

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

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Suspended Peace on the Hills

After two and a half years of the CHT peace accord, gaps in its implementation remain wide making up a disappointing balance sheet. Even so, if we were to conjure up a situation minus that 'olive branch' agreement during the last two years we shudder to think how terrifying the experience would have been. That is a small debt we ought to feel we, including the PCJSS, owe to the accord signed on December 2, 1997. However, this is not to condone the snail's pace at which implementation has plodded along. What we are precisely trying to build up on is the fact that a positive attitude can help matters like nothing else will.

In fact, the dual problem of unhelpful attitude and will has dogged the implementation process from the beginning. It is a pity that far from being celebrative of the first birth anniversary of the peace agreement, the PCJSS observed the occasion on a discordant note not in the capital city, as planned by the government, but separately away at Bandarban. The second anniversary has also passed off on a low key, both sides having turned their back to each other.

Shantu Larma, the PCJSS leader and chief of the interim Regional Council cannot be critical of the accord he had signed but finds fault with the implementation process. He being the head of the RC for the last seven months ought to consider himself as an insider rather than an external critic.

On the positive side, we have put in place a ministry for hill tracts affairs, an interim regional council, a land commission, one task force for refugee rehabilitation and an accord implementation committee. How efficiently they have been working is another matter though.

The list of negative factors not merely reads longer but is also of crucial importance to the fulfilment of purposes for which the accord was signed. The land commission remains a non-starter for lack of legal authority, manpower and other logistics. A land survey project hangs fire despite its vital need for settlement of long-standing property disputes. The leader of the Refugee Welfare Samity, Upendra Lal Chakma, has alleged that landed property including homesteads of some 3055 returnee families were in adverse possession and that some 40 villages are in the hands of armed forces and Bengali settlers. Some 642 cases of debt relief to tribal returnees are yet to be disposed of. Little progress has been made on the proposed withdrawal of 2000 cases against members or supporters of PCJSS and Shantibhumi who had surrendered weapons to the government earlier.

The points of discord between the PCJSS and the task force on implementation touch on some fundamentals. The PCJSS has raised a question about the rehabilitation of Bengali settlers alongside that of the tribal refugees adding that the accord does not enjoin this. They also argue that as per the peace accord all army camps barring the cantonment and the permanent garrison ought to have been withdrawn immediately after the members of the Shantibhumi had surrendered their weapons. But of the 520 camps only 22 have been wrapped up since the weapons surrender ceremony, they allege.

To bridge the differences of opinion, a pragmatic view ought to be taken about the stakes involved in a sluggish implementation of the accord. Already the multi-million dollar project that was conceived for an all-round uplift of the region has received a damper from the donors' express reluctance to invest till the accord is on a definitive implementation course. The NGO work remains suspended as well.

It is time for accelerating the process whereby we shall have an elected Regional Council on top of elected district councils in place of all those being now interim ones dangling a very big sign of tentativeness about it all.

Friday Mailbox

Parliament or Paltan?

Sir, The leader of the opposition often complains that she and her party are not allowed to speak in the parliament. This assertion comes very handy as an excuse for her party to take to the streets to fight for people's rights. On the contrary what we observe on the TV telecast is her rear presence, her party's walk-out and all sorts of indisciplined behaviour in the parliament. We did not have the good fortune of seeing her presence and taking part in debates in the parliament so much as we saw her in the public meetings even when she was the PM.

The capable deputy leader ran the show for her and now it seems he is virtually the leader of the opposition in all practical purposes. We also know of her refusal to participate in a nationwide question and answer programme. Here too the deputy leader saved the day for her.

People elect MPs to take part in the deliberations in the parliament and not for agitational activities on the streets. Should we accept Paltan as a substitute for the parliament?

A Latif Dhaka

Tragic death of cadets

Sir, On behalf of all the ex-cadets of Sylhet Cadet College. It is indeed a great loss. Our country lost two of its golden boys. Death of these cadets raises some questions among the ex-cadets. Was it necessary to make them pull a roller by the most junior batch of the cadet college?

