

## What is the Point?

TODAY'S hartal has taken the nation by surprise. The air being thick with the opposition's juggling of specific dates to call marathon strikes on, one had hardly expected today to be a hartal day. The casualness with which the dawn-to-dusk hartal was declared in a last-minute abandonment of a road march programme is symptomatic of thick-headed irresponsibility towards public sensibilities. Presumably hartal was considered the 'easier second best' option to road march which called for preparations they had apparently failed to make.

Today's hartal is to protest Election Commissioner's "unilateral declaration of schedules" for elections to Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna city corporations. It is common knowledge that the opposition political parties did not attend the meetings convened by the EC to discuss local polls schedules despite being duly invited to them.

The constitutional process of holding the local polls cannot be held ransom to the opposition's demand for the CEC's resignation. There is a constitutionally set time-limit for the electoral process to be completed.

Our appeal to the opposition is, please ask yourself: where this policy of yours is leading the nation to? Side by side with answering this question could they also comprehensively catalogue what they really want? Even the call for government's resignation sounds superfluous in view of the limited span left to its tenure.

On the government side, a strong case can be made against them for unleashing oppressive measures on the opposition. Yesterday BNP activists were prevented from entering their own party office. Can this be acceptable to any political party? In addition, all sorts of other measures are being adopted to harass the opposition workers. In short the space for opposition is being drastically narrowed which is forcing the latter to go for frequent hartals and other destructive activities.

To the government also we have this to say: references to Constitution, academic exhortations and the rhetoric you have tried many times over, now try something else in realisation of the fact that if opposition political parties keep out of the local government polls, the result would be too narrowly based to sustain the system. So, if you don't go head-long for a dialogue with the opposition you would be reinforcing the very process you are maligning the opposition for.

## Worth Going Into

CERTAINLY, Bangladesh Bank Deputy Governor Ibrahim Khaled's allegations of strong mafia links with the management of some nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) comes as a shocker and adds a new dimension to the controversy raging over the country's banking sector. Quite predictably, the finance minister, chief guest of the function where the central bank high-up landed the bombshell, came up with a refutation, blaming the 'military regimes' for leaving behind the smothering burden of classified loans on the four state-owned banks. Still, his advice to Bangladesh Bank to initiate a probe certainly speaks for the fact that he, too, didn't quite rule out the possibility and it certainly is encouraging. The episode has not only pointed to the rot but also cast a dark cloud over reforms in the country's beleaguered banking sector.

Admittedly, the nationalised banks have become the Achilles' tendon in the system. According to a recent report, classified loans at the four state-owned banks now stand at Tk. 13,168.28 crore and, according to the deputy governor's report, these are on the rise. Central bank's regulatory measures have failed to arrest the trend. The same measures however seem to have done wonders in the private banks — from December, 1998 to June this year, there has been a five per cent drop in classified loans. Obviously, the NCBs are not working the way they should and the indicators certainly point to gross irregularities in their management.

Fortunately, the central bank official has shown the courage and moral uprightness to come forward with his disquieting views on the plight of NCBs. Hopefully, the stir his observations have created would not die down but lead to serious brain-storming among the authorities. What we hope from them is definitive steps to rid the banking sector of the vices that have plagued it for years together.

## Murderous Abandon

THE rise in terrorism seems unprecedented. Only when we think that this is the height of barbarism, we are confronted by yet another case of brutal assault or homicide. A young businessman, Khokon, was stabbed in his abdomen with a broken bottle before his eyes were gouged out with a knife. This atrocity does not only speak of effrontery, but also of the law enforcement failure to ensure public safety. On the very same day a Shibir activist in Chittagong and a Jubo League leader in Uttara were shot dead. None has been arrested.

According to Khokon's family sources, the culprits are local hoodlums of Gumthar area in Gandaria, where he resided. Police sources say they have launched a manhunt to arrest the assailants. At a time when most culprits of heinous offences go unscratched, this initiative will be closely watched for its results. We only hope that after the hype, this search would not be abandoned.

