

New Political Alignment

It will be some time before the full implication of the summitry by BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Okaya Jote and their joint declaration to work together on common programme is clear to us. Hence we have decided to withhold, for the time-being, a comprehensive assessment of the impact their coming together is likely to have on national politics.

Suffice it to say at the moment though that the development formalises what has been in the air right from the beginning of 1999 — melting of the ice between implacable adversaries Ershad and Begum Zia and drawing of Jamaat and IOJ into a broader rightist fold. In a way, after the summit, the opposition looks more organised, more consolidated and somewhat more institutionalised than when they were operating as a somewhat loose-knit alliance with each of its components having to announce a more or less identical agitation programme from a separate platform.

There is no question about the fact that we want to see a strong role of the opposition in a democracy. Stronger the unity in the opposition ranks better the prospect for securing good, transparent and accountable governance in the country. To what good use the opposition puts its new-found strength must make a huge difference in the public perception of their motivation behind forming an alliance.

It will be worthwhile for them, therefore, that they test and use their new strength on the floor of parliament, their voice reverberating in unison on the collective agenda they have just adopted.

If, on the other hand, their alignment is wholly targeted at the downfall of an elected government which has a year or so of its term left, then what we can expect is unmitigated trouble: intensified movement spearheaded by hartals and disruptions to civic life and public order.

So, we urge the opposition to work on their common programme both inside and outside the parliament with the added strength they command now eschewing the path of belligerence leading but to de-stabilisation only. Let the top opposition leaders harness their alliance in creating an effective parliamentary process and educating the public on better ways of governance.

Retarded Diplomacy

It is disquieting that a lingering lack of co-ordination between officials of different cadres and between them and the contractual appointees at the Bangladeshi missions abroad is telling upon their performances. Against the backdrop of rapid globalisation and at a time when 'economic diplomacy' is the buzz word, such disorderly out-fits abroad cannot work to their potential.

Unfortunately such antagonism between officials in different embassies and high commissions has a familiar tinge about it. In fact, our civil service system is beset with inter-cadre conflicts of interest and a pathological rift between contractual and non-contractual appointees. We have more often than not heard of allegations of favouritism and discrimination along cadre lines. However, taking these to the resident missions overseas is simply preposterous. These not only have a telling impact on our diplomatic activities but also can wreak havoc on the country's image before the international community. So, the problem should be seen in a different perspective and addressed accordingly. Surely, we cannot do with such a drawback in our foreign missions which, according to the parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs, should act as the 'main window' for promotion of the country's commerce and trade in the international arena.

Encouragingly, the committee has pinpointed the problem at an opportune moment as the new millennium is fast approaching us. In an era of globalisation and intensified economic and commercial activism, a limping diplomacy cannot be savoury. The committee's recommendations for "streamlining the activities of Bangladesh missions abroad" should be immediately paid heed to, keeping in view the dire need for eradicating the undesirable inter-cadre rivalry and differences between contractual and non-contractual appointees.

Mahathir Revved Up

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad has won an emphatic fifth term in office. The general elections held on Monday last gave his 14-party coalition a handsome two-thirds majority in the parliament with powers to amend the Constitution without the help of smaller parties. The winning National Front is however 18 seats short of their 166-member strength in the outgoing parliament. Most of these seats have been captured by the pro-Islamic opposition. The National Front retained power in nine out of the eleven state assemblies despite predictions of a major backlash over the Anwar Ibrahim affair. Led by the deposed Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's wife Wan Azizah, the National Justice Party (Keadilan) won only five seats. Wan Azizah was, however, happy with the success of her seven-month-old party and the reduction in the ruling NF's majority. The election came under close scrutiny by independent observers in many states some of whom found traces of 'fraud' such as 'phantom voters' but they hastened to add that it did not mean the overall result of the poll was 'invalid'.

Now that Mahathir and his party have been vindicated, we hope that Malaysia will embrace liberal social policies and open her windows to the world for its people. We congratulate Mahathir on his re-emergence as his country's leader and wish him godspeed. May his people benefit from his sagacious leadership.

