

Dialogue at Any Cost

WE find no words strong enough to record our shock and outrage at the news that BNP leader Sadek Hossain Khoka received bullet injuries during hartal yesterday. We condemn this police action.

It is highly regrettable that this should have happened closely on the heels of the Prime Minister's open-ended offer for conciliatory talks with the opposition at a time and place, and on a list of agenda of the latter's choosing. The PM even expressed her willingness to discuss the one-point demand of the opposition, meaning the resignation of her government, obviously as a precursor to early elections.

Yet, we realise that while those who fired at the BNP leader must be severely punished, the PM's updated dialogue offer, crucial as it is at this juncture, need not get shot down because of yesterday's incident.

The PM's offer professedly addressed the central demand of the Opposition — namely, early elections. No impediment to dialogue should be considered too insurmountable by the opposition to spurn it. That will amount to throwing the baby with the bath water. The opposition should seriously consider the window of opportunity opened by the offer for talks without being a stickler for any precondition. That ought not to be there following the government's express willingness to discuss even its own resignation to be followed by fresh polls.

Let's suggest a check-list of do's and don'ts for the ruling party and the opposition towards fostering the right kind of environment for the talks to ensue.

It is imperative for government leaders and high AL party functionaries to stop: (a) all police action against the opposition; (b) arresting any opposition leader or activist from a rally or elsewhere and (c) making slanderous remarks against or critical references to any opposition leader, top-side or mid-ranking. In fact by way of a confidence-building measure, the government should actively think of releasing detainees kept under political considerations, covert or overt. They could also stay the cases where opposition followers are involved.

The opposition for its part should take up the dialogue process seriously. Working out the modalities for a dialogue could take a long time if efforts are not consciously made to shorten the process. This has to be borne in mind for the sake of an early dialogue materialising to replace the state of high-voltage confrontation raging between the AL and the BNP.

Wise Decision, Indeed

AFTER months of intense debate, controversy and speculation, the government has finally backed out from its hitherto hard-line stand on the issue of constructing an international convention centre at the Osmany Udyan. Its change of heart, though many may feel inclined to interpret it as caving in under pressure, is praiseworthy all the same. Our heartfelt congratulations to the government for not compromising public interest for its own political egoism. What's more, the decision to shift the site of the Bangabandhu Convention Centre for the upcoming Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit from Osmany Udyan to Sher-e-Bangla Nagar strongly reflects the state machinery's eco-consciousness. It is not a political issue and has never been. Indeed, the ruling party deserves a pat on the back for looking at it through a proper perspective.

Basically, the credit for saving the greenery at the Udyan goes to the members of the civil society who doggedly pursued the cause ever since the government plan was aired. Through a string of such programmes as sit-in, human chain, demonstration etc., they successfully mobilised people from all walks of life behind a just cause. The revision of the government's plan is an acknowledgment of their tenacity and, more importantly, the cause they had made their own.

From the very outset this paper has been vocal against environmental degradation in general and mooted annihilation of the Osmany Udyan in particular. Through reports, news analyses, articles and editorial comments, we did try to highlight the disastrous effect that construction of the convention centre at the Udyan would have on the environment at the city-centre. Fortunately, our efforts coupled with the sustained movement by the civil society have had the desired effect. The government has realised in time the mistakes it was about to make. Once again, we thank the government for correctly discerning what is in best public interest.

Recruitment at JU

THE already vitiated atmosphere of Jahangirnagar University seems to have been tarnished further by the decision of its vice chancellor to appoint eight teachers on ad hoc basis even as the institution remains closed sine die. The VC, who had already allegedly responsible for some ills of this august institution, has apparently bared his knuckles again. He has taken undue advantage of the 1973 University Act whereby the VC is empowered to appoint teachers on ad hoc basis for the immediate needs of any department if the process of recruitment turned out to be lengthy. Since the University is in indefinite recess the VC cannot justify the urgency for his having recruited those eight teachers in question. The president of the JU Teachers' Association has strongly criticised the action of the Vice Chancellor saying that the VC has broken all previous records regarding appointment of teachers on ad hoc basis. It has also protested the appointments suggesting that those were made on political considerations.

