

Give Them Space

LET'S call a spade a spade. When the activists of student organisations belonging to the four opposition parties had planned to march on the campus in protest against conferment of honorary degree on PM Sheikh Hasina, the government was right to ask them to keep off. Understandingly, on the penultimate day to the 40th convocation when the stage was set to simultaneously honour Nobel Laureate Prof Amartya Sen with the Doctor of Science degree, the government did not want to see the arrangement disrupted. We were prepared to accept the government's concern over protests within the campus which the four student organisations had sought to stage; but we do think also that the government was entirely wrong in mounting a full-scale assault on student activists who were trying to take out processions or organise protest rallies well outside the perimeter of the university on Friday. In particular, we find no reason why when the JCD had attempted to bring out a procession from in-front of the BNP central office, the police should have fallen upon them in a most ruthless fashion, somewhat in excess of their earlier preemptive strikes.

Under what law was it done? There was no announcement of section 144 having been clamped to disallow assembly of people nor was any ban on procession declared to warn the agitators off. Even if these measures were announced we would have criticised the move on the ground that the right to dissent is the bed rock of democracy and so long as it is exercised peacefully there cannot be any governmental impediment to it. What we are even more disdainful of is the crackdown of such a severity without waiting to see if it had got violent. The deliberateness about it is evidently symptomatic of the government's failure to differentiate between what constitutes a concern for law and order and what amounts to autocratic behaviour. The people are greatly confused by such a mix-up.

That said, we express our strongest disapproval and condemnation of the destruction of public property, including vehicles, that the opposition student activists went for in a show of hooliganism. The property and vehicles which damaged did not belong to AL government, rather these were public assets.

On balance, we have to say that the government is giving little space to the opposition for its programmes. Any dispassionate observer of recent events must be convinced of the imperative need for greater accommodation from the government side on whom the responsibility basically devolves to be the political trend-setter.

Smriti Soudha Desecrated

OVERWHELMED the sense of proportion in our political leaders and activists; so much so that they don't even hesitate to violate solemnity of a national day and sanctity of a martyrs' mausoleum. Even before the outcry over the ruling party-backed BCL's highhandedness and monopolistic attitude displayed on the Martyred Intellectuals' Day could die down, came the despicable musclemanship at the Jatiya Smriti Soudha in Savar on the Victory Day. Desecration of memorials induced by political zealotry is not quite new though. Every year, Shaheed Minar experiences rowdiness of varying degrees perpetrated by student activists of mainstream political parties on Amar Ekushey. As it seems, politics, of the blend currently in practice, won't even spare our national events.

Over the years, our leaders have blatantly sought to own our national events, exaggerating and fabricating their respective roles in, for example, the Language Movement and the War of Liberation. Their imprudence has bred impudence and arrogance in the activists which found expression in the incidents at the Mirpur Memorial and Savar Smriti Soudha. In their bid to run each other down, they have actually undermined the spirit of the liberation war, sacrifice of the martyrs and, above all, themselves as part of an independent nation. The Victory Day should have inspired tolerance, if not magnanimity, in the political leaders and activists; but has, unfortunately, bred animosity instead. Why? The answer lies in their inadequacy as citizens and their self-proclaimed role of leaders.

We would very much like to believe that our politicians will lead the country to newer heights of success in the new millennium. However, after this year's Martyred Intellectuals' Day and Victory Day observances, our confidence stands somewhat bruised.

Price of Medicine

THE drug administration authority's failure to reduce medicine prices despite 'tax breaks' allowed to the manufacturers has been a disconcerting piece of news. In fact the meeting last week of this important organisation after about thirty months since June, 1997 intrigued us a good deal. Country's drug policy introduced by Ershad's autocratic regime in the middle of 80's had a profound impact on the manufacturers as well as sellers and users. Many of the popular brands identified as 'unnecessary or superfluous' were banned and their sale, manufacture and use were prohibited.

The entire exercise was done in the name of making available cheaper and essential drugs and medicines to the people. But though the raw materials have registered a 40 per cent drop in prices since 1997 it has hardly had any bearing on the prices of locally produced medicines. The Drug Administration wields a jurisdiction over 117 drugs and medicines produced locally, of which only 80 to 85 per cent, are available in the market; but unfortunately they have little effective control over the prices. As a result, people are forced to buy Indian medicines available in the local market at a cheaper price. This has exposed some of our pharmaceutical industries to an unequal competition with smuggled Indian medicines. Once again it is evident that the borders are wide open and our government is deep in slumber as usual. The pharmaceutical industry which has earned a reputation in the international market is likely to become sick if it is not given a level playing-field. Is the government listening?