When Will Our Leaders Learn?

by Mansoor Mamoon

As the nation approaches the new millennium let our leaders belonging to rival camps not fail us again. Their failure will inevitably spell disaster which a poor overpopulated country like Bangladesh can ill-afford.

BANGLADESH now appears to have been caught in the whirlpool of political confrontation and deadlock. There is seemingly no light at the end of the tunnel much to the chagrin of the silent majority whose only aspiration is to see that democracy flourishes and brings about the desired stability so as to help catapult the nation into the new millennium with a new and dignified identity in the comity of nations. In fact, Bangladesh was consecrated to the ideals of democracy. It was the innate democratic cravings of the people that led to the sanguinary War of Liberation and successfully tritured the thugery of the domain of Pakistan. But democracy — the heart-beat of the people — continued to largely remain illusory even after independence.

Soon after independence a monolithic one-party rule was super-imposed and the entire nation was rudely shocked and stultified. After the great tragedy of 1975 mid-August there followed endless series of coups and counter coups, conspiracies and political killings. The nation literally stood fleeced and hemorrhaged, both politically and economically, along with continuous back-sliding and erosion of moral and social values. Finally the mas upheaval of December 1990 brought about the downfall of the long autocratic rule and provided a unique opportunity

to start afresh the country's much-vaunted journey to democratic dispensation. The first free and fair general elections since the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign country under a non-party neutral caretaker government spurred and kindled new hopes and aspirations among the masses. The beginning was rather good. Unanimity in Parliament in the passage of the 11th and 12th Amendments to the Constitution and switching over to parliamentary system of governance led the people to believe that our leaders at long last are fast attaining political maturity. This consensus on a national scale and the spirit of accommodation demonstrated by the mainstream political parties greatly enthused the people raising their expectations still higher. But unfortunately for us all, it proved to be short-lived. Very soon the country took a sudden u-turn. The hydra-headed monster of confrontational politics hovered over the country's horizon with its snowballing effect in the form of meaningless clashes, frequent shutdowns, barricades, blockades, smashing of vehicles and draining out of scarce resources in internecine feuds and squabbles among the

politicos. A new election in June 1996 and a new beginning were again thwarted by the very same acrimony and intolerance among the political parties.

The people were again disillusioned at the repetition of the very same political game playing, mainly by the two major political parties with the result that street politics could not effectively be brought into Parliament. The nation is now again faced with a perilous situation causing the fledgling democracy to continuously remain fragile. The masses have started to ask — will there be no end to the present imbroglio, will good sense ever prevail among the politicians? Should not they learn from the not infrequent changes and transformations in the outside world vis-a-vis the existing realities and realities at home? Take for example the outcome of the recent Presidential elections in Indonesia.

Megawati Sukarnoputri had been the favourite contender. In fact, her party had emerged as the largest parliamentary group. But her certain victory was snatched away at the connivance of the army backed former President Suharto's Golkar Party which at the last moment decided to back Abdur-

rahman Wahid. Megawati's supporters were infuriated and went on rampage in the streets of Jakarta. But she sternly called for calm. To mollify her supporters and in the greater interests of national unity and solidarity Megawati accepted the position of Vice-President under Abdurrahman, her political rival, thereby setting a unique example par excellence of democratic culture and spirit. Can we imagine such a situation in Bangladesh where the heads of the two major contending parties — the AL and the BNP — accommodating each other in an identical manner in a government of broad national consensus for smoothly running the statecraft?

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela shared power with De Klerk and set an unprecedented example of national reconciliation. Can we visualise such a happy augury in our context too? In neighbouring India, the Congress faced a humiliating defeat, the worst in its long history. But party chief Sonia Gandhi did not blame the Election Commission for her defeat, nor raised the bogey of subterfuge or vote-dodging as are the customs with the leaders in Bangladesh. She gracefully conceded defeat and publicly

admitted her failure in properly projecting the programmes of her party before the electorate. Sonia Gandhi went a step ahead and supported the candidature of the nominee of BJP as the Speaker of Lok Sabha and joined with her political opponent Atal Bihari Bajpayee in escorting the newly elected speaker to his chair. The BJP led alliance reciprocated by lending support to Congress nominee for the post of Deputy Speaker. Sonia has also lent her party's support to the Vajpayee government's economic reforms measure. Our leaders are vitating the country's political atmosphere through indulging in petty politics, diatribes and mudslinging. Parliament which is the symbol of collective wisdom of the people, has been virtually reduced into a podium for character assassination and obscene verbal missiles thrown unabashedly at each other much to the discomfiture of the common people.