As an ex-cadet as far as I know, a cadet college is solvent enough to hire a roller from outside and there are enough groundsmen to do the job. This is the most unfortunate thing ever happened in the history of cadet colleges. The Governing Body should take severe steps against those who are responsible for these tragic deaths.

Mir Awal Khademur Rahman Mohammadpur, Dhaka

PM Insults Herself

Sir, I read the editorial on November 11, 1999 captioned "PM Insults Herself." This is not the first time that her aggressive expressions have come under thoughtful criticism. In fact, there are a number of weeklies and dailies which not very infrequently publish their repulsions on such issue. Surprisingly they seem to fall on deaf ears.

One therefore can reasonably assume that these reports are carefully kept away from the PM's knowledge by those who are paid to keep her informed of everything which also concerns her image. But the PM should certainly know how others at home and abroad feel about her maturity as expressed in her utterances.

M Akhand

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What LDCs need

Sir, All the LDCs, while thinking about global trade, should have a common stand on duty-free access for their products to developed markets, free flow of manpower and withdrawal of non-tariff barriers. Besides, LDCs should not compromise trade with environment, society and ecology. These also are barriers in disguise to the economic development of LDCs.

Bangladesh as a coordinator for 48 LDCs may take the lead on these issues.

Abdul Majid

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Bangladesh Politics: Where's the Rational Compass?

by M Rashiduzzaman

Rational choices give political groups, in victory as well as in crisis, some traction and purpose. If the Bangladeshi politicians are not energized with better reasoning, do they want the nation pulverized, and on the brink of a civil war, again by a violent confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition?

In a democracy, the politicians are presumably the "rational actors" since they compete to win election either to get power or to stay in power through reelection. No matter what the politicians want, if the voters are angry with them, and if their self-interests dictate it, they will vote with their feet and register their frustration whenever a free election offers that opportunity. The rational choice theorists hoist the ultimate fear of the irate voters, which becomes the bracing corrective against the purveyors of irrationalism in democratic politics.

But how much of the defty fashioned rational choice arguments are relevant to Bangladesh where protracted unrest, partisan cacophony, mud-slitting, alleged election fraud and irreconcilable deadlock are the hallmark of politics? Do the Bangladeshi politicians worry if the voters are angry? May be, or may not be! Yet, I am attracted to a recent public opinion survey released in Bangladesh, I am also wondering if it could be explained with the rationalist grammar of politics. What the Democracy Watch opinion poll (I have seen only a summary of it) tells us is a slippery slope for both the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led alliance.

As many as 36 of the voters are undecided about whom to vote if there is an election next day. No overwhelming electoral swing is predicted either for the ruling party or the opposition. The AL and the BNP, the two largest parties are nearly even with 26 per cent of the voters willing to cast votes for the Awami League and 23 per cent for the BNP, respectively (JP 8 per cent and Jamaat 4 per cent). That political arithmetic presumably represented the ardent party loyalists of the two largest parties. But in a tight contest, it is the non-committed voters more than the committed ones that often determine the results. As a matter of conventional wisdom, the fence-sitting voters are more motivated by selfish (but not necessarily irrational) considerations than the dedicated party members usually are.

Meanwhile, the wheels of the hartalists and the anti-hartalists are spinning and spinning while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the opposition leader Khaleda Zia are moving further and further away from each other. The explosive combination of the unyielding stand off, the din of the vitriol and the terrifying muscle flexing between the government and the opposition is turning Bangladesh into a dangerous political zone. Rationality does not seem to be prevailing. Say what you wish against the hartal—something that I have misgivings about—the strong

showing of the opposition in street politics has shaken the upper echelon of the Awami League leadership.