The report published in The Daily Star on Monday said that a teacher, appointed on the recommendation of her chairman husband of the same department, had been rejected three earlier on. Two lecturers were appointed in Archaeology Department though they were supposed to appear before a selection committee on 9 November. An alleged anti-social element, rejected on an earlier occasion, was appointed to the IR department though he did not purportedly have graduation or masters degree in International Relations.

All these actions of the VC are suspected by his detractors to be aimed at improving his support base for the next elections to the VC panel and for the teachers' representatives to the Syndicate.

We strongly feel that those ad hoc appointments should be reviewed for what they are worth with steps taken to test them against set standards for recruitment.

Can We Stop Hartals by Reducing Government-term?

by Dr Nazrul Islam

The current government was elected with a constitutionally mandated term of five years. So this government has the right to remain in power until the completion of the term. Of course, a government has the option to call elections before they are due. In fact, the Prime Minister herself some time back publicly toyed with the idea of holding national elections in 2000 instead of in 2001. Whether she will do so or not is her own prerogative

THE menace of continuous hartals is threatening Bangladesh again. The opposition parties have now decided not to participate in any of the upcoming local elections. Instead they have settled on one-point demand, namely resignation of the government and holding of mid-term parliamentary elections. What this means is that the country is again faced with the prospect of a long phase of either continuous or at least continual hartals.

The government in turn has proclaimed that it will resist the opposition's one-point demand. The ruling party appears to be gearing up resistance to the opposition programmes on the street. Given stiff resistance by the government, and given widespread public apathy towards politics, it is not clear whether the opposition will be successful in achieving its one-point demand even if it pressed ahead with a programme of hartals. However, the point is not whether the one-point movement will succeed in forcing the government to resign. The point is that no matter whether it succeeds or not, such a movement based on hartals will cause serious damage to Bangladesh's economy and society.

It has been reported that the government is considering building 'Garments Patti' alongside Dhaka-Chittagong Highway and keeping the highway unaffected by hartal so that the garment exporters can continue to meet the shipping deadlines. These are certainly interesting ideas. However, as The Daily Star has noted in its editorial (November 2, 1999) these ideas do not address the root of the problem, namely the cause of the hartal menace itself.

The people are deeply frustrated with the political parties' inability to practice a healthy form of competition. The business community is getting angry. The donor community is feeling dejected. The public yearns for a relief from this destructive politics. Prof. Yunus expressed this feeling well when in his recent (Justice Muhammad Ibrahim memorial) lecture he put the question: 'When will the nation be relieved of this shorbonasha rajnit?'

Different Ideas to Mitigate "Hartal" Problem

Many ideas have been so far

expressed to mitigate the hartal problem. These ideas may be classified into several types. The first of these is in the nature of appeals and exhortations. For example, Prof. Rehman Sobhan in a recent article (The Daily Star, April 27, 1999) rightly noted that, 'It is unheard of in any political dispensation that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition never have any political dialogue.' He therefore suggested that, 'Here again the ice has to be broken by the ruling party. I would thus expect the Prime Minister to drop in uninvited to talk to the leader of the opposition.' Similar suggestions have also been made many times by The Daily Star editorials.

A second type of ideas is of judicial nature. In fact, Bangladesh High Court itself initiated a suo-moto process to bring political parties to the court and account for their behavior. Dr. Jaffer Ullah, a regular contributor to The Daily Star, has suggested that the victims of hartal should file suit against the political parties in court and seek hefty compensation.

The third type of ideas advocates generation of social pressure. For example, suggestions have been made that the business communities should stop patronizing (giving funds) to political parties until they shun hartal. Similarly, the electorate has been advised to act against the party calling most hartals, etc.

The fourth type of ideas is of institutional nature. Here the idea is to make such institutional changes that will remove or weaken the root causes of continuous hartals. One such idea is to shorten the government-term. For example, in a Daily Star article (December 9, 1998) the current author suggested shortening the government-term from current five-year to four years. Why and how such a change can mitigate the root cause of continuous hartals were detailed out in that article. As we shall see, other institutional ideas have also been voiced.

