's collaboration with the British, the government's pro-Western policies and its dubious sugar imports during the Kargil war have further embarrassed the BJP.

Meanwhile, the BJP's caste and factional rifts have come out in the open, starkly as in UP.

Its wholly negative campaign on "foreign origins" generated gossip, abuse and vulgar jokes, but probably no votes. Our voters favour the Constitutional-pluralist notion of citizenship, not *Hindutva* hysteria. Even the gains from Mr Vajpayee's "image" may prove temporary.

And for good reason. The BJP came to power in 1998 on a give-us-a-chance platform involving fatigue with the secular parties, and an appeal to *suraksha*, *swadeshi*, *samata*, *shuchita*, and *samrasta*.

Look at the record. The BJP's nuclear jingoism has degraded

India's security. Today, millions of Indians have become defenceless against a nuclear attack by Pakistan. Maximalist, our generals can hope that Pakistan will be deterred from attacking India. But this is just a hope.

Nuclear deterrence is a flawed doctrine. The Cold War witnessed over 10,000 incidents where deterrence nearly broke down despite sophisticated early warning, and command and control systems. Neither India nor Pakistan will have these for decades.

It was arrogant, foolish and dishonest for the NDA government to publish the Draft Nuclear Doctrine and ignite a nuclear arms race. The DND is a recipe for disaster. Its prescriptions will destabilise security, and keep India vulnerable at the conventional level, as Kargil showed. So much for *suraksha*!

Take *swadeshi*. The BJP's concept denudes Gandhi's slogan of its emancipatory, pro-poor content. After the BJP-

Sena deal with Enron, even the pretence to self-reliance stands dropped. There is wholesale embrace of MNC-driven globalisation.

With this comes an attack on *samata*: income and regional disparities have widened in the past 17 months. As the government gave the rich huge tax breaks, the poor suffered greater deprivation and unemployment. Consumer prices are likely to spike as soon as long-postponed price hikes (e.g. diesel) are levied.

As for *shuchita*, the less said the better after the sugar and wheat scams and the telecom turnabout. We have an I & B minister who shamelessly hands a prime Doodarshan contract to his own novice son. We also have Banana Republic-style deal-fixing.

In Mumbai, the very person who headed a committee on flyovers was given the contract to build them! The PMO is implicated in this Crony Capitalism. It has emerged as an independent, shady, power centre.

Even worse is the BJP's performance on *samrasta*. It has segmented this society as never before. Today, all of India's hierarchical and reactionary attitudes are coming out. Our religious, ethnic and tribal minorities are being subjected to atrocities from Gujarat to Orissa, from Haryana to Tamil Nadu.

The culture of the dominant sub-groups in the majority community is being palmed off as "mainstream", while all others are being marginalised. Under the BJP's majoritarian rule, India experiences a total lack of cohesion. The promise of a riot-free, fear-free, India sounds sinister.

This betrayal of promises is inseparable from communalism. Communalism cloaks many injustices and inequities, including gender discrimination, domination of elite linguistic groups, and so on. We have thus had not just a corrupt government, but one that delights in deepening social chasms.

Last year, a quarter of our people voted for the BJP in the hope that it would reform and "normalise" itself and move from identity to substantive issues. The BJP promised to be the Party of the Future. It has proved an organisation which lacks a vision for the future, and has nothing to offer to this society.

The BJP has already exhausted its novelty appeal. Worse, it has shown itself to be unworthy of trust. No wonder it has desperately tried to revive its so-called "hidden" agenda of temple, Article 370, uniform civil code, etc. This too has earned it notoriety, distrust and ignominy.

We should not be fooled. The BJP has two agendas: the long-term, "hidden", one; and a short-term programme. The "hidden" agenda is not the only dangerous one. The short-term agenda is about weakening democracy, undermining institutions, spreading insecurity among the minorities, and harassing those working for social and gender justice. It is equally pernicious.

The BJP must not be condemned only for its long-term goal of "Hinduising" society. Mr Vajpayee's unhidden agenda too is poisonous for our democracy's health, and will pave the way for a fascist transformation of this society. One can only hope that it will be stoutly resisted and defeated.

## The BJP's Dual Agenda

# The Non-hidden One is Bad Too

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Today, people question the claim that an avoidable, costly, military confrontation which wasted 500 lives and Rs 10,000 crores was a "victory". Mr Vajpayee's record in the Quit India movement, the RSS's collaboration with the British, the government's pro-Western policies and its dubious sugar imports during the Kargil war have further embarrassed the BJP.