TWO blots on India cannot be easily rubbed off. One is the killing of 3,000 Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. The other is the killing of 1,000 Muslims in Mumbai in the wake of the Babri masjid demolition in December 1990.

The first one came before parliament the other day in reply to a question. Members justifiably felt shocked over the slow pace of punishment to the police officials, who had openly involved themselves with the killing and looting. Even the action taken against some 12 officials in Delhi was cursory, not beyond withholding increment or administering censure.

Home Minister L K Advani was unhappy over the light penalty. I do not know why he expressed his helplessness when Delhi is under the overall control of Home Ministry. However, he readily agreed to the appointment of a commission to go into the matter *de novo*.

It was strange that the Congress members remained silent during the discussion as if they feared that the commission would point its finger at the party. Opposition leader Manmohan Singh should have spoken there and then. But he kept quiet and this was misunderstood.

His subsequent statement that the Congress had no objection to the constitution of a commission came hours late. Maybe, he had to consult party president Sonia Gandhi since the 1984 riots are said to have cast a shadow on Rajiv Gandhi. Poor Manmohan Singh has been receiving hate-mail and his children, threats. Leave the Congress apart,

Advani should have gone ahead with the appointment of the commission when the entire House welcomed the proposal. But he was reluctant. He explained to me that since the Congress had attacked the BJP for filing the Bofors gun case in the court, he did not want to be maligned for 'politicising' the 1984 riots.

Advani may be right in thinking that way. But it does not lessen the crime of those who participated in the killing and looting. It is an open secret that some Delhi Congress leaders instigated the mob and that the police were also involved. Rajiv Gandhi was then the Prime Minister. People, particularly the Sikhs have not forgotten his observation: *Jab ek bada ped girta hai to kuch to zamin hilti hai* (when one big tree falls, the earth shakes to some extent).

I do not know whether the commission can bring out anything new after 15 years. But the passage of time helps sometimes to see things more clearly. The crime part has been looked into but the motive part has not been. The commission may be able to throw light on the reason for making the Sikhs a target and why the authorities were late in acting against the rioters. The earlier commissions and committees have gone into the nitty-gritty of law and order. The new commission should go into the political aspect. Why did the Congress leaders jump into the fray?

Playing with Fire

Commissions have no meaning if the government drags its feet when it comes to taking action on their recommendations. Past experience shows that no government or party has followed the advice of any commission, much less punished those who have been mentioned by name.

The Home Ministry can tear a leaf out of South Africa's book and appoint a Truth and Conciliation Commission (TCC). The statements made before it was not punishable but those who made them were truthful. The TCC made it clear that it wanted the culprits to have the catharsis of confession. The commission should also examine Manmohan Singh's statement during the election that the RSS, not the Congress, was responsible for the 1984 riots. This observation is said to have been responsible for his defeat.

supported the proposal of a commission, there should be an early announcement about it. If an eminent person from the South were to head it, the involvement of the North would not be suspected.

That Attorney General Soli Sorabji has been consulted shows that the government is on the job. He was brought into the picture before the matter came up before the Rajya Sabha the second time. On that occasion, the government should have announced categorically that the commission would be

Mumbai resembled the streets of Nazi Germany. The attackers on Muslims and their houses were not sporadic or spontaneous but very much planned and systematic. Over 1,000 persons were killed and property worth Rs. 1,500 crore destroyed.

The Shiv Sena government, in which the BJP was a partner, was held responsible by the Justice BN Srikrishna Commission. The judge directly and indirectly criticised Sena-BJP leaders for participation in the violence. But to date even officers who have been indicted in the commission's report have not been punished.

I once asked a question in parliament on the non-compliance of the Srikrishna report. Advani said in reply that the report had first to be accepted by the state government. Since it had not accepted it, he said, no action could be taken by the Centre. Now that the Congress-led coalition has accepted the report and within two months, Advani should have no hesitation in punishing the IAS and IPS officers, who have been named in the commission report. Both services are under the Home Ministry.

