

Gory and Weird It Gets

OUR Thursday evening desk processing material for the Friday's special issue of the paper got momentarily stuck with by two gory photographs the like of which it had never before been confronted with. The snaps were of two harte victims taken by our own photojournalist, Nasu Miah, a truck-driver was an appallingly unrecognisable charred coil, thanks to the petrol bomb hurled at him by some demon of 'an unidentified person'. And a minor boy hit by bomb splinters lay prostrate on the clutching hands of two rescuers with his innards in a splotch, out in the small, tender mid-riff.

We thought the first snap-shot was much too shocking for the human sensibilities to bear up with deciding in the end not to publish it at all. But we carried the boy's photograph to convey a sense of how dastardly the assault on innocent people gets these days during a general strike. Increasingly hartal-related violence is taking on gory and weird forms as described above, to say nothing of pedal and autorickshaws being abruptly picked on and set ablaze with their operators roughed up to virtual cripplement. Hartal not only denies poor, daily wage earners their means of livelihood on the day but also turns them into victims of clashes between pro- and anti-hartal activists. Recently hartals have been marked by a mixed situation in which people have shown a tendency to come out on the street just as the others preferred to stay put in to avoid trouble. They want their rights to be exercised freely without anybody trying to force any issue through intimidation, provocation and coercion. But what they see is an apparently trifurcated fight taking place among the opposition activists, anti hartalists and the police, the last named allegedly being harsh on the first-named elements. And what the innocent people suffer is a bullet injury, a bomb blast or a beating spree, having been caught in the crossfire of AL-opposition activism. Name-calling does not help identify who hurled the bomb or fired the gunshot; for, in an anarchic situation it is easy to hide behind the smokescreen with potential saboteurs angling in the troubled waters.

Given the mounting hartal-centred violence, the opposition will do well for its image to stop magnifying the 'technical grounds' to overlook the prospect of a dialogue that remains intrinsically strengthened by the PM's unconditional offer for talks. All that the PM needs to do now is to make a formal approach to the opposition leader and see what happens.

Voters' List & ID Card

GIVEN the Election Commission's dismal handling of the voter identity card project, which has missed several deadlines since its inception back in 1995, the Tk 69 crore new voters' list venture cannot but induce apprehension of yet another debacle. That the EC has not learnt any lesson from the voter ID card misery is poignantly reflected in its decision to undertake a new challenge before the one in hand has been completed. What's more, simultaneous pursuit of these two projects could very well widen the margin of error and create more confusion.

Admittedly, the voter identity card project hit more snags than the EC people may have expected. Launched four and a half years ago, it was suspended for little less than two years because of a probe into allegations of gross irregularities. That was only the start. At the operational level, there has been utter mismanagement. Collecting information and taking photographs have progressed at a snail's pace throughout, resulting in one missed deadline after another. Till date, the struggle continues and a substantial segment of more than six crore eligible voters is yet to be covered. To make matters worse, the ID cards so far distributed, many contain errors that hinge on the ludicrous. On the whole, it has been a miserable tale of poor planning and even poorer execution.

Against this backdrop, the new voter list project may not inspire confidence, but this is something we should not take chances with anymore. In fact, we are in a race with time to prepare the new voters' list as a pre-requisite for the issuance of fault-free ID cards to voters before the new general election commences. Unless we can avoid the past pitfalls the chances of success with the proposed exercise are slim.

Degree Exam Chaos

THE 1999 degree examinations (Pass & Certificate) under the National University (Jatiya Bishwabidyalaya) commence today amidst unprecedented chaos, according to press reports. But fortunately the students are not responsible for such a situation, at least this time around.

The confusion in which this important series of examinations for about two hundred and seventy-five thousand boys and girls is being held is the creation of an inept and inefficient management at the university. The admit and registration cards for the students are allegedly full of mistakes and there is also a short supply of answer scripts. Half of the 134 centres, till Friday, did not receive the answer scripts. A number of reasons have been cited by the authorities for the indiscrepancies, the major one relating to the computerisation of admit cards for the first time and also short supply of printing paper from the Karnaphuli Paper Mills due to lack of funds. Furthermore, the centres were not even timely asked to collect whatever answer scripts were ready for delivery. The University authority said that they had issued instructions to the centres to rectify the faults in the admit and registration cards and hoped to solve the problems by Saturday night.

This is not for the first time that the National University is conducting degree exams. But the chaos and confusion dogging the examinations this year speak ill of the administrative and organisational capabilities of the authority. We believe that examination fees were realised from the students in advance, yet shortage of funds was cited as the main reason for not getting paper for answer scripts from the KPM. Why? Apart from the fees from students why must an important national institution suffer from lack of funds for conducting its examinations? We suggest the Education Ministry and the University Grants Commission take appropriate measures to prevent future mismanagement of degree exams.

APPARENTLY it looks odd, and even unbelievable that the majority of the Australians have gone for 'monarchy' to continue their 200-year old 'royal link' with the British Crown, although opinion polls have till recently shown that less than 10 p.c. are in favour of monarchy. But in reality it seems to have happened in Australia through a nation-wide referendum. Was it not magical? Did any magician's wand work there? Very silly question, no doubt. But let us begin calling a spade a spade. Then we might reach some broad conclusions.

On paper it is true that 55 p.c. of the total voters, numbering some 12.3 million, two-thirds of the total population of 19 million, recently voted 'No' on the Republicans' 'Yes' campaign in the recently held historic referendum on whether to become a republic, shattering the long cherished dream of the Republicans to turn the table by making the country a republic early next century. When 33 out of a total of 54 Commonwealth member-countries, have become republics, by cutting their 'umbilical cord' with the British crown, it appeared to be a 'queer pitch' for Australia to go wild for this 'anachronism' of 'democracy and monarchy', and that also on the eve of the new millennium.

Powerful Republican Front Goes Phut

The republican front although appeared to be stronger than monarchists, as it was lined up with heavy-weights of the Australian political scene

mostly from the Labour and Liberal Parties. Among the celebrities were four former Prime Ministers, including Bob Hawke of Labour, and two former bitter rivals, Labour's Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, said to be antagonists in 1975 constitutional crisis that actually started the first discontent with the existing system. Besides, in a rare display of political unity, three quarters of the members of the Federal Parliament, including the Labour Opposition leader Kim Beazley, jumped on the bandwagon of the Republicans' 'yes' campaign. As against this 'array' of republican forces the monarchists' 'No' campaign was led by the present Prime Minister John Howard of the Conservative Party. But such a huge and strong build-up of the republican campaign went phut most unexpectedly as something went wrong somewhere, may be down the line of the Republicans themselves.

"Rigging of the Referendum Question?"

After winning the referendum, Prime Minister Howard declared that the people have rejected the Republic proposal. Thus the results of the referendum have undoubtedly given a

Post-referendum Australia

Democracy, Monarchy and the Down Under

by A M M Shahabuddin

It is clear from the post-referendum statements and reactions of the Republican leadership that they are not going to accept the results of the referendum with humble submission as fait accompli. They have already announced to revive the campaign in favour of the republic. Under a new coalition of different Republican groups, the Australian Republican Coalition (ARC) has announced they would now fight for a directly elected President before 2005.

'breathing space', at least for some time to come, for British monarchy to continue to 'reign' in Australia. The Republican leadership, on the other hand, had conceded defeat, but with a strong note of criticism and dissent. They accused Howard of 'rigging of the referendum question'. Bob Hawke, however, insisted that 'a clear majority of the Australians are in favour of a republic and are cutting the ties with the crown'. He also asked Howard to take note of the results in Sydney, Howard's own constituency, where 55 p.c. voted for Republic. And the most amazing thing is that the results of the referendum could go so topsy-turvy when less than 10 p.c. of the people supported monarchy as an institution and almost the entire print media throughout the Federation was in favour of Republic.

As an agency report said: 'It is hard to find a single newspaper in the six state (provincial) capitals that does not oppose what is seen as an anachronism of England's queen Elizabeth II serving as Australia's head of state in a new millennium'.

Now let us examine the 'referendum question' which has become now so controversial. In fact, it is not the 'rigging' of the poll itself, but 'rigging of the

referendum question' which has now brought the Republicans to their senses. The referendum question which was 'framed' very cleverly by John Howard after last year's constitutional convention held in capital Canberra, asked Australians to vote 'yes' or 'no' to a simple question: 'Whether they wanted a president elected by a two-thirds majority of the Federal Parliament'. So the answer before the enlightened voters was simple: 'Whether they wanted an indirectly elected President or not and nothing else. And there lied the 'catch'. The Republicans either had to accept the Howard 'framed' question willingly or unwillingly because of their own internal differences, or they accepted it being over-confident of their 'victory', sweeping the popular votes in favour of the Republic. But the voters were more enlightened and conscious than what the Republican campaigners thought of them. As majority of the voters favoured a directly elected President by the people, they 'ditched' the 'referendum question' on indirectly elected President.

Expecting fervently for such an outcome of the referendum, the monarchists were waiting

for this 'catastrophe' for the republicans. So they went wild trumpeting it as the victory of the monarchists. And the Republicans had no alternative but to concede defeat, may be, due to their own folly and wrong strategy. It is true that there was no mention of 'monarchy' in the 'referendum question', a negative vote rejecting 'indirectly' elected President does not automatically mean 'yes' for monarchy. But it was too late for the Republicans to pull up their socks. They have already missed the bus. The 'referendum question' is almost similar to asking your guest whether he likes 'coffee with cream', and his reply is 'no'. But that doesn't mean that he had also rejected 'coffee' in favour of 'tea', of which the guest has not been asked at all. So the Republicans are in jinx again for sometime to come. They have been totally out-witted, non-plused and out-voted, too.

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public. Under a new coalition of different Republican groups, the Australian Republican Coalition (ARC) has announced they would now fight for a directly elected President before 2005. At last, the Republicans had learnt the hard lesson, but had to pay heavily for it. It is they who had given a new lease of life to the British Crown to 'shine' over Australia for some time more. Meanwhile, let the world wait and watch how long it takes for the 'pot' to boil.

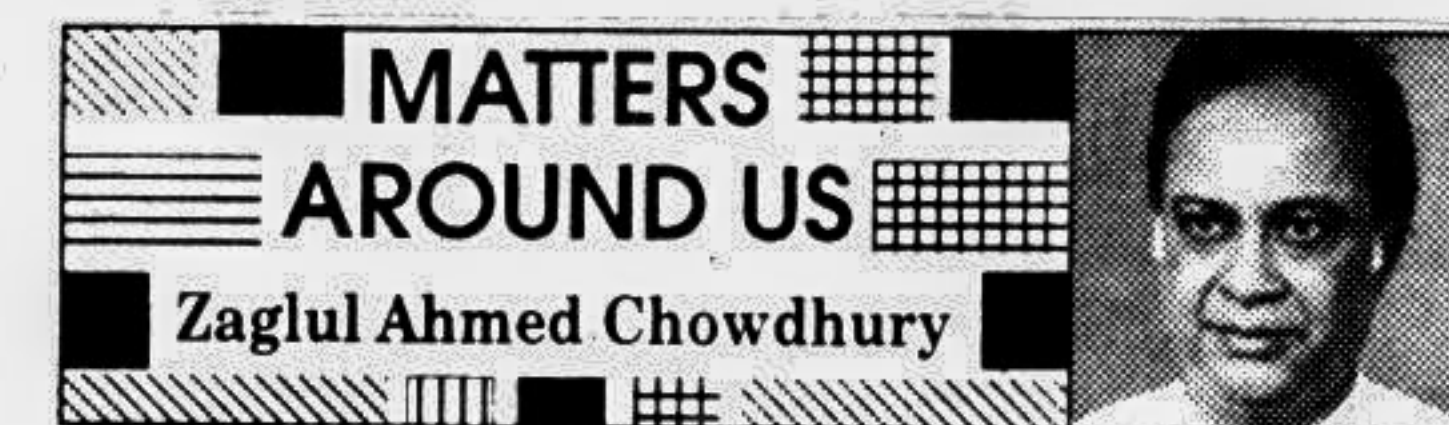
A tall piece: The Australian referendum 'episode' reminds me of a popular Bengali story about two English teachers of a village primary school, each of whom claiming to know better English than the other. So one fine morning the village elders arranged a public test of English knowledge of the two teachers in an open ground. Now, one of them, who knew his own weakness but was a bit shrewd, planned to 'trap' the other before the gathering. So he volunteered to ask the first question in English and wanted his rival to reply in Bengali in loud voice. He asked to give the Bengali meaning of 'I don't know'. The other teacher, failing to catch the 'catch' in it, loudly replied: 'Ami Jani Na'. Now the supporters of the first teacher went wild, dancing, singing and trumpeting, before the 'poor' fellow could explain his position. So he went back home defeated and dejected. Do we get any message here? Who went wild at whose defeat? If not, just forget it.

The writer is a retired UN official

Pakistan Scene

The General's Next Plan

The proceedings of the trial will be worth watching. Pakistan's coming developments and strategy of the army rule and its duration are contingent upon the outcome and nature of the trial.



Ziaul Ahmed Chowdhury

Speculations and the government in Islamabad also dispelled such a possibility. But it has happened.

Initially, it gladdened the heart of the opposition parties who were desperate to see the removal of Sharif government. It also made people jubilant, to an extent, because the government was discredited on many counts. This situation notwithstanding, the bottom line is that democracy suffered a severe setback much to the dismay across the world when at a time democratic values are being flourished.

Now one and half months after the coup, what the military is thinking about its future plan? How the political parties, including Sharif's Muslim League and main opposition Benazir's Peoples Party, are disposed to a situation which hardly signals an early return to civilian rule? And finally, what awaits Sharif, his brother Shahbaz, who was the chief minister of the important Punjab province, and several others facing the charges of treason and hijacking the plane which was carrying the army chief Gen. Musharraf from Colombo? One has to wait for the answer. The former chief of the Civil Aviation has turned hostile and will testify against Sharif. How does this case look like and what the army government in-

tends to derive from these situations? These are some of the main questions that are lingering in the minds of the people.

It happened in case of most military takeovers. Gen. Musharraf is also trying with the idea of a referendum to seek approval of the people to his action and in most cases it is achieved with a thumping majority. This is used as a basis to legitimise of the actions. The new army ruler is not lagging behind in this respect. Despite his assertions that civilian rule will be restored, no timetable is being put forward although the democratic world is putting pressure for it. The Commonwealth has suspended the membership of Pakistan. Washington's reaction to the development has been mute but it cannot afford to say that it relies an army government and as such there is also American pressure in favour of democracy. But the new regime seems prepared to face such criticisms regardless of the lack of constitutional rationale behind its actions.

The referendum is meant to take away some pressure on the undemocratic actions for the regime that seems unwilling to go for modalities to restore the civilian authority in quickity. After initial phase of euphoria by some anti-Nawaz political parties, the politicians in Pakistan are now beginning to realise the grim reality that time

carefully. As the deposed prime minister has pleaded innocence and said that in fact his democratically elected government has been 'hijacked at gun point', military is evidently keen to collect evidences that could be seen as incontrovertible as possible. Possibly, lack of these evidences is a factor delaying the formal filing of the charges by a week. Much of the political scene in the country will depend on the nature of the trial. Some Middle Eastern countries having close ties with Pakistan are also taking interest on the issue while pleading non-interference in Pakistan's internal affairs. Obviously, they are sympathetic to Sharif considering his fate. In that way, the regime is walking on a tight rope as how to proceed with the trial.

It has been made clear that trial will be free and fair. The proceedings of the trial will be worth watching. Pakistan's coming developments and strategy of the army rule and its duration are contingent upon the outcome and nature of the trial. The journey that Gen. Musharraf has embarked upon is neither easy nor free from obstacles. Only time will say how the regime negotiates these conditions while the prime concern of the democratic world remains to restore elected authority at the earliest.

A Tribute to Sufia Kamal

by Dr Amanullah Khan

A grim death has come upon us again. This time Begum Sufia Kamal passed away. This, while not quite unexpected given her age and her long ailment, yet is an event hard to accept. There are temporal and spiritual lessons, often intertwined, to learn from this towering champion of progressive movements in Bangladesh. A standard-bearer of truth and peace, Sufia Kamal

our khalamma — will remain there as a bright beacon of compassion and champion of progress, unity and truth.



Nasir Ali Kamran

To me, khalamma revealed long ago the creator's purpose of her life. She worked as a role model and as I say, she was the nation's murubbi, who we could turn to for solace whenever crises struck. Living overseas for several years now, I would often sink into nostalgia remembering some past events which I was so closely a part of. I was recalling khalamma only a few weeks ago when a feeling engrossed my mind — what will happen when she dies? Obviously we didn't expect her to be in the front line of progressive processions at this age but her shadow presence as a murubbi, as an inspiration and as a role model was still very reassuring. Yet the inevitable happens and it happened!

Khalamma's courageous stand in all progressive move-

ments of our country only speaks of her dedication to the cause of our people which was strengthened by her unending faith that the Creator would provide whatever is needed at the appropriate time. We sang many songs besides her and among her favourite songs, 'Tomara Oshime Prano Mono Loye Joto Dure Ami Jai' reminds me of her lesson to us that if we believe, and if we are patient, then we want for nothing because all we need is held in the love of the creator. Khalamma's death has also given me a mixed feeling: she is inspiring me even more because of her humility, her great compassion for people and for the right cause. She stood like a beacon, showing the way, giving us hope, leading us closer to the divinity.

An episode I cannot but write here to tell how and when I lost our mental health and ability to think rationally. Soon after her death, I called a fellow Bangladeshi gentleman who is also a front member of one of the Bangladeshi community organizations in Australia to see if they can organize a condolence meeting. The answer was: 'Who is Sufia Kamal?', a slight pause... 'Yes, yes, Sufia Kamal, I know... but she is an Awami League... we cannot do anything.' This shocked me more than her death actually did. My brain and mind actually became numb for a while. Is this how we acknowledge our national heroes, murubbis, daughters and sons of soil who have shaped our lives and the nationhood for ages? The difficulty lies somewhere else — it is the hollowiness in our brain, the blindness of our inner eyes and the deafness of our inner ears that prevent us from shunning our fanatic attitudes and retard our ability to accept truth and progress.

Khalamma represented selfless humanity, love and caring, and remained at the centre of love and respect of the nation. Irony is it, progressive forces are too isolated now, but a journey must begin to educate our children and grandchildren to choose the right from the wrong.

The writer is the Coordinator of Development Studies Programme, University of Melbourne, Australia

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.

"Kader Siddique's Unacceptable Comments"

Sir, The editorial on November 19, 1999 titled 'Kader Siddique's Unacceptable Comments' was confusing and full of contradictions. I don't understand how can Kader Siddique trust the system or create an atmosphere to bring about changes to the system that is full of horrendous bug that you and other reputed journalists documented in the recent election.

You wrote, 'It appears that he is all in favour of democracy and election, till the system fails.' Ironically that is the feeling of a person when he is robbed or deprived of something as arrogantly as the government chose to do in Tangail. You fail to understand that when the democracy and election process fails, some people are trying to re-instate it by challenging the executioner, it has nothing to do with one's trust in democracy. If Mr. Kader Siddique did not trust the democratic process, he would never resigned and opted for re-election.

You suggested public movement to refine the election process, strengthening election commission to ensure fair election etc. Some of us were under the impression that we achieved that when BNP were out of power and Awami League became the new ruling party.

The fact is, the greed for power is so much among our political leaders that they will do anything to stay in power. What do you do? Wait for the election process that you know will be rigged from the recent examples?

Let us be a little more realistic. I hope that the government comes to its senses and do the right thing. But that is a remote possibility. Let us say we hang on to democratic process and live to see the election in due date. My guess is that it will not be a fair election. What is your guess?

By the way, I think your criticism of Kader Siddique increased only after he was in touch with Ershad recently. It is evident from your choice of photographs and articles that you do not like the ex-president. A newspaper should be objective except probably in its editorial. It took you many years of hard work to create readers like us who reads The Daily Star on the Internet all the way from North America.

Mohammed Kalam USA

Tangled Tangail

Sir, The recent Tangail by-election (centred around Kader Siddique) has generated sharp public reactions; and if the general verdict is one as depicted in The Daily Star editorial of November 17, then the immortal Awami League (as assessed

by itself) better review its tarnishing public image. The party made a prestige issue of the case, and went about it by hook or by crook, judging by the press reports.

AL took great risk to bring about what it had intended. It has disturbed more than the political hornet's nest. Of course the party has contingency plans to handle the different types of reactions against the party, which, of lately, have been piling up, with incessant opposition activities. The former's pattern is familiar: brutal use of power and influence.

In Bangladesh, we forget about political living space. Political halitosis can ultimately erode a party's public image — the examples are not too far-fetched to seek.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

By-election in Tangail

Sir, In this country, if anybody can shout and howl, he seems to get his way. In the recently held Tangail by-election Mr. Kader Siddique got over 60,000 votes from 78 polling centres out of 82. In the 1991 general elections he also got about the same number of votes from all the polling booths. If in the present instance, polling booths had been closed before noon and thousands of voters who came to vote found their vote already cast, obviously in favour of the Awami League candidate, as alleged by Mr. Siddique then how come over 60,000 votes were recorded in his favour? In the 1991 general elections he also got about the same number of votes from the entire constituencies while his rival BNP candidate got over a

lakh of votes. In 1996 election, Mr. Siddique got over 1 lakh votes. It will be interesting to see the voting pattern in the next general election in 2001. In the present case, the difference between the number of the two candidates' votes was not too great and hence accusation of complete rigging becomes invalid. One should not also ignore that the antics and unbridled comments of Mr. Siddique would naturally induce people not to take him seriously. And this is what has happened. Mr. Siddique should be happy that against strong government propaganda, he has been able to secure approximately 45 per cent of the votes cast.

Zian Khan Dhaka

The Osmany Udyan

Sir, When the government decided not to build the proposed convention centre for NAM summit at the Osmany Udyan, we were relieved. But the latest DCC move has shocked us. Apparently, the authority has no real respect for the public who are fighting for the Osmany Udyan.

DCC has recently fenced a huge portion of the Udyan to build a hawkers' market. Their intention is pretty clear. The government does not want to be defeated by any quarter and hence the decision to shift the NAM convention centre is only an eyewash.

Now, the general mass who thought that we have won against an evil plan of the government, have eventually found ourselves fool.

S.M. Enayetur Raheem Dhaka