The next election, no matter if it comes next year or later, will become a referendum on Hasina's performance, and she realizes that in a performance challenge, the party in power is always at some disadvantage. Does it indicate that Sheikh Hasina is worried about the perceived public fury? Some concerns are visible. Now Hasina wants (at least publicly) to have a dialogue with the opposition, but the time for a parley may be over, although one should never say never when it comes to a rational and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

When the political antagonists are confident that they are winning the extra-constitutional battle, they usually turn a deaf ear to calls for negotiations—something reminiscent of what the Awami League did in 1995-96. The opposition discounts the dialogue feelings as no more than a ploy to puncture the momentum of an escalating agitation. The BNP-led alliance feels that it's fighting for its survival as an alternative political force. Such hardening of the opposition does not help the democratic process but, for such bitterness, the Awami League cannot put all the eggs of blame in the BNP basket. Since it returned to power in 1996, the Awami League government started with a zero-tolerance for the opposition, and it had an enemy-list flaunted in public. Sheikh Hasina looked upon the opposition forces as the abominable straw man, and tried to strike it down by numerous arrests, personal insults, and all other forms of humiliation and name-calling. But the crackdown on the opposition has not helped the Awami League's future prospects—on the contrary, the political stakes are rising against Sheikh Hasina. Still on a closer introspection, I feel that politicians, both from the government and the opposition, should stay close to the path of negotiation—the only rational

path to follow.

Arguably, if none of the two big parties has a clear and absolute victory in the future election, a coalition government with support from the smaller groups will be the only rational option. With that prospect in sight, the political mercury of the small groups, including the leftist parties, is rising. There is nothing inherently wrong with a coalition government except the shaky nature of it. Such stargazing on the political horizon is surely contingent upon free and fair elections without which the voters cannot exercise their own judgment. But that has become even more uncertain after what most non-partisan observers perceive as a "massively rigged" by-election in Tangail that Kader Siddiqui recently lost. He has not yet conceded defeat, and the acrimony is bitter. Clearly, the Awami League is further embroiled in a debilitating dispute. Was it a rational choice even if there is an iota of truth in the allegations that the AL had rigged that by-election? Judging by its absolute majority in the national parliament, the AL government would not have fallen if Kader Siddiqui had won. If election becomes a predetermined charade, and if the party leaders can get their cohorts to commit fraud and terror at the election booths, rationality is doomed to fail in that democracy.

Hasina has been under a siege—all those foreign trips are no elixir when the relentless domestic challenges are only telephone calls away. She is facing the growing internal feuds, not to mention the dangling charge sheet of corruption, inefficiency, favoritism, and a perceptible economic decline. But more vehement is the growing fear of a near-total break down of law and order—such allegations are springing across the political spectrum. [30 per cent of the respondents in that survey felt that the government had failed to maintain law and order]. Faced with such an array of odds, one obvious rational choice for the ruling party is to resign and seek a fresh mandate of the people, but Hasina does not consider it politically opportune while the constituents are, visibly, in a fed up mood. [50 per cent of the interviewees thought that the government had failed in creating more employment]. But the worst of all, the petrified Awami League government may succumb to the instinct of brutalizing the opposition with even more pressure. Not a rational move at all—it may have disastrous consequences! Yet the political future is not entirely bleak if both the opposition and the ruling party acknowledge that the best way out is to make some reasonable concessions to each other.

To start with, Hasina has an obligation to restore some dignity to the office of the Prime Minister by calling off the repeated personal attacks on the Leader of the Opposition that has brought rebuke from all except the diehard partisans on her (Hasina's) side. She must withdraw all the politically motivated cases against the opposition leaders as well as their foot soldiers. Unless there are proven cases, the political prisoners should be set free. There is no other way to restore confidence of the opposition, and no dialogue can bridge the two sides until that happens! To invite the opposition for talks, and then to insult its highest leader on the floor of the Sangsads is a cruel joke that has angered Khaleda Zia and disappointed the public. The Awami League bigwigs are still delusional—it is convoluting their political thinking, and holding them back from rational discretion. Their victory after the 21-year hiatus, has, instead of humility, created a sense of invincibility on their part, and until that is overcome, Hasina would not meet with Khaleda Zia (or with other opposition leaders) as equals. Rational preferences would not prevail as long as the Awami League overrules its own capacity and underestimates its rival's ability to challenge.