In India, during electioneering in September last when a certain Union Minister compared Sonia with Monica Lewinsky, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee strongly censured him and asked for mending his language in future. This

spirit of accommodation, placing of individual and party interests above national interest and showing utmost respect to the verdict of the electorate as well as mutual respect for each other are the very essence of democracy. Unless our leaders cultivate this culture assiduously there is no hope for democracy to take firm roots in our soil. Our leaders should well remember that democracy is essentially dialogue — two-way traffic. Democracy is conciliation and not confrontation.

Democracy is not power mongering. In a democracy power rather is a trust reposed by the people. Without viable opposition democracy is bound to turn into autocracy. Democracy has two wings — the party in power and the party or parties in the opposition. Without these two wings democracy cannot take-off. The earlier our leaders learn these basic lessons of democracy, the better for the country and for the people. As the nation approaches the new millennium let our leaders belonging to rival camps not fail us again. Their failure will inevitably spell disaster which a poor overpopulated country like Bangladesh can ill-afford.

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Tangail By-election

Desperate Action May Prove Disastrous

by A B M S Zahur

THERE is little doubt that Tangail-8 election could not be made fair or peaceful. Right from the announcement of the date of election the feeble attempts of the Election Commission to advise the ruling party to respect the election code was totally frustrated by the ruling party. Of course, it has to be admitted that the provocative statements (even to some extent derogatory) of Kader Siddiqui was not desirable because he is not only a senior Awami League leader but also a famous freedom fighter. No doubt, the self-exile of Kader Siddiqui for long seventeen years made his image a bit rusty to the public in general. This resulted in his defeat in election in 1991. However, he remained always close to his people of Tangail. It was no other than Awami League government which conferred upon him the coveted and respected title of *Bangabir*. Being a leader at a fairly early age he is certainly not an ordinary law-maker. No sensible and neutral Bangladeshis will consider him as a mad cap or a despicable "terrorist" whatever may be efforts made against him to depict him as an imbalanced person. He is certainly a leading politician in the country.

The accusations made by Kader Siddiqui against Awami League chief do not appear to be fit for brushing aside lightly even if not easy for the AL chief to accept them. The accusations are, (a) autocratic practices of the chief of democratic political party; (b) accommodation in the leadership of persons who served directly or indirectly to government of Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmed after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975; and (c) failure to meet AL chief's electoral pledge of scrapping the Atia Forest Ordinance, 1982.

It is true that it is extremely difficult for the chief of Awami League to accede to all the above suggestions in toto. She could, however, have given serious thought to (c) above. In fact, she announced undertaking of scrapping of Atia Forest Ordinance 1982 only a few days before election was held. In regard to (a) and (b), Kader Siddiqui does not appear to have strong points because —

It may be remembered that the position of chief of Awami League was not bestowed upon her automatically after the assassination of her illustrious father. As Awami League was going to be disintegrated into a number of factions because of leadership crisis she had to

accept the difficult position of the chief of the largest political party to keep it intact. Ever since her acceptance of the leadership, well concerted attempts were made to damage (and if possible, destroy) the image of Awami League by the successive governments. Without her Awami League could not have survived the onslaughts of military-democracies of Zia and Ershad. Success came to her after hard struggles for more than fifteen years. She never boasted for this stupendous job. She knows fully well that without her tight control the party may lose its discipline because of its inner contradictions. Kader Siddiqui fled to India to save himself, not the party. He spent long seventeen years there. Thus he has little moral strength to suggest that Awami League chief behaves like a dictator. Even the strongest of the critics of Sheikh Hasina will admit that without the leadership of Hasina Awami League will be divided into several factions and the party will lose its political force.