All these different ideas have merit and deserve due consideration. In many respects, these are complementary instead of being mutually exclusive. What is however important to note is that many of the other proposed measures may remain ineffective unless appropriate institutional changes are made. That is the reason why attention needs to be focused on the necessary institutional change.

Importance of Institutional Change

An analogy with the demand for elections under caretaker government can illustrate the point. This demand arose from the fact or perception that the incumbent political parties in Bangladesh unduly influence election results. Again, there could be many different approaches to this problem. One could appeal to the political parties not to do so. One could suggest taking instances of electoral malpractice to the court. One could also suggest putting social pressure on the political parties. However, Bangladesh's experience as a nation showed that all these measures, while helpful, could not solve the problem. There had to be an institutional change to overcome it. This change came in the form of a constitutional amendment requiring parliamentary elections to be held under neutral caretaker government. So far Bangladesh had two elections under caretaker governments. The first one was held even before the above amendment was passed. The election of 1991 gave victory to the BNP. The election of 1996 gave victory to the Awami League. On both occasions the defeated parties had complaints about the fairness of the elections. However, the complaints were not of such order as to prompt them to challenge the overall results. In other words, the institutional change worked.

The same is the situation with the hartal problem. Appeals, threat of judicial re-

course, generation of social pressure will all be helpful. However, the Gordian knot will not be cut unless the necessary institutional change is made. In the case of the hartal problem, the most important institutional change has to be shortening of the government-term. This needs to be accompanied by a few other changes discussed below.

Increasing Support for Reduction of Government-term

It is heartening to note that the idea of institutional change as a way to overcome the hartal problem is gaining support. For example, Mr. F. H. Abed, Managing Director of BRAC, in a recent interview with The Daily Star (April 9, 1999) expressed the following view: 'I think that if we had general elections every four years, including all other local government elections, under a neutral caretaker government, so no elections take place under any government other than a neutral caretaker government, whether it is general election, council election or municipal elections, that will seem to circumvent the idea of having mid-term elections.' Thus we see that Mr. Abed is favouring shortening of government-term to four years. In addition, he is suggesting another institutional change, namely bunching of elections. Such bunching is very common in the developed democracies. For example, in the US it is a common practice to hold national, state, and local elections on the same day. For Bangladesh, as Mr. Abed rightly argued, such bunching will take away to a great extent the sources of political strife during the regular term of a government. In the same interview, Mr. Abed suggested another institutional measure, namely abolition of by-elections. The political parties can be given the power to nominate someone to replace the members of the vacant seats. Again, developed democracies can provide relevant example. In the US no by-elections are held for

pre-maturely vacant Senate seats. Instead, the governor of the state nominates somebody for that seat to serve as the Senator for the remainder of the term.

Other perceptive people in Bangladesh are also recognizing the potentiality of institutional changes as a way of overcoming political volatility. For example, Prof. Rehman Sobhan in the article mentioned above noted that, 'To attempt to unseat an elected government before its five years are up, no matter how unsatisfactory its performance, reflects an unseemly impatience for power by the opposition and a reluctance to accept the rules of the democratic process. If five years is seen as too long to permit for the persistence of misgovernance, we can amend the constitution to set a three-year tenure of office. But this process has to be done legally with backing from a political consensus reached through national dialogue.' (The Daily Star, April 27, 1999). Mr. Abdul Awal Minto, the FBCCI president, has also made statements suggesting reduction of the government-term to even only two years.

The exact length by which the government-term should be reduced can of course be further discussed. There are instances in developed democracies of government-term shorter than four years. For example, in Australia the government-term runs only for three years. However, in the context of Bangladesh a term less than four years may prove to be too short. In Bangladesh, there is now the provision of caretaker government to be installed ninety days before the election. This means that even with a four-year period, the effective term will be three year and nine months. Hence under Bangladesh's circumstances, a four-year term may be more appropriate. It is not by happenstance that the opposition parties' one-point movement is crystallizing in the fourth year of the government. This demand did not emerge or firm up during the second or the third

year of the term. It is the fourth year that seems to be something of a Rubicon in Bangladesh politics beyond which lies only strife. Bangladesh's opposition politicians' patience simply does not last into the fifth year. It is in the best interest of the nation to constitutionally take that year out of the government-term.