There are reports that the Maharashtra government, which has a wafer-thin majority in the state assembly, may not take on the saffron combine, particularly when the action would mean moving against Sena chief Bal Thackeray. I hope that the Congress-

led government does not put the report on the back burner.

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The Shah Commission, which went into the excesses committed during the emergency (1975-77), had proposed a look by outsiders into the working of all police agencies, including the Intelligence Bureau and the Central Bureau of Investigation. But nothing has been done because the agencies are afraid to be exposed. And working hand in glove with the party in power, they have been politicised. The CBI's credibility has come to be questioned following a recent case where the agency is said to have manipulated a murder case because the accused was a police officer's son.

In fact, there is need to overhaul the entire police machinery and its operation in dealing with the public particularly the phenomenon of communal violence. The force has got contaminated. As was seen in Delhi in 1984 and in Mumbai in 1996-97, the rioting, ultimately came down to confrontation between the minorities and the police. This continues to happen even today.

Something has to be done about the religiosity of policeman. At least temples, mosques and gurdwaras at the Police Lines should be closed. Those who want to pray can go to places in the city. Otherwise, we are playing with fire.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The Congress may have party washed away its sins when it has lent its voice to the demand on the appointment of the commission. A Sikh Lok Sabha member of the Congress said that his party would welcome the security by a commission. But his was a lone observation. When he made it he was neither backed by the party spokesmen nor by Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has also said that the appointment of the commission depended on the Congress party's okaying the proposal.

Now that the Congress has amended its mistake and has constituted. Instead, leader of the House, Jaswant Singh, said that the government would consider appointing the commission. Why this equivocal attitude?

The appointment of the commission may prick the BJP conscience. It may decide to take action against the killers and the looters in Mumbai. The situation at that time (Dec 1996-Jan 1997) was so bad that civil liberty groups requested the President of India to send the army to set things right. An eminent retired judge of the Mumbai High Court summed up the situation when he said in an interview that the streets of

Sino-Russian Understanding

A Political Exigency or a Long-term Strategy?

Yeltsin desperately wanted support because it is important for him to raise his image internationally and more importantly at home. With the coming presidential elections, prime minister Putin, who is in charge of the Chechnya problem, must improve his position before the Russian people as a "dynamic leader" by whipping up nationalist phobia.

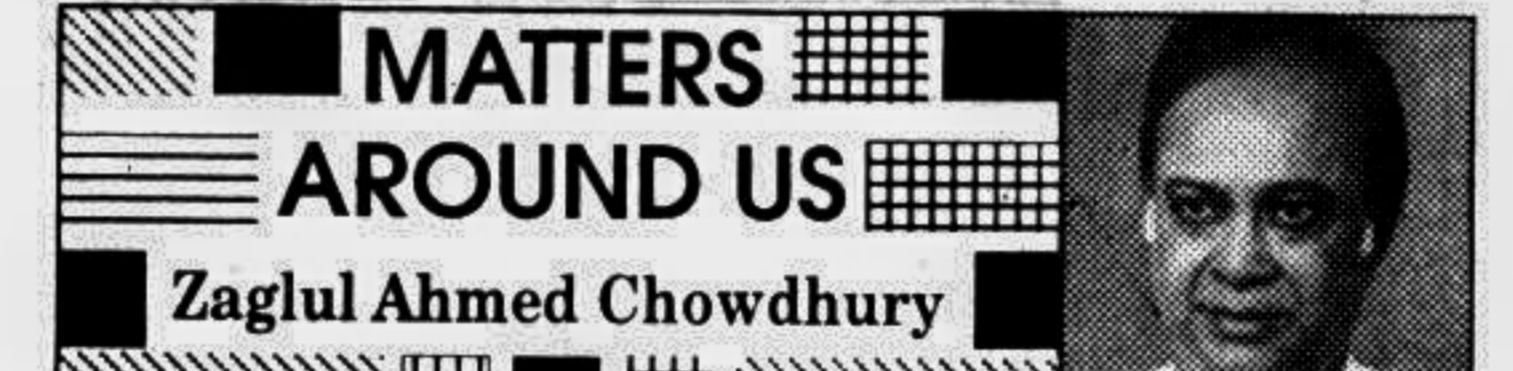
THE recent summit level understanding between two important nations, on a variety of issues, leaving aside their earlier acrimony marks a major development in the current international scene. The strategically timed summit at Beijing was designed to send a number of messages to the West - mainly to the United States. The outcome of the Yeltsin-Zemin meeting carries significance in the global context. The results of the summit between Russian federation president Boris Yeltsin and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin were, in a way, unexpectedly harsh against the West. But certainly, the basis of their new understanding did come somewhat as a surprise to many since it was tough on certain counts in one hand and reflection of compromise on the other.