However, this does not justify Sheikh Hasina's behaviour like a dictator. It is highly desirable that the chief of a democratic political party shows enough respect for democratic values. In regard to accommodation of the Awami League leaders who joined the Khondkar Mushtaque cabinet it may be stated that one of the most important strategies in a political game is compromise and adjustment. There may not be a "last word" in politics. If Sheikh Hasina could take a pragmatic view in politics why Kader Siddiqui should try to impose his will. After all, how much Kader Siddiqui could or did contribute to the struggle of Awami League during his long absence from politics? However, as a front-ranking leader of Awami League, there could have been serious discussion on this point with him.

It is difficult to accept that a leader of the stature of Sheikh Hasina should feel so nervous about the acts of a renegade Awami League leader, why she should place herself on the same level as that of Kader Siddiqui is also not understandable. In the present situation even if Awami League lost the seat of Tangail-8 not much harm could be done to its position. Furthermore, it was only a by-election and the tenure of membership was only for 16 months. It is certain that

by defeating Kader Siddiqui through engaging so many politicians and political activists and bureaucrats, incurring so much of expenditure from the state exchequer, flouting the directives of Election Commission, making it almost ineffective, Awami League helped in increasing the popularity of Siddiqui and in strengthening the positions of the opposition parties. It has tarnished its image as badly as BNP did its own in case of Magura election.

If we compare Magura election with Tangail-8 election we may see that Awami League has committed a greater blunder. In Magura election the BNP chief was not involved so openly as Awami League chief has been involved in the Tangail-8 election. At that time all the opposition parties did not unite to overthrow the government. Magura election helped Awami League tremendously to fight unitedly against BNP. Needless to say that any mistake or omission to be committed by Awami League will help the opposition to consolidate their positions.

It is also intriguing for an ordinary citizen as to (i) why the complaint of Kader Siddiqui should not be handled by the election tribunal, (ii) what were the overriding considerations of the Chief Election Commissioner to constitute an inquiry committee with the approval of the Supreme Court? If the directives of the Election Commission are not respected why the Chief Election Commissioner should allow his image to be tarnished by the quagmire of politics? He is in between Seylla and Charybdis now. It appears that he cannot cancel this by-election not considered fair by FEMA, BHRCC and DW and some important developed democratic countries. This makes difficult for him to absolve himself from the charge given by BNP of having cheated toward Awami League. The only option open for him is to resign, that may be acceptable for the ruling party in consideration of the present political situation because such an act may soften the attitude of BNP and the possibility of a dialogue between BNP and Awami League may brighten. In fact it may be considered as an opportunity for the Chief Election Commissioner to quit with respect, honour and dignity.

The author is a retired Joint Secretary.

HONOURABLE PRIME MINISTER

This is an open letter to you from an ordinary citizen of your beloved country. We would not like to believe what your political adversaries very often accuse you of. But our expectations from your administration were entirely different from what people expected and got from the others in the last quarter of a century. The questions and concerns that I am going to put forward to you today arise from that shattered expectation of millions like me. One might wonder why am I taking the recourse of media to ventilate my frustrations. The contents of my letter will, hopefully, speak for itself.

Madam prime minister, accountability and transparency are integral virtues of any democratic institution. In the last few occasions, you even put the judiciary in the dock by demanding accountability from it just like any other organ of the state hierarchy. Without transgressing myself into that complex debate, it could be suggested in no uncertain term that first and foremost share of the accountability lies with the elected organ of the state. The leaders of the government and the opposition are equally accountable to their constituents who endow their trust on them through the democratic exercise. The whole government bureaucracy is directly accountable to the elected officials, which, in turn, hold them indirectly accountable to the people. Madam prime minister, I am not a constituent of US politics. Nevertheless, the accountability of the US politicians crossed the political boundaries that prompted Senator Kennedy and Congressman Solari to respond positively to my communications soliciting their good offices in support of our people's struggle to free our political system from the clutches of Ershad's autocracy. My personal appeal to the Prime Minister Jean Chretien and the Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy (of Canada) to extradite two of the confessed and convicted killers of Bangabandhu not only met with high powered assurances from 26 Sussex Drive, but also contributed positively towards an early reformation of the Canadian extradition law in Ottawa's parliament bill. Only on the other day, an open letter to the Foreign Minister Axworthy by a Pakistani born journalist in the Toronto Star, criticising his, otherwise highly acclaimed, stand vis-a-vis the military take over in Pakistan generated a substantial response from the foreign minister in the aforesaid paper itself. I, respectfully, invite you,

madam prime minister, to respond to my open letter through the pages of newspaper to prove the accountability of your government and to reassure your constituents that what you preach is what you practice.