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

# What's in a Name? A Lot

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

In America, it is perfectly all right to remain Farid, rather than become Fred; Sumit, rather than Smith; Aliya, rather than Alisa, — or Alope, rather than Al! There is so much more to your name than just a label; it is a complete package of your heritage.

Hari. The aim of the people of all religious persuasion is the same — to have their children blessed. That is why after generations of living in the West, Indians, children of Indian origin have names such as Kanhai and Kalicharran (Test cricketers) or V. S. Naipaul (novelist). Even the apostate Salman Rushdie has not disowned his "Muslim" name!

In the West, friends call each other by first names. Not necessarily so in Bangladesh. If someone's name is "Muhammad Abdus Samad" right away we know that neither "Muhammad" nor "Abdus" is his significant name; we would call him by his last name, "Samad". Calling someone by his last name is an insult in the West — only a superior officer in the armed forces is allowed to do that to his subordinates.

It is a challenge for a man to address a woman in Bangladesh, and vice versa. If the woman is older, "Apo" or "Khalamma" comes to our rescue. If the girl is much younger, it is all right to call her by her first name. The main problem

is with one's own age group. The West Bengalis have the perfect solution; they would address someone as, "Kamala Devi". We have no equivalent. If we are to address female colleagues by their first names, it would be considered a breach of etiquette. And surely we cannot call someone "Musammil Shireen, ektu shunori!"

No one suffered as much indignity for the right to be called by the name of his choice as the writer's number one hero bar none, Muhammad Ali. In February, 1964, a couple of days before he was to challenge Sonny Liston for the Heavyweight Championship of the World, Cassius Marcellus Clay let the world know that he had embraced Islam and would like to be addressed as "Muhammad Ali". Christian America was outraged, the fight was almost canceled, and even after Ali defeated Liston, everyone, including African-American boxers such as Floyd Patterson and Joe Frazier, refused to call him anything but "Cassius Clay". The writer's teachers at "East Pakistan" (now Faujdarhat) Cadet College weighed in with

the opinion that Clay was merely a pawn in America's desire to hoodwink the Muslim world! How things change. These days, everyone loves Ali, and as Ali used to joke, "even the (racist) Ku Klux Klan call me Muhammad Ali!" In an interesting side bar, the Greatest 21-year daughter, Laila, has decided to become a professional boxer, in spite of her famous dad's wishes to the contrary.

Yet, there are others who are too willing to part with their precious native names for commerce. Last year, *The Wall Street Journal* published the story of an Indian immigrant, Alope Majumder, an Internet entrepreneur, who said he was worried because Americans could not navigate his name well. Is it, "A-low-kee" or "A-loke"? Americans wondered. Sensing loss of business, Alope Majumder, a devout Hindu, transformed his name into a plain-vanilla American name, Al Major! (To avoid confusion with the former British Prime Minister, John Major, Alope's friends suggested an upgraded name: "Al General!") Alope is not alone. Pursuant of business success, many young immi-

grants of different nationalities exchange their multisyllabic original names for succinct Anglo sound bites. The largest ethnic group to go for Americanized monikers is the Russian immigrants.

Before passports became mandatory for immigrants entering the US in 1920, many immigrants had their original names messily Americanized by monolingual immigration officers. There is a joke as to why many Italian-Americans have the first name "TONY". Because the immigration officer mistook the label on their luggage that said "TO NY" (NY stands for New York) for their first names! In the 1960s and '70s many immigrants reclaimed their original names as a matter of pride.

Although most immigrants do retain their last names — names that reflect their history and religion — and pass it on to their children, they are more likely to experiment with American first names. The writer knows of Bangladeshi American families who gave their children American first names. This unintentional

push towards assimilation is in the hope of giving children a better future. Among Indian Americans, the favourite first name for a boy is Kevin. Chinese Americans favour Tiffany as the first name of choice for their daughters.

Such concessions are unnecessary in America. If one stands in a line at a bank in America, one is likely to be surrounded by people with first names as diverse as Jose (pronounced "Hozae"), Menachem, Michiko, Sushma, Nilufer, Xu, as well as Peter, Paul and Mary. Americans remain unfazed by difficult names. The writer, with a first name exemplifying consonant gridlock, ought to know! Mexican actress Salma Hayek said recently that only a few years ago agents asked her to suppress her Mexican heritage. These days she is a very sought after foreign actress in Hollywood.

Difficult name did not stand in the way of Arnold Schwarzenegger's storbybook success in America. The dirt-poor Austrian native is not only a Hollywood mega-star, he married into American royalty. He is the husband of Maria Shriver, the daughter of President Kennedy's sister, Eunice. Relax, folks. In America, it is perfectly all right to remain Farid, rather than become Fred; Sumit, rather than Smith; Aliya, rather than Alisa, — or Alope, rather than Al! There is so much more to your name than just a label; it is a complete package of your heritage.

# Opposition Thriving Despite Anwar's Year in Jail

Anil Netto writes from Penang, Malaysia

The election race is hotting up in Malaysia. A key opposition leader was recently freed from prison. The jailed former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, claims he is being poisoned. And Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's economic policies are being credited for the country's recovery. Gemini News Service reports on whether Malaysia's unlikely coalition of opposition parties can work together despite religious and ethnic differences.

WHEN ousted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim appeared in court with a black eye in September last year and testified that he had been beaten senseless, the revelation outraged many Malaysians and gave a spark to the reform movement he had launched just days earlier.

A year on, Anwar's stunning allegation that he is the victim of arsenic poisoning has injected fresh impetus to reform — the local term for demands for wide-ranging reforms and change. It has also dealt a severe blow to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's chances of retaining the two-thirds parliamentary majority he covets so much in the coming elections, which must be held by mid-2000.

Anwar was sacked from government, arrested and sentenced to six years in jail for allegedly abusing his position to influence police investigations into complaints of sexual misconduct made against him.

He flatly denies the charge and claims he is a victim of a high-level political conspiracy. He has been in police custody or jail since 20 September 1998, regularly trooping in and out of court. Most recently, Anwar faced fresh charges of sodomy,

which carries a jail term of up to 20 years, but his trial was put on hold while he underwent testing in hospital in the wake of the arsenic allegation.

While Anwar remains cut off from the public view, the release of Lim Guan Eng, the deputy secretary-general of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) in late August has revitalised the opposition front, which had appeared to be losing steam. Lim was jailed last year for sedition and publishing false news after he defended an under-age ethnic Malay girl who implicated a senior politician from Mahathir's party, among others, in a sex scandal.

As a Chinese Malaysian coming to the rescue of an ethnic Malay, Lim appeared to bridge a yawning divide in Malaysia's pluralist society. Malays make up about half the 22 million population with

ethnic Chinese comprising about one-third, but the two groups usually take different political sides. About 5,000 Malaysians flocked to the prison gates in Kajang near the capital Kuala Lumpur to welcome Lim's release after a year behind bars.

There's never been a precedent in our history for a convicted prisoner to be greeted as a hero, marvelled Mahfiz Omar, leader of the youth wing of the Islamic Party (PAS) at an indoor rally in Penang.

Stitching together a united opposition front has proved to be a laborious process as party leaders try to overcome decades of suspicion and conflicting ideologies. The parties — the multi-ethnic but Chinese-based DAP; PAS, which wants to set up an Islamic state; the tiny Malaysian People's Party (PRM); and the new National Justice Party (KEADILAN),

headed by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail — are as diverse as they get. But they have come together with a single aim — to restore justice. To this end, they are launching a common manifesto, which is widely expected to keep the basic tenets of the Malaysian Constitution intact while promising the removal of all oppressive and unjust laws.

Sticking to the basic constitutional tenets would mean retaining the secular state with Islam as the official religion. That would reassure the non-Muslims — and many Muslims as well — who have been uneasy about PAS Islamic state objective.

For Mahathir, the negative publicity surrounding Anwar's arsenic poisoning allegations has come at the worst possible time. The economy has picked up after a recession, which was triggered by the Asian economic

crisis in mid-1997 and aggravated by corruption, cronyism and Mahathir's penchant for resource-sapping multi-billion ringgit projects. Indeed, there is a widespread perception that the scale of corruption has risen over the years, with little tangible action taken against those responsible for huge financial scandals.

"At the very least, we will wipe out corruption," vowed KEADILAN's deputy president Dr Chandra Muzaffar, a renowned political scientist and novice politician. "We will ensure that the unhealthy nexus between business and politics will be stopped," he told the crowd of 5,000 at the Penang rally.

Although the economy is said to be recovering, Chandra pointed out that 17 per cent of residents in Kuala Lumpur are squatters. He also said that 10 per cent of Malaysians nation-

wide live in conditions close to absolute poverty. Their cries are seldom heard in the corridors of power.

So "justice for all" is set to be the theme for the opposition. That seems appropriate as critics say the credibility of many of Malaysia's institutions of government — the attorney-general's office, the police, the judiciary, parliament — has been badly eroded with power increasingly centralised with the executive, more specifically, Mahathir, in power for 18 years.

"We do not want to seek revenge but to establish the rule of law," said Lim. That will not be an easy task given the ruling coalition's control of the media and government machinery, which it uses and abuses for election campaigning. But the ultimate test is whether the level of outrage among the 10 million eligible voters about injustices and abuse of power will be strong enough to dent the ruling coalition's decades-long dominance.

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## To the Editor...

### Importance of hartal!

Sir, The other day, I was asking one of my colleagues as to when was the next hartal (meaning the hartal on October 3). To my surprise, as I asked at least four others, no one — including myself — knew about it! As far as I remember, all the newspapers published the opposition's announcement regarding the hartal on October 3, immediately after their 60-hour hartal last month.

This should be an eye opener to those parties, in favour of hartals, how their political programmes are losing importance to the members of the public.

Ehsanul Haque  
Dhaka

### Anti-smuggling measures

Sir, It was not surprising to note that the giant multinational cigarette company, pay-

ing tax to the GoB in the range of Tk 1,000 crore per annum, had its net profit down by 41 per cent, and it was restructuring its staff for more competitive business. The staff shake-up had been made obligatory to face the smuggling now being openly going on in Bangladesh, not only of foreign cigarettes but also other commodities as well.

Indirectly it reveals the incapability of the authorities concerned to make a dent in the smuggling business, which, most believe, has also been heavily politicised, as can be seen in other sectors where graft, corruption, unethical business practices, and nepotism reign.

The company, it appears, made some policy oversight in its business in Bangladesh. In the DCs and LDCs, there is a psychological preference for foreign goods, even if the same are manufactured locally. Therefore, the local high-priced products and famous name brands of cigarettes might not

have been a policy in the right direction. In Dhaka, there are small pockets of luxury shops which sell only imported products for the rich.

Secondly, the tariff on higher-priced brands of cigarettes was raised in almost every budget, upsetting the market balance and encouraging smuggling on larger scale, which the government has neither the will nor the resources to control or contain. This is not the only way to meet budget deficits, initially targeting the smokers. The additional revenue generated can at best be marginal, compared to the rest of the smokers' market of cheaper brands.

An observer  
Dhaka

### "Insensitive Employer"

Sir, This refers to a news item published in the *Daily Prothom Alo* on 22.09.1999. The news was about a good

number of government doctors posted as Asst. Registrar/Indoor Medical Officer in the Chittagong Medical College Hospital who were not getting their monthly salaries since the month of July this year. I would like to draw the attention of the relevant authorities that the same thing is happening in other places as well. Like the writer of this letter, a good number of government doctors posted as Asst. Registrar/Indoor Medical Officers in Sir Salmullah Medical College, Mitford Hospital and Dhaka Medical College Hospital (and I am sure in some other medical college hospitals as well) are also not getting their monthly salaries paid since June, 1999.

Last year, some new posts of Asst. Registrar/Indoor Medical Officer were created to facilitate smooth running of medical college hospitals. A few years back, around 20 posts of Medical Officers (to work mostly as Indoor Medical Officer) were created. All these posts were

created supposedly on a temporary basis with provision to renew their sanction from time to time. And from what I could gather, at the beginning of every financial year, the sanctioning by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and clearance of the Finance Ministry are required to allow these people to get paid by the AG office. Now, the sinister fact is that almost always, this routine matter does not get taken care of on time. Consequently, the helpless and hapless doctors do not get their salaries paid on time. Sometimes for months. Though eventually they get paid of their dues, it is needless to say they have to suffer intolerably during these periods. May I kindly draw your kind attention to this simple fact that most of the doctors posted in these posts have to rely solely on their monthly salary to feed themselves and their families. The reason is that these are "Training Posts" and while being posted in these positions doctors, specially the Asst. Regis-

trars, have to work round the clock in the Medical College Hospitals and are not expected or allowed to indulge in private practice. Therefore, I appeal to the relevant authorities to kindly look into this matter with utmost urgency so that we get paid without anymore needless delay.

A Sufferer  
Dhaka

Please, don't stop here  
Sir, All credit to the government for taking stern measures to wipe out the micro-empire of sores in the society established openly by Ershad Shikdar of Khulna who had been nursed and protected by successive regimes for two decades.

The public is hoping that this type of good governance is not a flash in the pan and more prosecutions will follow.

A Husnan  
Dhaka