However, the rational choos-

ing party does not absolve the opposition from its own responsibility. The Awami League government has accused the opposition for encouraging violence, and many of its supporters have been charged with terrorist activities. But the opposition has denied such accusations. Except the extraordinary reasons for such action, hartal should be put on hold. Irresponsible statements like "dragging down the government" do not help the opposition posture. An elected government deserves to be "brought down" only through an election. And the BNP-led alliance is not beyond the pale when it calls for the government's resignation.

The JP and the Jamaat leaders have joined the BNP in demanding the Awami League government's resignation. But the party in power alone can take the initiative for an earlier election although it may refuse to do so until the government suffers a legislative vote of no-confidence for which there is, realistically speaking, little possibility.

While the Awami League can seek protection behind the legal fences for continuing in office, it is not unprecedented in a Westminster form of government that the cabinet resigns earlier than the scheduled time. Numerous countries with parliamentary forms of government hold elections, if political reasons demand so, way before the end of the mandated term. This happened in Japan—whenever there was any major political crisis, the government sought fresh mandate from the electorate.

People are watching both the party in power and the opposition. The use of its armed supporters to break up hartals has catapulted the Awami League government into the perilous path of dealing with the dissenters. Since the AL came to power in 1996, the BNP supporters were snuffed out from the University dormitories—it was designed to eliminate the opposition support base. But the opposition has been able to regroup, and the intermittent

strikes continued while the show of force by the government has not been relaxed. The Awami League government has the police and other law enforcement resources, which should be adequate to deal with disturbances and prevent collateral damages that regrettably come in the wake of hartals. The newspapers have been publishing disturbing pictures of the anti-hartal activists and the gun-toting chasers of the hartalists in broad daylight and in the main streets of Dhaka City. While the BNP-led opposition has no right to exert violence to enforce hartal, the charity should begin with the ruling party—it should restrain its armed upholders from chasing the civilian protesters. It is a corrosive belief that the ruling party and its operatives are somewhat above the rule of law! Nothing will work towards peaceful and rational interactions between the ruling party and the opposition parties unless all the parties disband their respective armed cadres. Will the parties on both sides of the political aisle respond to such a responsible and mutually beneficial voice?

It's clear that the ruling party wants to use the new Upazilas (and the municipal corporations) as their staging points in the next parliamentary election. If the opposition campaign continues against the ruling party, no more than a small percentage of the voters will possibly show up at the local government polls, and if the BNP-led opposition alliance wins, the new regime will, most likely, order fresh polls for the Upazilas (and the 4 municipal corporations). Local government institutions cannot upset the overwhelming trend of national politics! So the realistic option for Sheikh Hasina is to suspend the local elections until the next general election.

Rational choices give political groups, in victory as well as in crisis, some traction and purpose. If the Bangladeshi politicians are not energized with better reasoning, do they want the nation pulverized, and on the brink of a civil war, again by a violent confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition? The best rational compass to gaze is the future!

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Need for a Dialogue at the WTO

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury writes from Wisconsin, USA

CONOMISTS are famous—and often pocked at—for disagreeing among themselves, but there is a fairly solid consensus among even this, notoriously disunited group that free trade is the best way to promote prosperity around the world. Economic policy, however, is not made in a vacuum; it operates in a political context, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) needs to take greater notice of that inconvenient but undeniable fact.

The first two days of the WTO's meetings in Seattle has been disrupted and overshadowed by the noisy, and sometimes violent, protests of demonstrators from more than eight hundred organisations around the world.

The protesters are a diverse lot, ranging from well-known groups such as the US labour union AFL-CIO to relatively obscure organisations such as the Raging Grannies. But they are united by a deeply felt grievance: whatever its theoretical virtues may be, free trade is

sickening and crippling workers in unsafe working conditions, exploiting the poor, polluting the environment, forcing children to perform back- and soul-breaking labour and creating many other problems.

Some of these complaints are again overstated. If workers in impoverished countries in Asia and Africa can't sell what they make because would-be importers erect trade barriers, they may lose their

jobs. That's why the benefits of free trade are real, not just theoretical, and the protesters who ignore them are also ignoring millions of people who, without free trade, would not have jobs.

Mike Moore, the WTO's director general, makes a good point: 50,000 people may turn out in the streets of Seattle to condemn the WTO, but more than one billion other people in more than thirty countries

If the backlash against WTO continues to grow, free trade won't be politically supported, or even tolerated, in many countries. Thus more aggressive steps need to be taken to preserve the environment and protect workers' rights, either by the WTO or by organisations more specifically tailored to reach these objectives.

OPINION

Open Mind, Stunted Vision!

By Mijanur Rahman

THE Daily Star in its recent editions published two write-ups titled 'An Open Letter to the Leader of the Opposition' (November 1, 1999) and 'Open Letter, Closed Mind' (November 26, 1999)—the former was written by Dr Mozam H Khan, an expatriate Bangladeshi currently living in Canada and the latter by Mr Mohammad Badruddin Ahsan, a banker in Bangladesh.

Dr Khan's article exposes the political pitfalls of the ongoing anti-government movement launched by BNP and its allies. The writer, in the true vein of the speaker of a Browningsque monologue, speaks of his utter anguish and frustration, albeit with political undertones, over the current economic and political mayhem being perpetrated in the country in the name of politics. Helpless to provide a cure but unwilling to remain mum over the prevailing state of affairs, the writer, like many of his expatriate compatriots who are fortunate enough to witness the workings and efficacy of majestic democracy in their respective adopted land, desperately attempts to bring sanity in our politicians whose craze for power goes unabated even at the spectacle of immeasurable human sufferings.

A political track, this write-up has little option but to impinge the current political impasse plaguing the country to the failures of our politicians, and while in the light of the prevailing political imbroglio the BNP-led opposition alliance has reasons to bear most of the blame, the writer seems not to ignore this fact. The party in power has not been spared, either. While at times the writer's monologue treatment of the subject becomes enmeshed in his subjective self, he makes the whole nation's political predicaments and economic

woes of the current moment paramount. While our self-seeking politicians orchestrate orgies of destruction and mayhem, the whole populace of the country, held captive to our bellicose and eccentric politicians, seem to witness at the sufferings and sacrifice of an innocent housewife like Rina Begum. This discernible humanitarian side and appeal of this tract is sure to strike the reader's sensitive chord.

Splashed with practical examples of how democracy gets the nod in similar political ideals which are currently undergoing, this article has much to offer our politicians to behave themselves in the greater interest of the nation. The Mulroney-saga that unfolded in Canada a few years back and later took natural democratic course, should act as an eye-opener for our leaders on both sides of the political fence. Pragmatic policies towards our big neighbour, India, can help us reap the harvest of economic benefits the same way Canada is benefiting from the USA.

In his article, Mr Ahsan is highly critical of Dr Khan's views. Clothed in linguistic sophistry and shielded by misplaced historical allusions and anecdotes, his article is self-defeating in that its attempt to portray Dr Khan as partisan arraying with the Leader of the Opposition. Besides, the very logic he uses to defend the Opposition Leader's current destructive politics of hartals and stoppages appears to be fallacious. The writer seems to be vulnerable in his argument that what Khaleda Zia is resorting to in the name of politics is being done under the rights and a licence legitimised by her political opponent while she was in the opposition camp: "If the

witty aphorisms is nothing more than a veiled attack on some historically settled issues only kept at abeyance for a while by vested groups in the post-1975 period. By using innuendos and historical stories, the writer has either tried to justify the past happenings that had cast the nation into abyssal political uncertainty or to predict repetition of such incidents in the future. He is partially right when he says that "politics is ultimately the calculus of public sentiments when a leader can bring exponential growth in popularity through his thought and action. The reverse is also true in equal intensity". While many regimes have fallen and risen in the dictate of this historical