Under your premiership, we had altogether different expectation as regard to the treatment of the opposition. In your vein flows the blood of a man at whose clarion call, the Bengalees for the first time in our history, not only within the geographical boundaries of Bangladesh, but around the globe, got themselves united for the cause of their motherland. Your performance in uniting the nation is far less than satisfactory. In line with the tune of your predecessors when they were at the helm of the state, you also wait the people to believe that there was no government before yours and there will be no government after yours. For instance, during the inauguration of the Bangabandhu Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge, your administration politicised a national effort so much so that neither did you acknowledge your predecessors' contribution, nor did you invite them to make any meaningful participation in the event. Of course, if they were invited there to witness your ribbon cutting ceremony, should any one expect them to comply, madam prime minister?

Madam prime minister, your and your party stalwarts' speeches and activities in the recent few weeks have seriously put your party, in my view, in the dock for the first time. What the combined opposition could not do in three years, you and your comrades have created that self-inflicting wound probably in three days. Parliament is the highest seat of the state where not only the fate of the nation is crystallised for tomorrow but for the next generation as well. Parliamentarians are immune from judicial prosecution not because they are the blessed sons of God, but for their supposedly responsible deliberations in shaping the destiny of the nation. What happened to the BNP stalwarts in the streets was nothing new after all, but what your honourable Home Minister invented out of the incident in the parliament was indeed a new phenomenon to the nation. Since they were absent from the parliament, they should have been referred in the house with more passion and respect. It was absolutely unclear to any one of conscience, as to why did you, wearing the laurel of the leader of the house, indulged yourself in making an uncalled-for and provocative speech that was even not worth

printing in the media? It was even appalling for us to note that your fellow parliamentarians rose to their feet to applaud your delivery. It is probably the worst form of sycophancy that the nation has ever witnessed from their elected leaders.

Your detractors, now and then, ludicrously try to cast an aspersion on your patriotism with reference to your alleged soft (in my view pragmatic) attitude towards our giant neighbour, You, probably, realise more than any one else, how loathsome it is to endure that enigma. In spite of yourself being a victim of that enigmatic propaganda, in the last few weeks madam prime minister, you indulged yourself by making similar disparagement against a talented politician of our land.

You very often rekindle your audience about the shattered electoral process during the regime of your predecessors. Where does your moral stand lie, madam prime minister, after what has been done to shatter the electoral process in the Tangail by-election? Kader Siddiqui has proven, in no uncertain term, to your constituents at both home and abroad that he is very much likened by the voters of his constituency. In the face of multitudes of odd, he was able to hold to his popularity, your very inarticulate remarks about him notwithstanding. Kader Siddiqui was a local leader and had inflicted enough damage on himself by meeting two of your adversaries. That would have been enough to deter the disgruntled elements of your party not to join hands with him. Your party, for no reason, under the inept leadership of your political advisor, created an opportunity for him to claim national sympathy, and that too madam prime minister, totally at your own expense.

I do not want to sound myself too prophetic. If you and your party's stalwarts fail to realise your successive irreparable blunders and if your adversaries do not reciprocate the same in the name of successive 'tougher actions', the next general election, for sure will result in a clear majority government. But that government, in no way, madam prime minister, is going to be headed by you. This time around, I wish I am proven myself wrong.

The writer is a Professor at School of Engineering and Manager, Sheridan Quality Institute, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

To the Editor...

Use of force officially

Sir, The present regime may be sending the wrong signals to the citizens believing in the use of (police) force, especially against the official opposition party — BNP. It looks like AL is out to crush BNP out of existence by hook or by crook, reminding the people of the BKS days, when democracy was nipped in the bud (the excuse was to stabilise the post-revolutionary period). Now even the photo-journalists are not spared, and the party workers (of the opposition) are not allowed to enter their own party offices (the opposition claim that some 22,000 of their workers have been harassed by the police has not been contradicted officially). This appears to be an original application of democratic concepts.