What Can the Prime Minister Do?

The Prime Minister has been trying to stop hartals. She has announced that in future the Awami League will never call hartal even when it is in opposition. That is indeed a very binding commitment. However, even such commitments are not proving effective. Prime Minister's appeals to the opposition to shun hartals are going unheeded. It is therefore clear that she has to do something else if she wants to save the country from the hartal menace. Being in power, she bears more responsibility for the overall situation of the country. If the economy suffers as a result of hartals and political strife then the performance of her government will be hurt. The Prime Minister took the lead in bringing about the constitutional amendment requiring elections to be held under caretaker government. She can take a similar lead in introducing another constitutional amendment bill that will reduce the government-term, bunch national and local elections together, and do away with by-elections. The opposition parties in turn should participate in the discussion of such a bill and help in its ultimate adoption.

The thorny question that remains is what happens to the term of the current government. The current government was elected with a constitutionally mandated term of five years. So this government has the right to remain in power until the completion of the term. Of course, a government has the option to call elections before they are due. In fact, the Prime Minister herself some time back publicly toyed with the idea of holding national elections in 2000 instead of in 2001. Whether she will do so or not is her own prerogative. We can certainly hope that she will do what is the best for the nation.

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Tangail By-election

Awami League versus Awami League!

By Mansoor Mamoon

If Kader Siddiqui could come out victorious, the history will be different. Hence in the final analysis the stakes of both the Awami League and Kader Siddiqui are, indeed, too high. For Kader Siddiqui it will be a question of his political survival and for the Awami League, to continue keeping it unscathed

NOVEMBER 15 by-election in the Tangail-Shakhpur constituency in Tangail district might well mark a turning point not only for the ruling Awami League, but for the future course of Bangladesh's national politics as well. Incidentally, the Awami League had started its journey from Tangail back in 1950 with unprecedented victory in a similar by-election by a dissident ruling Muslim League activist late Shamsul Haque, who along with late Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani floated the new opposition party, the first viable one in erstwhile East Bengal (East Pakistan) with the disgruntled elements of the then Muslim League. It is said that history repeats itself and ironically history is being repeated in very same Tangail with the ruling party rebel leader Kader Siddiqui, since expelled for openly criticising the Prime Minister for what he termed as her cronyism, corruption and highhanded rule, is challenging his own party leadership. Ironically, when late Shamsul Haque challenged the then Muslim League leadership he also used almost the same languages Kader Siddiqui is uttering now.

Kader Siddiqui has admittedly set a unique example. He resigned from his parliamentary seat and is seeking re-election to show that in being expelled from the party on whose ticket he sought popular mandate he has forfeited his right to cling to the position of lawmaker of that party. His decision to re-seek the confidence of the voters, therefore, sans his former party identity, will go

down in the history of Bangladesh as very much in conformity with the spirit and principles of democracy. In the past, particularly during the successive regimes of General Ershad and Begum Khaleda Zia, lawmakers conveniently switched party affiliations with impunity or delayed legal verdict without either bothering for constitutional obligations in this regard or for the voters' opinion. Even during the time of this regime also two BNP lawmakers were inducted in the cabinet setting the worst example of betrayal of the party which nominated them as well as that of the voters whose mandate they were elected. The Election Commission has in a recent judgement under directive from the Supreme Court cancelled their membership. Kader Siddiqui has not only renounced the party to which he originally belonged and with whose ticket he was elected but also his membership in Parliament. After surmounting lot of impediments allegedly created by the administration if finally Kader Siddiqui is re-elected the shock-wave that it will generate will be simply tremendous for the ruling party leadership. In the event of such a development the by-election though will not be the Waterloo

for the Awami League, its impact will, however, be far reaching for the party as well as on the country's overall political scenario.