Evidently, the Russian president chose to visit Beijing at a time when it is facing two key issues - the Chechnya problem and the coming presidential elections in Russia. Both are important for him because he has launched the military offensive against autonomous region Chechnya and he has to see the end of this in the form of punishing the recalcitrant republic where the Russian soldiers failed to accomplish his task in a similar campaign in 1994-96. This time they are determined to wipe out the "terrorists" in Chechnya and it appears they are on the verge of achieving this objective despite resistance from the other side. About the coming presidential elections, Boris Yeltsin is not a candidate for the same, since he has already served two terms and is barred for a third by the constitution. But despite failing health that requires him to be in the hospital regularly, Yeltsin wants to maintain his

grip on politics and power. He is keen to see that one of his candidates emerges as the next president so that he can call the shots. It is this consideration that has prompted him to pick up Vladimir Putin from relative obscurity hoping he becomes the next president. The president wants that Putin acquires a national stature for the elections and Chechnya issue provides the opportunity to achieve the goal.

During his talks in Beijing, President Yeltsin has extracted his slice of the cake from the Chinese opposite number to the best of his satisfaction. In turn, he compromised his principled position with the present-day biggest communist nation China whereas he is decrying communism as he swept to power as the first democratically elected president in the wake of the collapse of great socialist country - the old Soviet Union.

Presidents of Russian federation and China wrapped up the two-day summit last week, jointly declaring their commitment to oppose foreign intervention for the sake of human rights. The statement underscored how close the overtures have drawn now. Propped by their opposition to NATO's war to stop ethnic purges in Kosovo and sharp western criticisms of Moscow's military offensive against Chechnya, two countries have now found common grounds on some crucial areas. President Yeltsin won support from China - the population-wise largest nation on Chechnya



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

tangle, while he compromised on his position on human rights as he not only failed to echo western allegations, the communist China as done by most of the democracies, but also went a step further by warning the West and others not to consider this as a pretext to interfere in the affairs of other nations. He also extended support to Chinese claim on Taiwan. Obviously, the understanding that the two leaders reached warrants significance on a variety of reasons. Russia was not in much good terms with the China because two nations now belong to different camps. The former Soviet Union was the embodiment of socialism as V. I. Lenin turned it as a sound communist society on the basis of Marxism and socialist thoughts. China too is a big socialist country where Mao Se Tung's leadership and communist ideas made it a force to reckon with. But Beijing never claimed itself as a big power and remained in the midst of developing nations, while the US and the Soviet Union were two superpowers leading two camps - NATO and WARSAW PACT.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 drastically changed the world political

map and balance of power as WARSAW PACT disappeared and its members embraced democracy. The Soviet Union also suffered geographical setbacks as some other independent states emerged from it, and in the process, the US remained the sole superpower. The development came as a big blow to the socialist world but China remained steadfast as a communist nation and so were Cuba and Vietnam although they watched with great concern the demise of giant communist state Soviet Union. Beijing's relations cannot be very warm with the present democratic Russian federation, which abandoned socialism. True, China had problems with the old Soviet Union but, broadly, both belonged to the same ideology. The Russian federation and its pro-West president cannot be an ally for Beijing as much as it does not trust the West despite the fact that the US and China have come closer on many fields. Russia and China have also border differences and this time two leaders signed three accords defining the 4,250-km-long border and joint use of the disputed islands.

Clearly, the signing of the accords on border was not much of their objective as much as

two leaders wanted understanding on certain issues. Although China saw Yeltsin as being propped up by the West and the Russian president often comes down on the opposition communists' strategic interests drove them reach agreements on certain matters which they saw would serve their interests. President Zemin rejected West's concerns about human rights and annihilation of civilian population in Chechnya in the current Russian offensive. And this represented a major gain for Yeltsin since an understanding with China on it would largely diminish any chance of possible western interference centring the Chechnya crisis. After Chinese support, it looks that the West will be more cautious if at all it thought of interfering in Chechnya.