We urge the authorities to stem the "frightening" rise in terrorism. Otherwise the people may be forced to take the law into their own hands, which would be another threat to civic life. The way a dacoit was beaten to death and four others hurt when attempting to rob a bus bore testimony to this. The people are fast losing faith in those who are supposed to protect them — the police. If crime cannot be checked and culprits chastened, then 'beaten to death' would become the latest catch phrase.

# Democracy Under Assault?

*Apart from the democracy's inherent difficulties of transplanting it — essentially a Western creation — to parts of the world with different cultures and traditions, democracy will have to run a gauntlet of challenges typical of the change of time. In the meantime the democrats across the world should better perform and deliver.*

how within years those beliefs were shattered by hatred, irrationality and atrocity bringing mankind on the brink of a new period. The democracy striding triumphantly into 1900s found itself almost at once on the defensive and it was despised as bourgeois civility and cowardice. The great wars crudely brought down the old structure of security and democratic order unleashing the energies of the authoritarian uprisings against democracy. By the time the Second World War broke out democracy was virtually on the retreat with barely a dozen democracies left on the planet.

Can such reversal to democracy take place again by the turn of the next century? If democracy fails to deliver as it did several times also in the past, the history can by all means, repeat itself. And its syndromes are already visible. After the initial euphoria over winning long denied freedom a decade before the newly-liberated nations as well as the nations with boosted democracy soon settled into horse trading, big money and rough-and-tumble tactics of representative politics. From rich landlords and business class to intellectuals and workers — the interest groups started contending for their share in national power and wealth. The democracy, as a result, was bereft of its egalitarianism, equality, welfare and social justice.

Even as the dominos in Eastern Europe fell and the democracies got rejuvenated elsewhere in the beginning of

the decade the defences were equally stiff. Disregarding the global trend of democratic fever of the late eighties the rulers of China and Myanmar stunned the international community by killing the prodemocracy demonstrators in 1989. While an unrepentant Chinese authority continued to strangle such aspirations, in Myanmar the military Junta set aside the results of a general election in 1990 overwhelmingly won by Aung Sun Suu Kyi and has since tightened its grip over the country. In Indonesia in spite of the people's demo-

mation of a coalition government which is likely to last longer than before. But across the border it's in Pakistan from where the real danger to democracy emanates. Because Pakistan's first coup in 1958 set in motion a trend which saw a large number of third world countries following the suit. Ayub Khan was hailed in the west as a great reformer and an Asian version Charles de Gaulle. Even Samuel Huntington saw Ayub as one coming 'close to filling the role of a Solon or Lycurgus or Great Legislator on the Platonic or Rousseauian

democracy through the politics of intimidation, vendetta, plunder and crimes of bewildering varieties. Steeped in incessant internal squabbles they have seldom been able to address the hard issues of the polity like healthcare, drinking water, housing and so on for their countries' teeming millions. The criminalisation of politics has rendered the society as one riddled with corruption, extortion, terror and a pervasive social insecurity. Who can blame the victims if they turn to any other alternative for succour? The democratic transformation of the society is a long arduous path but in South Asia even that process still seems to be a non-starter.

As the millennium comes to a close there are other challenges to democracy coming from the quarters hitherto unknown. The most potent challenge comes from the gradual erosion of nation state under an inexorable force of globalisation which has already crashed across national frontiers. Democratic politics comes into play on the turf of nation state and some of its institutions are synonymous, overlapping and interrelated with those of the state. Once the state is diluted or weakened in its power and composition the democracy is deprived of the base on which it rests.

Although modern democracy is the political offspring of technology and capitalism, symbolised by industrial revolution, both are going to pose strange new challenge to

democracy. The industrial revolution extended over generations and allowed time for human and institutional adjustment. The computer revolution does not allow that time and therefore the transition from Factory Age to Computer Age is far more traumatic than one from farmland to factory. The computerised world has already posed problems by straining the bond of social control and political sovereignty with a tremendous acceleration of technology.

The concepts of modern democracy are European inventions. With the end of the Eurocentric era and now the advent of Asia-Pacific economic magnetism, there is also a historic shift in the political balance. The Asian leaders are no more prepared to accept the Western standard without pulling them to question as to whether they are of any relevance to them. Their questions of an 'Asian Way' are likely to be disincarnate to the spread of classical democracy as conceived in the West.

In spite of the democratic revivalism after the Cold War it cannot be expected to enjoy a free ride through the next century. Apart from the democracy's inherent difficulties of transplanting it — essentially a Western creation — to parts of the world with different cultures and traditions, democracy will have to run a gauntlet of challenges typical of the change of time. In the meantime the democrats across the world should better perform and deliver. Or else not only a new wave of militarism may sweep the underdeveloped part of the world, the failure on the part of the democrats will invite the risk of variety of other alternative creeds.



## PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

cratic fervour their wills were not reflected when Meghawa whose PDI won 34 per cent — the largest of the popular votes — in June's parliamentary election, could not be elected the republic's President due to a manipulative mechanism of presidential election. Malaysia and Singapore are considered hardly democratic by western standard in spite of their prosperity and success. In South Asia India, the world's largest democracy, went through a decade of turbulence and instability with substantial political decline. However at long last India's 600 million voters seem to have their way with the for-

model". Given the blatant failures on the part of self-serving politicians the military takeover was long overdue in Pakistan even this time by the country's tradition. Whether its fallout both in global and regional context will be like those in the sixties is still undetermined.

However, the highest concentration of self-serving politicians — devoid of political corruption or purpose but entrusted with delicate task after experimentation of democracy — have happened to be in South Asia. From Nepal to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to Pakistan they have made a mockery of

# Selecting a Dream Team

*The selection mechanism has to be smart enough to sift paper tigers and self-servers from the "right stuff". The CE has shown that he could do it in the Army, let him now replicate it in choosing the right people to help him govern Pakistan as Pakistan should be governed, with sincerity aiming for the amelioration of the economic miseries of the people and towards the ultimate purpose of making the country great.*

Mr. Pirzada may be the perfect man for legalising the issues but, as much as Pakistan needs a break, the Chief Executive needs to make a clean break from the past.

As one of Dr. Mohammad Yaqub Khan's constant admirers, one has personally seen him under stress when he had the courage to stand up to what constituted constitutional authority but was remained intent in running riot without economic logic in the financial sphere. He has single-handedly kept monetary supply under check and Pakistan's credibility with the IMF and World Bank going in the face of very severe adverse and negative reports. A man of great integrity and honesty, he nonetheless is associated with the failed policies of yesterdays as well as political governments of both sides of the divide during both his tenures. He has been tough on financial institutions but occasionally not strict enough from saving them from going there. In his defence, he was kept on being second-guessed by political appointees but the business community in general feels he has a penchant for the public sector whereas the need of the hour is to shore up the private sector. One hates to say it because of my personal liking for him but he brings an element of controversy in his bag-

gage, not the least in his direct involvement of the May 28, 1998 foreign exchange ban and the spate of SBP circulars thereafter that confused all and sundry and made the Rupee run riot against the US Dollar for quite some time before it was brought back from a free fall.

No question that the Governors of the Provinces are all rock solid. One will not expect them to be blazing great trails but on the other hand as symbols of the Federation all of them get high marks. One

## AS I SEE IT

### Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

wishes the type of good governance that Lt. Gen Moinuddin Haider set as Sindh Governor is emulated, in fact why he is not in the 'A Team' as yet is a matter of some conjecture. This man set standards that should be an example for others. In that sense, all the Governors are men-of-good standing that reflect the will of the military regime to provide the citizens of Pakistan with an administration that is fair and just. Similarly the Chief Secretaries and Inspectors General of Police are excellent choices to back up the Governors in running the Provincial administrations.

Both the members of the cabinet announced so far, Shaht Aziz as Finance Minister and Abdul Sattar as Foreign Minister, are outstanding. Shaht Aziz could have had the post for the asking three or four political/careerist regimes ago but he has chosen his moment of association with the rulers with care. He is one of Pakistan's success stories in the interna-

tional business arena, well respected not only in the private sector but also among the technocrats of the important world institutions. Similarly Sattar Sahib brings experience, intellectual honesty and commitment to his post as Foreign Minister. As spokesman of Imran Khan's Tehrik-i-Insaaf he was articulate and credible, two very important criteria in the CE's search for talent, which brings us to Ms Maleeha Lodhi's return to Washington as Pakistan's Ambassador, another outstanding selection. She was easily the best Ambassador we ever had in the US Capital and at this crucial time Pakistan needs someone like her to not only blunt the propaganda of an autocratic regime that is sure to be articulated by our many adversaries particularly India, but also to explain credibly in democracy's capital why drastic measures were necessary to make sure Pakistan went into the next millennium as a sovereign independent country with a meaningful democracy in place and not end up in anarchy as in Somalia, Afghanistan, etc. The Accountability Cell has newly appointed Lt. Gen. Syed Mohammad Amjad, a

## 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.

### Collective fine?

Sir, As a household consumer of electricity, I wonder why the AL regime is imposing a collective fine on the public for offences committed by other parties!

Instead of the government doing less business and relying more on the private sector, the big agencies are being bifurcated (DESA, DESCO, and a new transmission company), thereby spreading the virus, thinning the public interest content.

The regime appears to lack political will while approaching the basic and core problems facing the nation. Cosmetic solutions are for show only. There is a simple solution: get unpopularity. It means get tough.

A Zabr  
Dhaka

charges may be withdrawn progressively as the arrears collections rise. The cynics might point out that this is a sort of collective fine on the public for offences committed by other parties!

Meanwhile the Vice Chancellor of BAU appreciating the importance of opening MSc courses at BAU, has constituted a 10-member committee with Prof Dr Golam Ali Fakir, Dean Faculty of Agriculture and Prof Dr Nur Mohammad Talukder, Head Dept of Agri-Chemistry as its chairman and member-secretary respectively to review the present academic position of BAU. The committee has recently visited BAU and discussed

anti-Indian phobia deprive us from some financial benefits, if there are any. Nationalism means you love your nation. It does not mean you hate other nations.

Shafiq Ahmad  
Building No. 75  
Sabat Al Salim  
Kuwait

Sir, I think it's not a wise decision — after 18 years of discussion — the prime minister and her government have taken. In my view, there should be revenue to be imposed by the government for the benefit of tax payers — not only for the truck-owners.

For an amount of Tk. 2000 per annum it's not a good decision.

### MSc course at BAI

Sir, In order to meet the growing demand for specialised scientific manpower in the country's agri-sector, re-opening of MSc courses at Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka has become essential. With this end in view, the principal of BAI, Prof Md Shadat Ulla has initiated a fresh proposal requesting the BAU authority to re-open MSc courses at BAI.

It may be mentioned here that the BAI is currently offering a 4-year BSc (Ag) degree course under the academic control of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Mymensingh.

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### Transshipment to India

Every one must think about the country's interest — not the individuals.

M. Habibullah  
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Toronto, Ontario  
Canada

Sir, The transshipment of Indian goods through our country is not acceptable to me.

Mohammed Mohiuddin  
P.O. Box-30320  
Yanbu Al-Sinaiyah  
Saudi Arabia

various academic matters with the teachers of BAI including BAI Teachers' Association President Prof Dr Md Hazrat Ali and General Secretary Asst. Prof Md Rafiqul Islam.

It is now expected that the BAU authority will soon take the decision to start MSc course initially on certain subjects of agri-science at BAI.

A Zahidul Haque  
Associate Professor  
BAI, Dhaka

### "Think of the Students"

Sir, I would like to thank the DS for the thought-provoking editorial. A teacher must have the vision of his concern for his students. He should not behave like a member of a trade union. It is a pity that a group of teachers always without any genuine reason tends to show solidarity among themselves for a wrong cause at the cost of the students' future life.

Dismissal of a teacher does not justify the resignation of his colleagues en masse.

Abul Ashraf Noor  
Uttara, Dhaka-1230

construction of Jamuna Bridge and other embankment purpose, the Indians denied to give only 19km transit so that they can have a complete monopoly on their products — and unfortunately we had to take that pain.

Therefore on what basis our government wants to give the same Indian a transit of 190km?

Oh yes, you must be thinking: Why not give a chance to the country that helped us achieve the independence? For that question, I have to say that India never would have come forward to help Bangladesh if it wouldn't have effected Pakistan. Their main intention was to weaken Pakistan which they did.

Tanvir Ahmed  
Australia

## OPINION

### How Can We Rid Bangladesh of Hartals?

A.H. Jaffor Ullah

BEFORE this year's monsoon season could hardly sign off for the year, Bangladesh's opposition parties and their leaders are ecstatic over the prospect of another banner season for hartal. Starting from September, the opposition leaders have given their clarion calls for hartal. Hartal news is dominating the news media of Bangladesh. As I browse through the Internet edition of all English newspapers, what I see is not a pretty picture. The news depresses my mental faculties. My mind gets numb. I therefore, lament and say — "Is this why we worked so hard during the turbulent nine-month period in 1971?"

The year 1971, a watershed in the nation's history, brought happiness and joy to our heart. Although I was physically far away from the epicenter of our freedom struggle, I worked with my fellow Bangalee students in America all through the nine-month period risking expulsion from the graduate school only to make sure that an independent Bangladesh could be a reality. At the time, I never thought for a moment that our Sonar Bangla would be transformed into a terror-ridden nation by the cumulative action of a handful of politicians.

Sometimes wonder why these politicians are hell-bent on destroying the fragile economy of this impoverished country of about 125 million people. How can a handful of them inflict such a devastation and wreckage to this nation? Don't they have hearts? What will it take to make them understand that hartal is bad news for everyone? No one wants it. Most ordinary folks in the cities simply stay inside their homes not to get hurt. I had the chance to read a letter written to the editor of an English news daily in Dhaka by a hartal victim. The reader had a harrowing experience. He was riding a car. The car was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Without their knowledge, the car ran

into a torch procession when a ten-inch brick shattered the windshield of the automobile injuring both the driver and the passengers. What a madness! If this event had taken place in any western nation, the party calling the torch procession would be liable for the damage. I wonder why victims do not go the court seeking retribution. Bangladesh has most certainly criminal laws in her book. Also, there ought to be some decent lawyers eager to take on the leaders of any political party to court that calls these inane hartals.

Any party calling hartal in the nation should be deemed liable for any death, bodily injury, and property destruction caused directly or indirectly by these hartals. A free country does not mean that political parties are above the law. Individual rights, property rights, etc. should take precedence over rights of any political party to enact hartals. A country that cannot protect the rights of individuals irrespective of the person's stature should not call it a democratic country.

This scribe suggests that some law organization should entice hartal victims to go for a "Class Action Law Suit" asking an astronomical sum of money as reparation for their sufferings. This will have two immediate effects. One, political parties will learn the lesson that they are not above the law. Second, some leaders may have hard times paying an exorbitant sum of money; some may have to face bitter sentences in case they cannot pay the fine. Everyone in a society understands what laws should do provided the law is strictly enforced. In Bangladesh, we have to strengthen our court system. Believe me, the hartal culture of Bangladesh can be restrained with one thing and that is the law. Why don't we give law a chance to produce some result?

The writer is a senior research scientist in America (New Orleans, Louisiana).