Kader Siddiqui has let it be amply known that the by-election is a fight between the 'genuine' Awami Leaguers (meaning his own) versus the 'unwholesome' Awami Leaguers (under Sheikh Hasina's leadership). Political observers are apt to describe in a jocular vein the engagement as between an Awami League versus Awami League one. The ruling party leadership is prone to dismiss any rebellion in the party as ineffective citing the example of Dr Kamal Hossain who broke away after the 1991 general election and the eventual return of the Mohiuddin-Razzak BAKSALites to original fold. It is further vociferous in its claim that such individualistic dissidence will do no harm to what it describes as the 'largest mass organisation' in the country. When late Shamsul Haque challenged the Muslim League in 1950 he was also poohpoohed in an identical manner as Kader Siddiqui's prospect are being viewed in a contemptuous manner by the present Awami League leadership. Kader Siddiqui has already spelt out

his next course of action.

He will convene a separate council of the Awami League, expel whom he describes as the fake Awami Leaguers (as they did in his case) and reorganise and revitalise the party imbued with spirit of the War of Liberation and the ideals of his leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. If he wins the election he is likely to get the support of some more Awami Leaguers who feel deprived and are sitting on the fence. Apart from getting the support of the freedom fighters and common people in his constituency, Kader Siddiqui is also counting on the tacit backing of the BNP and the Jatitya Party (Ershad faction) as well as the Gono Forum led by Dr. Kamal Hossain. In support of Kader Siddiqui the main intention is to see a possible split in the Awami League and to see its relegation further.

Shamsul Haque's victory in the 1950 by-election inspired the opposition parties to form the United Front which swept the 1954 general elections. Kader Siddiqui's victory is likely to demoralise the Awami Leaguers to some extent and prompt the opposition parties to forge strong alliance and fuel their current one-point movement for the ouster of the gov-

ernment. It is true that one by-election will not be a determining factor for the future of the Awami League as one may does not make a sunshine. But the by-poll in Tangail will have a different connotation and its fall-out will be long lasting if the outcome goes against the ruling party. Probably realising this, the party in power has thrown all its weight for returning its candidate and a door to door campaign has ensued. It resembles a hand to hand battle. Top brasses in the government including the Prime Minister have visited the area and allegations of breach of code of election conduct have been raised against them at the Election Tribunal. All eyes are now focused on the by-election in Tangail.

But supposing Kader Siddiqui fails to return... A valiant freedom fighter as he had been in 1971, will he grace-

fully accept defeat yet another example of upholding democratic culture or will he raise the old bogey of subtle rigging like the defeated candidates in all elections irrespective of party affiliation? Any attempt on his part to destabilise post-by-poll scenario in Tangail will not create much impact. Localised issues normally do not create stirrings on the national level. Minus organisational strength no issue or agenda can be pushed to the desired target. Kader Siddiqui resembles David of the Goliath-like organisational strength of the Awami League. David, however, vanquished Goliath and if Kader Siddiqui could come out victorious, the history will be different. Hence in the final analysis the stakes of both the Awami League and Kader Siddiqui are, indeed, too high. For Kader Siddiqui it will be a question of his political survival and for the Awami League, to continue keeping it unscathed. Only time will say which way the political wind will blow.

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Honest Abe and Me

THE latest literary scandal concerns the biography of Ronald Reagan titled 'Dutch,' Edmund Morris, a distinguished historian, has admitted to having a bad time recording Reagan's life, so he decided to invent a fictitious character — himself — and wrote about all he good times he and Dutch had together.

It has been a lively topic of conversation in literary circles ever since. If Morris invented himself, how can we be sure he didn't invent the entire book? I must admit, I see nothing wrong with what he did. The reason is that I have been working on a biography of Abraham Lincoln, and recently when I hit a stone wall I decided to put myself in the book as one of Abe's dearest friends.

This is where I have gotten so far. 'Abe Lincoln was born next to our log cabin in Kentucky on Feb. 12, 1809, and we became bosom pals soon after. The two of us walked two miles to school every morning and two miles home in the evening just in time to chop down trees. Abe and I studied law and then formed the firm of Buchwald and Lincoln, specializing in civil rights cases.'

Then he fell in love with Mary Todd, a girlfriend I introduced to him. 'In 1856 I urged Lincoln to run for the US Senate. Lincoln lost, so he decided to run for president, a campaign I can take complete credit for.'

At my urging, Lincoln came out against slavery, and Southern states withdrew from the Union. 'Then we had a war between the states, and I served as Lincoln's chief of staff. I also wrote the Gettysburg Address at his request.'

During the conflict I urged Lincoln to forgive it was a good idea and adopted the Emancipation Proclamation, which I had written to my wife earlier in the war. 'On April 14, 1865, I stopped by the White House and said, "You folks interested in catching a show at Ford's Theater?" "What is it?" Abe asked. "It's called "Our American Cousin." It got very good reviews. "Lincoln thought it was a good idea."

That is all I've written so far. But Abe's biography makes more sense with me as a character in it. The title I've come up with is, 'Honest Abe and Me: From One Rail-Splitter to Another.'

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.

To the Editor...

National Water Policy

Sir, It is encouraging that we now have a National Water Policy. It is a flexible policy and is subject to review and modification as need arises. WARPO is now busy in formulating National Water Management Plan based on the National Water Policy. WARPO is also busy in involving increased number of people in preparing the National Water Management Plan. To that end as per news report in The Daily Star dated 7/11/99, workshops are being held at six Divisional Headquarters.

I would like to point out a gap that is apparent in the adopted policy. This is in respect of article 4.15, Research and Information Management. In the sub-article 4.15(k), the policy statement says: a central and comprehensive database and database management system will be built by collecting information and data from the existing organisations. This is very good, but then what about the existing data collecting organisations? They have not been covered under the umbrella of National Water Policy.

Of the existing organisations responsible for water-sector data-collection, Hydrology Department of BWDB is a major data-collection agency. With the increasing demand on water resources management, more

sophisticated and reliable data are now required and modern-day data-collection technology to meet this challenge need trained and professional people. Although there had been substantial efforts in this field but there has not been any sustainable improvement due to institutional shortcomings.

In the policy statement and also in the ensuing National Water Management Plan, this gap should be adequately dealt with so that necessary institutional environment is available for the sustained development of manpower and technology.

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Dirty politics

Sir, It seems that hartal has become a part of our daily life. Awami League had called 173 days hartal in the regime of the past government and now the opposition is following suit. Many of them could have been avoided if the government had been a bit tolerant.

Destruction of public property during hartal is most objectionable. The newly built Binaman office in Chittagong which cost crores of taka was burnt down and the railway station, a dream fulfilled for the people of

Chittagong suffered destruction in the hands of the picketers during the hartal days of the past government.

Should the present opposition destroy garbage truck of city corporation though it is nothing compared with what happened in the tenure of the past government — still we protest this. They have no right to destroy public property.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Good game!

Sir, It was a sensational draw with England A by the Bangladesh cricket team. I think, this is another step closer to Test cricket. I hope within three or four years, we will be able to reach our target. My greetings to Khed Masood for his unbeaten 103.

Jewel
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Kidnapping school kids

Sir, The recent kidnapping incidents on the Dhaka University campus have affected the image of the university. As a student of DU, I do feel

embarrassed, although the general students have no connection with this. I have no language to condemn this act of barbarism. Some non-student political activists, the authority and the law-enforcing agency are responsible for these acts.

When at a time the confrontational politics, forceful occupation of residential halls and toll collection had shattered the image of the Arts Faculty, we felt proud of our Science Faculty, which is free from these. A recently appointed protest at the Karzon Hall has taken personal initiatives to drive out all non-student political cadres out from the main building. General students felt proud of his brave initiative and congratulated him. Although the goons are driven out from the main building, they have taken shelter in the extension dormitory, which is very close to the main building.

The resident-students are under the impression that recent incidents are being taking place in collaboration with those goons.

I want to draw attention of the Vice Chancellor to take necessary steps.

Hamidur Rahman
An embarrassed
Science faculty student.