

What is the Point?

TODAY'S hartal has taken the nation by surprise. The air being thick with the opposition's jugglery 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 Juba League leader in Uttara were shot dead. None has been arrested.

According to Khokon's family sources, the culprits are local hoodlums of Guntiher 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.

IN the wake of the demise of the cold war Francis Fukuyama's 'end of the history' prognosticating the democracy's triumph as ultimate creed of mankind took the world by storm. Years later President Bill Clinton declared during his second inaugural address that 'for the first time in all history more people on the planet live under democracy than dictatorship'. The New York Times after a careful scrutiny of the claim confirmed 3.1 billion people to be living under democracies and another 2.66 billion under authoritarian systems.

About a decade before, indeed there was a mood of triumphalism for democracy with the fall of authoritarian regimes across the world and a great majority of third world countries either practicing or professing democracies. This was a peak that democracy could never scale during its long chequered history since the creed's inception in Greek city states 2500 years ago. As regards the non-conformists it was earnestly hoped that the majoritarian propensity would ultimately result in the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. Yet, far from an euphoria, the winners of the long struggle for democracy observe at the threshold of the new millennium only a guarded optimism for the future of democracy. This is not without reasons.

At the turn of the century in 1900 people believed in the inevitability of a democratic efflorescence even more firmly because its prospects looked brighter with the coming of an age of peace and reasoning after protracted upheavals during the previous century. Looking back it may be shocking to recall just

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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.

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the decade the defiances 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 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.

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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 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

model". Given the blatant failures 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.

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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 disconcerting 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. 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 regional context will be like those in the sixties is still undetermined.

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man of fine reputation, to run it. To assist him the Chief Executive has brought Maj. Gen (Retd) Inayatullah Khan Niazi, an unbending person of outstanding integrity and character.

Overall the selection of individuals has been very much on the plus side, an "A" for effort and perspicacity. It also spells out the fact that the motives are sincere and in line with the pledges made by the Chief Executive. What we need is simply the best, we need A-plus all the time. We cannot afford "B" standards. Having reached rock bottom, in the CE's words, we have nowhere but to go up. In that we need all the help we can get from the outstanding talent that is available and that is in the form of a 'dream team' that can perform. There will be many people who push themselves forward, to paraphrase John Kennedy, asking not what they can do for Pakistan but what Pakistan can do for them; the CE has to watch out for such job-seekers full time. 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.

Democracy Under Assault?

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PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz



Selecting a Dream Team

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AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

gaze, 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.

Both Dr Attiya Inayatullah and Mr. Iftikhar Sahibzada are personalities of some stature that bring no hiccups to the sanctity of the NSC. Gen Musharraf has shown sagacity by including a woman in this high forum, particularly someone who has experience both internationally and domestically on matters of social importance. Mr. Iftikhar Sahibzada has been a man of great integrity and honesty, a bureaucrat far above par.

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

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, Shaukat Aziz as Finance Minister and Abdul Sattar as Foreign Minister, are outstanding. Shaukat Aziz could have had the post for the asking three or four political/caretaker 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-

national 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-Insaf 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

man of fine reputation, to run it. To assist him the Chief Executive has brought Maj. Gen (Retd) Inayatullah Khan Niazi, an unbending person of outstanding integrity and character.

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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 Bangladeshi 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.

I 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 in Dhaka during a hartal. The car was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Without their knowledge, the car ran