Yeltsin desperately wanted this support because a massive win in this crisis is important for him to raise his image internationally and more importantly at home. With the coming presidential elections, his protegee prime minister Putin, who is in charge of the Chechnya problem, must portray himself as a "dynamic leader" by whipping up nationalist phobia. This objective is being attained to a great extent since most Russians would like to see a severe punishment to the rebellious republic. However, the war in Chechnya remains far from being won although Moscow is closing in. Beijing, not surprisingly, seized the opportunity of Russian support to its claim on Taiwan, which earlier was not forthright from Yeltsin. Yeltsin paid scant importance to the issue of human

rights in China since the West always sees the country as tampering these rights. China rejected these accusations.

The new understanding between Russia and China should not come as a total surprise. They found some common concerns during the NATO war against Yugoslavia, and Yeltsin had soft words for Beijing after initial hesitation in the aftermath of NATO bombing in the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which Washington saw as an "accident". China also considered Chechnya issue a broad-in-line with the Taiwan controversy and ensured Moscow's support to its claim to it while extended own support to Russian position in Chechnya. Two sides sought to seize their own interests from the summit. But the outcome will force the West in taking an immediate overview of the entire international diplomacy following the summit.

Some western analysts feel that the summit was designed to fend off possible western interference in Chechnya and it will not have wider repercussions once the tangle is over; because both China and Russia need western financial and trade cooperation. However, some others say that it may produce some kind of a qualitative change in the global pattern of international relationship, because the summit also challenged the "One" superpower dominance. The foreign minister of G-8 nations currently meeting in Berlin is likely to deliberate on this issue. Russia is also a member there. This undoubtedly noteworthy but its implications are unlikely to be clear in the immediate future. But few would dispute that Sino-Russian basis of new understanding would raise eyebrows in several quarters with some wondering whether it is a political exigency for the time being or a long-term strategy.

To the Editor...

"Retarded Diplomacy"

Sir, I am very impressed by the editorial "Retarded Diplomacy" on the 2nd December. It has focused the importance of modern diplomacy. The image of a country depends much on the competence of diplomats representing their respective country. Obviously the role of a diplomat is vital in enhancing his country's image abroad.

Let us hope that our diplomats do their best abroad. The inter-cadre rivalry and differences between the two groups of appointees in the Foreign Service must end.

Abul Asraf Noor, Dhaka-1230

DCC Mayor

Sir, From the report 'Mayoral arrogance' on December 6 '99 and the editorial 'Mayor's Commercial Flair' on December 7 '99, we learnt that the mayor of Dhaka City Corporation is going to build a hawkers' market at the Udayan and we further learnt that an office of the Jubo League - youth front of the ruling party - was set up there.

We felt happy that the government has decided to build the NAM convention centre somewhere else. But the recent news shocked us. How can the mayor take such a step? It seems that the mayor has a silent nod from the government. Is the government going to take revenge on the people by setting up a hawkers' market at the Osmany Udayan?

Nur Jahon Chittagong

the old and new parts of the capital city. Recently the government withdrew its previous decision to build NAM convention centre at the Udayan due to public protest.

But the fate of this greenery is not yet safe. To make good on his election pledge, the city mayor is determined to construct a hawkers' market at the Udayan. He seems ignorant of the criticism from different quarters. It is obvious that reduction of open space in a concrete-crammed area would damage the eco-balance. But the city-father does not realise this underlying threat.

So we urge the prime minister to intervene.

Md Ahmadul Haque 510, Zia Hall University of Dhaka

Tender thoughts

Sir, Nowadays tendering (dropping tender in tender box) is not a tender but commando operation. It is done in guerrilla style at risk to one's life; and later the quality of work or supply as tendered suffers (as also the health of the tenderer). Those who interfere are said to be linked with powerful godfathers. Divine God (above, and everywhere) is also invisible. The comparison ends there.

There is plenty of potential power in this poor country, with high hopes and light wallets; but it is hugely misused, without flutter of the qualms of conscience. There is no such old-fashioned commodity known as conscience; only black tools of science are available in the black market, for grey operations, tinged with red.

In how to earn one's honest living in this country unless one is allowed to drop a tender in the

tender box? The authorities here have the reputation of skirting this responsibility and frolic about, and find solace in the arms of arms; or arms and the man.

Tenderness is eroding in the human breast in this wild, wild country of *mastaans* and *moshas* (political mosquitoes) who whine and buzz in the corridors of power - for its misuse. Let us erect a Memorial to the rapid-fire governance of this country, without mentioning any names - the sad demise of 'The Unknown Soldiers' who relax their wallets to let others live.