Political ideologies generate wars, and at the local level political bitterness denies the right to peaceful existence. If innocent third parties (public) suffer in bilateral political frictions (hartals, etc), the politicians will not get the benefit of the doubt, however powerful they claim to be.

The citizens have witnessed enough political instability during three decades, and now they are tired and fed up with it. The days of reckoning are near. The leaders are not delivering.

A Zabr
Dhaka

Elections under caretaker government

Sir, This refers to the article by Mustafizur Rahman, published in The Daily Star on November 22, 1999. I think the proposal for holding all elections under Care-taker Government was a demand of the time — very much logical and concrete.

I am writing to furnish my two proposals on this issue: 1. I earnestly request our Prime Minister to take initiatives to table a bill for holding all elections under Care-taker Govt. and request our Leader of the Oppositions to give her party's consent on the bill.

Holding Parliament Elections under Care-taker Government was a unique contribution of PM Sheikh Hasina. If

she did not struggle for Care-taker Govt. back to 1995-96, I am sure it would not have been possible to implement the concept. I believe Sheikh Hasina would pioneer the concept of "All Elections under Care-taker Govt." with the same spirit of 1995-96.

2. Secondly I would request the Editor of the Daily Star to arrange a roundtable meeting on this issue inviting the outstanding personalities in the country as The Daily Star often conducts such discussions on the burning issues. This will enable all concerned to think about the matter.

Salma Alam
2, Bijo Nagar, Dhaka-1000.

Contain gangsterism

Sir, Gangsterism in Bangladesh is becoming more and more menacing, affecting the daily life of citizens at all economic and social levels. The official effort to contain this evil is rather sporadic, without any Master Plan which would reassure the public of confidence in the governance.

There are reasons for such assumption. Unfortunately, unacceptable political culture is encouraging gangsterism through the invisible godfathers, and backdoor manipulations. Earning easy living through shortcuts is not the proper philosophy of life (one former prime minister has been awarded 15 years' RL).

The society is going through a period of negative changes. Unless the undesirable trends are nipped in the bud, the situation might go beyond the control of the Administration. Already the gangs of miscreants are firing back at the chasing police teams (one police officer was killed recently as a result of assault with a deadly weapon). Greeting with bomb cocktail is not a proper reception!

The Home Ministry is aware of the situation, but the combating operation is rather unsystematic, and the element of deterrence is missing (fear and respect for the Law). Even the traffic offenders treat the traffic regulations with contempt; and the pavement encroachers seem to be above the law. Some types of undesirable activities of the political activists and workers are overlooked by the law enforcing agencies, or handled

with nepotism. The elected representatives of the people are politicians, but apparently ignore the social effects of bad politics. Noise is not performance; and the gift of the gab is misplaced if used subjectively.

A Husnain
Dhaka

The third millennium

Sir, I have been following the DS countdown to the third millennium for some time. I think that you have got it wrong. How can ninety-nine years make a century? You know that the twentieth century began on 1st January 1901 and will come to an end on the 31st December 2000 after completing a hundred years.

Let us go back to the beginning of the Gregorian calendar. We know that the first century began on the 1st January 0001 and ended on 31st December 0100 and the first millennium ended on the 31st December 1000. This is simple logic that the second millennium will end on the 31st December 2000

and the third millennium will start on the 1st January 2001.

QMS Hafiz
New DOHS
Dhaka.

SOE loan defaulters

Sir, It appears from the list published of the top 20 loan defaulters in the country (DS, Nov 3) that one-third are the state-owned enterprises. There is a message in it. How can we carry out the coming operation impartially in both the private and public sectors without fear or favour? How will the government to tackle the stranglehold of the CBAs in the defunct SOEs, who are sitting pretty on lavish charities from the exchequer?

Charity begins at home, before chartered pressure is put on the private sector. Slogan-mongering will not reach the ears under pressure, or inside the tombs. Here is a test of leadership worth watching!

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka