

Don't Use Religion in Politics

THIS is a shameful exploitation of religious sentiments, quite ironically as well by the two predominant figures in our national politics — Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina — who are supposed to set standards. The opposition leader opened the hatch. Reflecting a tougher mood against the government she put a sop on the pervasive expectation that the month of Ramadan might be kept free from hartal calls to allow people to concentrate on *Siam*. She suggested that if 'need be' hartal would be called during the month of abnegation and prayers. Drawing upon a historical reference she virtually said that if the battle of Badr could take place in the holy month of Ramadan what stops one from countenancing hartal in the same month. In other words, she is trying to arouse the sentiments of a *Jihad* or a religious war, as it were, among the people calling upon them to rally round her party's cause for toppling an elected government. Firstly, she is using religion to legitimise a hartal call; and secondly, she is so bent upon bringing down a duly constituted government, which has but so little left to its tenure anyway, that even the month of *Ramadan* need not be immune to hartal.

The Prime Minister, for her part, countered the opposition leader's argument by using religious sentiments with equal vehemence. She suggested that since the 'Kafirs' (religious heretics) had waged the battle of Badr during the month of Ramadan the opposition leader's agitational proposal for the same month amounted to a similar act of irreverence.

We condemn this shameless playing on religious passions to gain politically over each other. On the practical level, this denigrates religion and politics — both in an equal measure.

On balance, the Prime Minister needs to overcome the pattern of dialogue offer and vitriol alternating in her political behaviourism towards the opposition. She makes an offer for talks to the opposition leader when faced with a prospect for hartal but invariably falls short of writing out a formal invitation to Begum Zia. And, when the latter does not respond positively to the PM's offer she spews out unprintable epithets against the opposition leader. This time the PM has tried to malign Begum Zia's alleged indifference to education by alluding to her SSC exam results. This obnoxious political idiom kills a dialogue even before it is born. The PM either sounds sincere and genuine or draws a blank as she has been doing so far.

Death of a Legend

EVEN before the nation could overcome the bereavement at the loss of poetess Begum Sufia Kamal, death strikes again, this time to snatch away a star from our intellectual firmament. National Professor Abdur Razzak's demise robs the nation of an enormously gifted intellectual. His very presence was inspiring to people who knew him closely and even to those who met him only once in their lives. We take solace to our profound grief from the belief that the respect he enjoyed in his life-time has made him into a legend for the future.

Professor Razzak was a scholar *par excellence*, an unassuming, deeply committed seeker of knowledge. For him, pursuit of knowledge had been an all-pervasive passion. Driven by an insatiable urge to know more, he freely delved in different branches of wisdom developing insights that were so sparkingly his own. True, his attainment and assimilation of knowledge seldom found expression in black and white — he had very few publications to his name. Yet, the thirst with which he had gone about enhancing his scholastic ability by moving from one discipline to another must set a precedent for others in the academic world of Bangladesh. His towering yet quiet presence didn't dwarf his companions but stimulated them to go beyond their limits.

As a person, Professor Razzak was within himself, content with what he had. He was not worldly wise and never intended to be. He shunned the path of wealth and luxury to take up the life of an ascetic. Self-effacing, he had an incredibly disarming smile rooted in his inherent simplicity and profound love for people. His death leaves us poorer with an unfillable void.

Playing with Exams

THE degree examinees sat for their exams across the country in a state of total chaos on Sunday. Without playing the old record about the number of students expelled on the first day for cheating and about the hey-day enjoyed by many examinees in reproducing smuggled material on the scripts, it can be said that faulty and incorrect admit and registration cards created havoc at many examination centres. A large number of students received cards at the examination centres themselves with so many others having been given special numbers in place of admit cards on the telephonic instructions of the National University authorities. Complaints of erroneous admit cards being sent to many centres and admission of examinees to the centres without admit cards were common enough to escape notice. The confusion was confounded by an overlapping of papers which impelled the authorities to change the schedule for them.

The National University was established to reduce the load on Dhaka University. But in reality, as our recent experience shows, the important organisation is unable to cope with its specified responsibilities. The NU seems to be run in an amateurish manner. It seems that the whole idea of having an efficient examination authority in the form of NU is a casualty of the naive attitude of the authority. We believe this year's experience will be a good lesson for the NU bosses for their future course of action in making flawless examination arrangements.

Air of Inevitability or Atmosphere of Resignation?

Till Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi are entrenched in their respective party, the Indian politics will not undergo any significant change. Even heat and dust will be missing in the next two years.

INDIAN politics has now an air of inevitability about it. The two main parties, the BJP and the Congress, have entrenched themselves. Between them they have some 300 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha. No third force or an alternative is on the horizon. Nor anybody worth noticing is talking about such a possibility. Even the communists, who at times propose a new front, have lost credibility after their support to the Congress.

Leaders of the two parties, Atal Behari Vajpayee of the BJP and Sonia Gandhi of the Congress, are also secure in their positions. There is no challenge to them from within or without. Indeed, the politics of both parties has come to revolve around them. Even dissenters within the two parties have come to accept the fact that there is no going away from them.

Not long ago, one heard rumblings in the BJP, the hardliners pinpricking the liberals. After the elections even whispering has stopped because of the realisation that it was Vajpayee who won, not the party. Home Minister L K Advani goes out of the way these days to attribute the BJP victory to Vajpayee.

Had the hardliners still any say, Vajpayee would not have stepped down from the chief ministership of UP. It took RSS ideologue Govindacharya more than a month to discipline him after Vajpayee said that he must go. His supporters among the hardliners vainly tried against his

vacating due to the faulty policies it is following. Advani has realised this. He did not even try to save Kalyan Singh because the latter wanted to go back to the days of the *mandir*. Advani may, however, try to capture the BJP to have a place of influence by the time the question of Vajpayee's succession arises. From No 2 to No 1 position in the government is far more difficult than from the BJP's presidency to Prime Ministership. There are already reports that Advani would like to succeed BJP president

split after him despite the underpinning of the RSS, its cadre and concept of *Hinduashtra*.

The fear of split also haunts the Congress if ever Sonia Gandhi decides to step down. In fact, the party has a bigger problem: it cannot do with her and also without her. She is the centre where the divergent elements within the Congress meet. Without her, the party may split into two or three parts. At the same time, the party is going downward under her leadership. It appears that people still accept her as the

polis. It is her foreign origin. There is no questioning of her devotion or dedication to India. But the voters are not yet ready to make her the Prime Minister. The longer she takes in appreciating this point, the less are the chances of the Congress making any headway.

The party has lost the government in Goa. Delhi is next in line. And there is no likelihood of the cyclone-devastated Orissa returning the Congress again in the Assembly election early next year because her visit to the state has made no impact. If the Congress loses in Bihar, her problems will only multiply.

Sonia Gandhi fails to appreciate another point of inevitability in Indian politics. People have stopped trusting one-party rule at the Centre. They want the government at New Delhi to reflect local sentiments, which they express through regional parties. The BJP has realised this. The government of 24 parties looks more of a Jamboree. But there is no other option at present. The BJP feels confident that the wider base does not give power to any single party to point at the gun as the AIADMK did during the last BJP-led coalition regime.

Till Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi are entrenched in their respective party, the Indian politics will not undergo any significant change. Even heat and dust will be missing in the next two years. That is why there is an air of inevitability in the country. Or, is it an atmosphere of resignation?

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kulidip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Kushabhu Thakre, who ends his second tenure in May.

Advani is moving closer to the organisation for another reason. The unstable conditions within the Ram Prakash Gupta ministry in UP may necessitate a mid-term poll, probably along with election in Bihar in March. Advani is in charge of elections in the BJP and he wants the party in his grip. This does not, however, in any way affect the position of Vajpayee, who is considered 'most' for the party. In fact, the BJP's biggest dilemma is: After Vajpayee who? Will the party

Congress president. When it comes to her heading the government, they seem to be dragging their feet.

The Anthony Committee looking into the causes for the Congress reverses dares not pinpoint this. No doubt, factions within the party have contributed to the defeat of many Congress candidates. The real reason is that she does not sell beyond a point. The Congress leaders know this. But they are afraid to say so to her face.

It is not dynastic politics, which scared the electorate at

OPINION

Political Actions: Agony and Ecstasy

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

It was not 'much ado about nothing'. It was indeed something that would instantly provoke serious concern. Mr Sadek Hossain Khoka, an MP and a former Minister of State for Youth, Sports and Culture in Begum Zia's cabinet sustained injury on his temple when he was leading a pro-hartal procession on November 8, 1999. His pictures appearing in different newspapers on the day following showed him, on one hand profusely bleeding and on the other, holding a policeman by the collar and punching blows on the cop's neck and down the spine. Everyone, both in the position and in the opposition heaved sighs of relief that the unfortunate incident didn't take a fatal turn and that the inflicted injury was not that serious to be speculative.

Nevertheless, BNP wouldn't let it go easily. Notwithstanding the free punches and concurrent filthy language used in the fracas, the BNP leadership deprecated the police firing for its being delinquent in as much as that it was, in their words, unprovoked. However, eye-witness account given in the daily *Ittefaq* gave a different story. It said that the police contingent on duty was trailing behind the procession led by Sadek Hossain Khoka, Abdulla Al-Noman and others. The tail-enders in the march suddenly started pelting brick-bats, stones and also threw bombs at them. The leaders at the top of the row were evidently taken by surprise and before they could refrain their unruly workers the police fired rubber bullets in self-protection. It was at this moment, the leaders turned back and in the melee Khoka and others were injured.

Home Minister Mohammad Nasim made a statement in the Jatiya Sangsad on the unfortunate incident and promised a formal enquiry into it. In the course of his statement he made certain remarks, critical and stings, which could not be at all palatable to the wounded BNP leaders. He had expressed his reservation about the veracity of their statements holding the government responsible. Nor

other, appointing a 3-member medical team ostensibly to assess the extent of the injury sustained by the BNP leaders and also to ensure proper medical treatment to the MP primarily and others. BNP leadership had already turned down the proposed intervention by the government as an 'eye wash'.

Whatever it was, most of the dailies gave description of the incident in their respective issues on November 09, 1999. Some even quoted a number of doctors, including the one attending Sadek Hossain Khoka in South Asian Hospital and the remarks attributed to Professor Matur Rahman, Senior Consultant in BIRDEM. The first one practically avoided a direct reply to the press reporters on the magnitude of the injury sustained by Khoka while the BIRDEM Consultant plainly said that Khoka's injury was nothing serious. He had dressed the bruises and advised re-dressing after 2/3 days. According to him there was no necessity to go for surgery in such cases.

However, the BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiya

informed the press that three rubber bullets were removed from Khoka's wounds and that one more was still there awaiting removal. He also firmly challenged all those, having reservation about the story that his statement could be disproved by anyone he would instantly withdraw himself from the present anti-government movement. We are yet to know if anybody in the government is willing to accept the challenge but we are certainly pleased to watch the gesture of goodwill displayed by Mr Nasim to Mr Sadek Hossain Khoka when the former visited ailing Khoka in a free hand duel.

However, the government expressed, apparently a genuine intention to get an unbiased picture about the whole incident on one hand through instituting an enquiry and on the

other, appointing a 3-member medical team ostensibly to assess the extent of the injury sustained by the BNP leaders and also to ensure proper medical treatment to the MP primarily and others. BNP leadership had already turned down the proposed intervention by the government as an 'eye wash'.

Khoka's and others' confinement in hospital beds haven't however made any difference to the overall anti-government movement of the opposition. We have had a dawn to dusk hartal on November 16 and another on November 25. Meantime Begum Zia had asked the educational institutions to complete their examinations by November 24 at the latest.

She has also declared that hartals and other agitational programmes would be there even in the holy month of Ramadhan. Making such announcement she had likened the programme in Ramadhan with the holy battle of Badr led by prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) against the infidels! She couldn't perhaps imagine how much she would have ridiculed herself making such an outrageous comparison. Anyway, her wisdom permitted such utterance and so she did.

For sometimes now we are coming across most stale and vituperative statements being exchanged between the position and the opposition, all featuring

centres, voting in those four centres was immediately suspended but from the results of the 78 polling centres Showkat Momen Shahzad was shown to have won by over 15 thousand votes. The former Awami League MP in this constituency Abdul Kader Siddiqui Bir Utam and now an independent candidate was defeated. Mr Siddiqui has rejected the result alleging massive rigging by the Awami League candidate Showkat. The four polling centres where the election commission has suspended voting would have a little over 13 thousand voters and if on re-polling Siddiqui bagged the entire votes he would not win. In any case, it is for him now to lodge formal protest with the election tribunal with enough proof to reverse the result already announced.

Away at Sirajganj the Awami League worker Chayan contesting in the ensuing by-election there as an independent candidate while the party nomination was given to Swapan, has been expelled from Awami League for having re-

fused to oblige party directive to withdraw. There is, however, no such dispute in respect of Awami League candidate Dr Alauddin for the by-election in a Rajshahi constituency. In fact, Dr Alauddin was an Awami Leaguer originally but having failed to get party nomination in 1996 election he joined BNP and was elected. Both Swapan and Dr Alauddin were later inducted in the cabinet as Deputy Minister and Minister of State respectively, apparently of their own volition. BNP fought a legal battle in the Supreme Court and later in the Election Commission sitting as a tribunal. Their seats in the Jatiya Sangsad were even-

by-elections. However, the two factions of Jatiya Party viz Ershad's and Mizan Chowdhury's have filed nominations along with a number of independent candidates at each place.

Fratricidal efforts are now on to raise a tempest in the overall political firmament of the country. BNP-led opposition has made a renewed pledge to unseat the government. To this end programmes of frequent hartal besides intermittent mass demonstration on the street and public meetings (yet to be on a single platform) are being held to upbeat the rhythm. The expected momentum is, however, not in sight to precipitate an immediate crisis. Prime Minister Hasina had already offered to discuss on any and all issues with Begum Zia. But

by-election at Kishoreganj in consequence of the sudden death of the incumbent MP Mr. Shamsul Huq of Awami League. Here former acting Vice-Chancellor of Jahangir Nagar University Professor M Alauddin has been the Awami League nomine.

Significantly and true to their point BNP has not fielded any candidate for any of these

Foot Note : Naming of a national institution after a living person, more so, after one who is heading the government is, in my personal opinion, a worst of perversions engineered by vested interest to curry favour with the potential benefactor. Naming of a departmental facility at BKSP after Sheikh Hasina is a pointer.

Will she kindly take care of such a far reaching, vicious game?



**Art
Buchwald's
COLUMN**

The New Thanksgiving

WHAT I miss the most around Thanksgiving time are the Norman Rockwell covers on the Saturday Evening Post. Let's face it — the Norman Rockwell Family at Thanksgiving is gone. They have been replaced by the 1999 Non-Nuclear Family.

In the Norman Rockwell Family there was the mother, the father, grandpa and grandma, and the little tykes, all standing around admiring a roasted turkey. Everyone was there to show off a real American holiday was all about.

But alas, the Norman Rockwell Family has disappeared and been replaced by the Non-Nuclear Family. Here is how it is shaping up.

The Bomeisters are having the dinner, but Gerald Soda (the 11-year-old son of Mrs. Edna Bomeister, who is divorced from Gerald's father, Jim Soda) has to go to his father's home in Nantucket.

Gerald intended to bring his widowed mother from Seattle, but she now has a boyfriend and will spend the holiday with his family. Edna Bomeister's mother, who lives in Sun City, Arizona, couldn't come because she was unable to get a frequent flier airplane ticket.

If everyone had kept to their schedule, there wouldn't have been a problem, but things started to unravel when young Gerald Soda's plane to Nantucket was cancelled. Mr. Soda was furious and said he was going to take Mrs. Bomeister to court as she had violated the court decree.

Mrs. Bomeister couldn't get a final count so she ordered a turkey and a ham. This was barely enough after she found out that Ed's boss was coming with his new girlfriend.

I keep wondering how Norman Rockwell would paint this Thanksgiving dinner. I am certain everyone wouldn't be smiling at the turkey.

His famous cover of the Thanksgiving family still sells. People want to remember what a real family gathering was all about. I know Norman would have gotten a frequent flier ticket for Ed's mother-in-law. Also, Mrs. Bomeister would have made her own stuffing instead of buying it at the store.

Ed's brother would be in the picture with his wife after their reconciliation.

Little Gerald would not have to go to Nantucket because in Norman Rockwell's world there would be no divorce decrees that would make him go somewhere else on the holiday.

Norman would present the Bomeisters as a happy, functional family, ready to dig in to the turkey and sweet potatoes. It's a Thanksgiving without glitches and as warm and tasty as the holiday itself. It is no wonder that now in American households, where everyone is at the table, the older generation says to the younger one, 'You should have been there.'

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To the Editor...

Image of JU

Sir, This refers of an article written by Abdul Bayes titled Restoring JU's Tarnished Image in the DS of November 21. We congratulate the writer for his timely opinion. We urge the schools, colleges and universities to adopt the following measures to remove further deadlocks in our educational institutions.

1) Identify the teachers who encourage students in negative ways.

2) Select students who really want education.

3) Discourage political leaders to interfere in educational institutions.

4) If all teachers and students unify, then on one can create problems.

We request the writer to call a meeting with the VCs, principals and headmasters.

M Ali Dhaka

A Pleasant Surprise

Sir, The editorial titled "A Pleasant Surprise" on the 18th November, 1999 suggests a new trend of politics that must be appreciated by all of us. Muhammad Nasim, the Home Minister, is a decent person with compassion and sympathy for others. His noble gesture to Sadek Hossain Khoka, when under treatment at BIRDEM for his injury, was the normal practice of healthy politics. Let us hope that Nasim's decency and courtesy should not be assessed as a sign of weakness in the current political confrontation between the two major political parties.

It is a pity that we always judge everything in the negative way. This must stop once and

but the students are suffering too much. Students are the future hope of our nation and they should grow up