

Why Punish the Patients?

THE commotion among internee doctors of Dhaka Medical College Hospital and teachers and students of Dhaka Dental College following Monday's assault by DU students on their premises shows no sign of dying down. We have already condemned, in a strongly-worded editorial, the hooliganism some Dhaka University students unleashed at both the DMCH and DDC in reaction to a fellow student's death at the Medical College Hospital. We called them 'marauding mourners' who did injustice to the memory of deceased Monir by taking their wrath out on public and private property including cars. Some doctors were allegedly roughed up, too. However, it is the turn now for the doctors of Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Dhaka Dental College to draw a flak for their reaction overall to the rowdiness of DU students.

They observed a 24-hour 'token' work-stoppage at the DMCH on Tuesday threatening to go on an indefinite strike if their demands to bring the culprits to book and beef up the DMCH's security arrangements were not met in 15 days' time. The Dental College has already embarked upon an indefinite strike, according to reports published yesterday.

We fully empathise with the internee doctors' torrid outrage over the DU students' extremely rowdy behaviour but can't overlook the fact that their reaction is largely misplaced because it is the hospital patients and not the assaulting DU students who are being the victims of their work-stoppage. Owing to Tuesday's strike itself, scheduled surgical operations were delayed, outdoor patients went away unattended and the indoor patients did not receive routine attention.

We urge the internee doctors to step back from any further strike in view of the investigative work started by a 4-member probe committee earlier formed by the health ministry. The committee has two weeks to fix the responsibility for the untoward incidents. The doctors' allegation about the police playing a by-stander's role need to be gone into. At the same time, we would like to know what the Dhaka University authorities are doing with their students going haywire on that day. We feel that under no circumstances should the patients be punished for the fault of others.

Power Distribution

TUESDAY'S meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry of energy and mineral resources has indeed been definitive in its observations and unequivocal in its recommendations. The hole, the JS body rightly pointed out, is at the heart of power distribution, and not the generation. While power generation has increased, it maintained, the distribution system has not really shown any sign of improvement whatsoever. Let alone installation of new power lines, the old ones are not properly maintained. Also, at the management end, decentralisation of authorities through formation of DESA and DESCO, "instead of making PDB efficient and dynamic", has miserably failed to yield any benefit, except for catering to the "professional aspirations of a few officials". On the whole, the committee's observations have hit the bull's eye. We sincerely believe that detection of such a fundamental inadequacy would result in steps for correction and thereby advancement of the beleaguered power sector.

Encouragingly still, comes PDB's instructions to DESA to cut down on systems loss from 24 per cent to 20 per cent by January next and raise bill collection radically so that it can pay up its dues worth Tk 1700 crore to the PDB. To top it off, there is the finance minister's ultimatum to the city's power supply authority to improve financial matters satisfactorily by July next to avert "drastic solutions". Also, initiation of "massive transfers of officials to remove dens of corruption" by the authorities sounds like a bold move. The PDB has shown wisdom in convincing the trade union activists not to interfere in this respect.

Finally, it seems things are moving in the right direction. Our power generation options being limited, effort should have been made to upgrade our distribution system in the very first place. It is encouraging that the authorities have started thinking on that line. However, the JS body's recommendation to implement the ECNEC approval for increasing staff strength at the Raiganj 1 and 2 generation plants should be heeded as it involves a crucial shortfall in power supply.

Blair Carries a Point

WHATEVER the British rulers left as legacy in this sub-continent after about two hundred years of colonial rule, could not all be dispensable. As aliens to the land and the culture of the people they had their own priorities, which most of the times might have hurt the feelings of the denizens but they had their strong points as administrators as well as good citizens. As the cradle of democracy, Britain has set examples in upholding democratic norms and practices and as individuals many Britons excelled each other in bravery and fairplay, particularly in the practice of democracy and decent behaviour.

Prime Minister Tony Blair set an example on Tuesday which might not have been the first of its kind in Europe; nonetheless it is worth mentioning and perhaps also emulating by leaders in other countries. His transport got stuck in a London traffic jam; he and his companions left the car, walked to the nearby tube station, bought tickets and took the train to his office six stations away at Westminster.

Our prime minister had announced before the elections in 1996 that she would not allow any traffic hold-up when she would be commuting as the country's PM. But in reality, the prime minister's cavalcade once even took the wrong lane during a normal weekday. Roads are still blocked and people made to suffer along the PM's route. What we basically need to focus on, however, is the traffic mess which the prime minister has promised to do something about quite a few times over now. We urge her immediate intervention to set it right.

POLITICIANS in Bangladesh are playing with fire. If there is any doubt about the statement, one needs only to look to our west and find the contrasting examples of government changeovers. In both instances, an elected government had to concede executive authority of the state. In one case, it was because of the results of a no-confidence vote in the parliament. In the other, it was because the dismissed chief of the military wanted to regain control and some more. In one instance, a new government came to power by virtue of an election. In the other, a new government came to power by virtue of subjugation. In one instance, foreign companies are rushing in with billions of new investments. In the other, heads of state are dragging their feet to recognize the new national government. Does not this raise any concerns among the political elite of Bangladesh? The writing on the walls could not have been made more abundantly clear. Politics of personality and of violence ideology is going to cost us dearly unless we start looking for a cure for this malaise that has forever locked history in a perpetual cycle of self annihilation.

Failure to Institutionalize Ideas: At the core of the problem is the failure to form nations based on ideas. We have attempted to form nations out of selective amnesia and have failed miserably. The obsession of renaming everything, of rewriting history books, and of banishing thoughts of dissent, cannot have any other motivation. Memories change because people change; what could remain unchanged is allegiances to a national ideology, and in its absence, crisis. All nations are born out of crisis of some sort; Bangladesh is no different. Every community of crisis, for a small window of opportunity,

remains a community of memory. However, such communities are also short lived unless efforts are made to transform that community of memory into community of ideas. This is usually accomplished through the constitution and subsequent institutional manifestation of that constitution. This is what has happened in India but failed to materialize in India and Pakistan.

Communities of Crisis: We are a nation created of crisis, by crisis and for crisis. Surely there was a community of seventy-five million that came together to secure its independence from an oppressive regime. But this community never got the opportunity of becoming a community of ideas. It took only four years for the secular constitution to become non-secular and another decade for it to become Islamic. Same fate has befallen socialism, if not in words, then definitely in deeds. The mutability of the constitution at such fundamental levels exposes our fragility as a nation. Successful democracies are based on the congruence of four critical factors: ideology, institutions, civic society and culture. Of the four, culture is the least malleable. Which in turn makes symmetry of the other three factors even more crucial. The recipe is simple. Ideology is expressed through the constitution. Institutions — market and non-market, political, social, financial — all follow the constitution. Civic society fills in the void. In the case of mature democracies, the voids are a minimum. In the case of a

nascent democracy, the voids are a maximum. What hurts most is not the void, but the contradiction. Attributable to our schizophrenic political past, that is precisely what we have created — institutions of crisis and contradictions.

Institutionalization of Crisis and Contradictions: There is little doubt that civil disobedience is now institutionalized in Bangladesh. There are set days and times to call a Hartal. For instance, the one-day variety can start either on a Thursday or a Sunday. No preparations are deemed necessary — the hartal machinery can get into operation within twenty-four hours' notice. The hartal defences also go into effect immediately. Ambulances, police and international travellers are exempt. Providers of essential services like banks and hospital go into their lean mode of operation. Factories switch over to night shifts. Schools and colleges start meeting on weekends. Only people who are marginalized are the rickshaw-pullers, taxi-drivers, day labourers, hawkers etc. Who cares about them anyway? Unless of course if you are trying to fill up a political gathering. Am I the only one who sees the contradiction in this? Civil disobedience in times of military rule makes sense. It also makes sense when you are fighting against autocracy. But it makes no sense whatsoever when you are in the opposition because of an election. An election in which you campaigned in equal terms as the party that now seats on the other side of

the isle. This is not a rocket science. This is how democracy is supposed to work. If you don't have respect for this basic tenet, you create a fundamental crisis with catastrophic consequences. Pakistan just experienced such a consequence. On a subtle but permanent level, one can argue that the military to democracy and the democracy to military tendencies in Pakistan are also institutionalized. Just observe the steps taken by the new regime in Pakistan. The rational for takeover on grounds of political corruption, the promise for a quick return to democracy, the formation of a technocratic government for the interim — are the same exact recipe every military government has followed since we first came to know of their existence.

Opposition and Lines of Defense: When the government fails to deliver, it is the responsibility of the opposition to bring that to light. But when it chooses to protest inappropriately of their own, it abdicates its constitutionally mandated responsibility to provide defences against tyranny and oppression. Instead of investing its energy and resources in a one-point movement to unseat the elected government by calling frivolous hartals, the opposition should be fighting for unconstitutional means to oppose the ruling party. The legislative branch and the judiciary are still there. Though riddled with faults and shortcomings, everyone else is playing by their rules. If those rules are unjust,

it is responsibility of the opposition to highlight and build pressure to change them. Writing them off is simply irresponsible, immoral and it borders on criminal negligence. By staying hell bent on their Hartal stance, that is precisely what the opposition is doing. Consequence of the opposition's failure is much more detrimental than that of the party in power. Being an underdeveloped democracy, opposition is our primary lines of defence. When the ruling party and the opposition both fall into the side of the problem what choice does a country have other than to wish for some divine intervention? Isn't that an insult to the people who only ten years ago staged one of the largest civil uprisings of the country to unseat an autocrat? Or to the people twenty years before that who laid down their lives to free us from tyrants? Have we become so desensitized and complacent about such matters that we simply don't really care anymore?

Complacency's Price and Perseverance's Reward: Perhaps that is exactly what has happened. The party that kept dragging its feet on the installation of a caretaker government because there was no constitutional provision is the same party that is now making an unconstitutional demand for the resignation of the election commissioner. If we had taken them seriously then, should we approve their demands now? Or are we supposed to be just as illogical, opportunistic, immoral and whimsical as our political leaders? Or are

we just to be complacent about the price we have to pay if the situation remains unchanged? The point I am trying to make is a simple one. If the ruling party is the problem, the opposition is not helping our cause by joining them in that precarious position. Because if both of them stay as a part of the problem and the problems begin to exist indefinitely, then we once again have to choose between the lesser of two evils. Let us not be a community of crisis again! Give us a chance of being a community of ideas — the ideas of democracy, freedom and justice for all. If we had any respect for those who sacrificed their lives to grant us independence from oppression, if we had any respect for us and our children, this is the least we can demand from our two political parties. The road to true democracy is not pretty and no one should make such claims. As Robert Kaplan wrote in an Atlantic article few years ago, 'the issue is not that democracy is good and dictatorship is bad. The issue is that when we look at the history of successful democracies, we see them emerge only as a capstone to successes in economic and social fronts.'

That journey is not going to even begin for us if we continue to run away from the task of fixing a dysfunctional parliament, a subservient judiciary, a corrupt bureaucracy, or a bloated public sector. It will start only when we embrace the challenges — the challenges of building stable political, economic, financial and social institutions. It's like taking cod liver oil; first its tastes bitter, and then you get better. But you have to quit taking it in and spitting it out.

The author is a doctoral student in Public Policy writing from Virginia, USA.

Indonesia's Path for Democracy and its Challenges Ahead

by Harun ur Rashid

The very fact that the President and the Vice-President have been elected through democratic process demonstrates the desire and the determination of the people of Indonesia to a new start. The world will be watching how the fractured nation will be healed through the policies charted by the elected leaders.

At last the people of Indonesia achieved what they had struggled for. They wanted democracy in the country and their leaders to be elected through democratic process. Last week, the politicians did not fail them. Although many were a bit disappointed that Ms. Megawati Sukarnoputri could not be elected as President, but they are happy that a moralist and a great democrat has been elected as the President of the country.

The election of the President and the Vice-President of Indonesia by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) is a culmination of a process which commenced in May last year. With the downfall of President Suharto, an interim government was installed with Dr. B.J. Habibie as the President. Under his regime, election was held in a fair and free manner in last June and the 70-member Consultative Assembly elected Mr. Abdur Rahman Wahid (59) as the President and Ms. Megawati Sukarnoputri (53) as the Vice-President.

The election saw the regrouping of many parties including the former ruling party, Golkar, which backed both the President and the Vice-President. Credit should also go to former interim President Habibie who led the transition from dictatorship to democracy and was wise to withdraw from the contest when he found that political arithmetic was stacked against him.

The election of Mr. Wahid — commonly known with Javanese nickname Gus Dur — as the President was a surprise

to many because Ms. Megawati's party had the largest number of elected members in the Parliament and everyone expected that she would be elected as the President. But Ms. Megawati and her advisers were not skillful in making alliances with other parties and as a result she lost the presidential election to Mr. Wahid. In the selection of the President, the Assembly's Chairperson Dr. Amin Rais played a key role in mustering votes for Mr. Wahid. Thereafter President Wahid backed the candidacy of Ms. Megawati as his number two.

Finally a new team of leaders were elected who had no role in the past governments. They made a clean break from the past and the people were jubilant to see them elected. The position of the Vice-President is important because President Wahid's health is questionable. He had two strokes and has to be supported in his walk by his bodyguards. He is intellectually very alert although he is physically weak and nearly blind. Many believe that he may not be able to complete his 5-year term of the Presidency and Ms. Megawati would automatically succeed him to the top position.

President Wahid has an old and respected political pedigree. His father and grandfather were well known Muslim leaders in the country. The President is an Islamic scholar

with degrees from Egypt and Iraq. He is not a religious demagogue, is moderate in his views, tolerant to other faiths and a great reconciler. He heads the largest Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama with 35-million members in the country and during the election his party, the National Awakening Party (PKB) came third in June parliamentary elections. It is believed that his presidency will carry on a long record of tolerance on social, political, religious and ethnic issues.

Both the President and Vice-President have developed strong bonds between themselves as opposition leaders.

This bond was further strengthened because their fathers knew each other well. Recently, they accompanied to their fathers' graves.

It is believed that the power of the President will not be unfeared as President Suharto had enjoyed. During his rule the Parliament was only a rubber stamp. The newly elected Parliament is a vibrant and active body and not a "talking shop". Furthermore it is understood that the term of the President will be limited to two terms only and the Parliament will assert itself to have a say in the affairs of the government.

The political unrest in various islands has to be addressed. One way is to decentralize the power in Jakarta and provide autonomy to the provinces. Furthermore the government needs to embark on pro-

The two elected leaders face daunting task before them. The crippling economy needs to be restored with the IMF and World Bank loans. The banking sector requires overhauling and new legislations have to be in place to regulate the accountability and transparency of the activities of the financial institutions. The confidence of the foreign investors will only return when they see not only political stability, but also sound policies in banking and investment free from corruption and cronyism. The clean up of corruption will be a great challenge for the new government.

The Indonesian-Chinese who fled from Indonesia last year need to return to restart their business. A climate of confidence is imperative for their return and the sectarian and ethical rifts are to be immediately repaired through proactive and reconciliatory policies of the government. The Indonesian-Chinese with their global network in finance and investment will be able to put the economy on the track. This appears to be one of the priorities of the government.

The political unrest in various islands has to be addressed. One way is to decentralize the power in Jakarta and provide autonomy to the provinces. Furthermore the government needs to embark on pro-

grammes alleviating poverty in the country. It is now estimated that 60 per cent of the 210 million people live below poverty line. Social justice would have to be the core of all socio-economic programmes. Once economic prosperity is brought at the doors of the common people, much of the steam of the separatist movement is likely to disappear.

Another difficult task will be to reform the military. The politicization of the military will have to be curbed. The military should be confined to their professional job. The configuration of the hierarchy in the military requires restructuring and the police should be separated from the military command. The rogue elements of the military which perpetrated atrocities in East Timor will have to be purged. A clean, efficient and professional military would satisfy the demands of the people.

Although the two leaders are popular and persons of high integrity, they lack experience in running a government of a

large archipelago country, the third largest democratic nation in the world. Another difficulty appears to be the high expectations of the people from the leaders. Unless the leaders move swiftly and can deliver benefits to the people at large, the common people will get impatient and the social unrest may generate. The people have become bold enough to protest against any policy of the government, which does not bring any immediate advantage to them. However, if they see that the government is right on the track eliminating corruption and bringing the corrupt persons to trial, they are likely to wait for a while.

President Wahid is a moral force in Indonesia. He is widely respected for his views on social justice. The reformist agenda of the two elected leaders ushers in a new era for the people of Indonesia. The very fact that the President and the Vice-President have been elected through democratic process demonstrates the desire and the determination of the people of Indonesia to a new start. The world will be watching how the fractured nation will be healed through the policies charted by the elected leaders.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

OPINION

OneNest's Bangladesh Connection

Naeem Mohaiemen

In the throes of Silicon Valley (West Coast) and Alley (New York's) frenzy of Internet startups, there are quite a few that have South Asians at the top — starting with the much discussed Hotmail, founded by Sabeer Bhatia a month after he received his green-card. Hotmail was later bought out by Microsoft and Sabeer is now a acknowledged Internet wonderkid.

Much to the chagrin of India's ossified elite, this 30-something "kid" now goes to seminars in India as the chief guest and wags his fingers at the Indian IT industry for failing to provide enough of an entrepreneurial environment to keep people like him at home. Following Hotmail's lead, there are numerous other South Asian-led Internet startups, including Junglee.com, Techtime.com, EthnicGrocer.com, Xing etc.

Joining this crowd of Internet startups is a New York-based Internet company founded by a young Bangladeshi entrepreneur. OneNest.com is a new e-commerce web site selling artist- and artisan-made goods from around the world. OneNest co-founder and CEO Durreen Shahriar learnt the importance of connecting artisans with the marketplace in her native Bangladesh. A former investment banker who became the youngest VP at Hearst Media, Shahriar was heavily influenced by her work for the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

During her work with the Grameen projects in various villages, Durreen was struck by the gorgeous textiles, carefully crafted by highly skilled women. These women were very motivated to work, in order to provide shelter and sustenance for their families. During her work, Durreen learnt that while these women were aided by the credit programs, there was no plan in place to stream their product to the Western market. She identified this as a oversight: "I really

thought it was a long shot that these women who couldn't read or write were supposed to work out distribution for their product."

Co-founder and chief technology officer Musher Moin, is also from Bangladesh. He was most recently at IBM's flagship e-commerce site. Third partner and chief financial officer Victor Morgan is the only native-born American among the co-founders. A former consultant with Braxton Associates/Deloitte Consulting, Morgan was influenced by the work he did for his family-owned carpentry business. Working there after school and during summer vacations, he gained an appreciation for high-quality craftsmanship.

OneNest is billed as a community, a place where artisans of the world can meet buyers for their work. OneNest points out that the "product" for sale is more than a mere commodity. The objects for sale are vessels of information about their cultures. They speak of ancient ways of creating tools and treasures, some of which are in danger of extinction. OneNest is designed to tell those stories. It is also designed to function as a direct link between buyer and seller — to support artisans so they can support themselves.

The OneNest team's press release says this will be the Internet's premier site for artist- and artisan-made goods — including music, photography, video and other media — in a magazine-style format that informs, engages and entertains the consumer as she shops. They are presently in talks with Bangladeshi company DRK for multimedia, photography and other products. Hopefully, many more partners from Asia and around the world will follow.

The author, a New York-based Internet Startup for African-Americans.

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.

Terminator gene

Sir, Agricultural scientists and professionals particularly from the developing countries which are directly dependent on agriculture have been expressing their deep concern over the introduction of 'terminator gene' or 'terminator technology' by the US Department of Agriculture.

Terminator gene has been developed through the application of genetic engineering techniques. By means of terminator technology, it is possible to manipulate expression of certain genes in plant and make it sterile to produce seeds incapable of germination when re-sown. This will create a serious economic problem to the farmers because they would have to purchase fresh seeds in every season and from some particular seed companies.