AZ Dhaka

Importance of extra-curricular activities

Sir, I have gone through the articles published in the special supplement brought out by the DS on the occasion of the 3rd Convocation of North South University (NSU) on December 9, 1999.

In fact I had very limited idea about NSU, but after reading the articles I learnt a lot. Undoubtedly NSU is an ideal centre of learning.

I appreciate the concluding remarks made by the outgoing American English teacher Kate Baldus in her write-up titled - 'A Year at NSU in 10 Words or Less', which read: 'I look forward to being able to broaden the impression Americans have of Bangladesh. It will be pleasure to tell them that this is a country of more than floods and famine. Similarly, I hope that during the past year I have shown my colleagues and students that America is about more than consumerism and

fast food. I believe that it is through one-on-one cross-cultural exchanges like these that new ideas and understandings flow between countries.'

I also liked the article - *My Life at University* written by an NSU student. I quote: 'NSU life revolves around various student activity clubs and the university encourages our involvement in such extra-curricular activities. Students learn the true essence of working together and try to treat their club work as seriously as they do their studies.'

It is indeed encouraging to learn that the NSU attaches due importance on extra-curricular activities along with regular studies.

M Zahidul Haque BAI, Dhaka-1207

WRIP proposal

Sir, The American oil and gas company UNOCAL has given Western Regions Integrated Project (WRIP) to Bangladesh at a cost of \$ 700 million. UNOCAL will develop a gas field in Bhola and set up 150 km gas transmission pipeline through Gopalganj district to Khulna and other places. UNOCAL will also install four power stations to produce electricity.

We are impressed by this offer as the Bangladesh government doesn't have to spend any money for this. However, previous foreign investments in Bangladesh have not been very impressive. Ershad governments KAPCO urea factory and Roazan power plant-1 and Khaleida Zia government's Roazan power plant-2 have caused a huge loss. Bangladesh has been about 4000 crore taka on these projects.

We should be very careful to handling such future projects.

Khairul Anam Dhaka.

OPINION

A Decade of Transition

A Husnain

Politics in Bangladesh has been passing through a basic transitory period towards practical democracy during the decade of the 1990s. By 1999 it is obvious that the nation needs more time to enjoy the fruits of the political labour, initiated at the beginning of the decade by the grand overthrow of the autocratic regime (of 9 years), by a combined civilian street demonstration involving the major political parties, and the people. The defence forces and the civil service also played key indirect roles.

Before unlearning, the lessons have to be learnt first. So the question is what the society learnt during these ten years, and what should be the programme for the unlearning process: how to depend less on the negative approach and cultivate the positive outlook on how to get things done. It is high time for the critical evaluation and reevaluation by the players and the outside and independent observers.

The period of unlearning has arrived - the shedding of the evil practices, and starting with a clean slate. The old ways of political thinking is not working anymore, as the public sensitivity is high due to past recorded isom and experience, and the narrowing of the communication gap. The Bangladesh electorate today is highly sensitised, having half a century's experience of the various experiments in 'good' governance, including the break up of Pakistan. Therefore the politicians would be hard put to it in trying to spot scapegoats,

as they are the major players, but the judgement is carried out by the society, and not the politicians, although the latter offer views and solutions.

The country has bogged down to political infighting, with bipolar politics prevailing, coated with layers of charismatic cosmetics. There are reasons for this unstable base, and the wavering at the top. There is no more time to watch the distant rainbow, but to go ahead with the process of synthesis to produce the uniform sunlight produced by the colours of the rainbow. Childhood jealousy is a recognized symptom of growing up. Are we now passing through this phase of political jealousy, and have not started to grow up? The uncleaned municipal garbage (it belongs to the DCC) in the metropolis is a symbol of the times. There is the political garbage to clear, and keep the political arteries cholesterol-free, otherwise political hypertension (popularly known as blood pressure) will continue to prevail. The creators of the garbage are not interested in its clearance. The job belongs to other agencies and sectors. Who will clear the political garbage? Politics has to compete with the other market forces. There have been political fall-outs before, and one more is apparently due now, as per symptoms. Some political meddling is needed to channelise the stagnant pools. The current style is to stifle the other styles on the political stage. This may not work, as it never did. Who are drafting the new blueprint?