

Dialogue is the Public Choice

THE Daily Star's sampling of public reaction to Begum Zia's spurning of PM's persistent dialogue offer and her vow to go for frequent hartals has yielded an interesting result. The cross-section of people approached by us unanimously insisted that a dialogue be held but felt it could only come about after a congenial atmosphere has been created for it. This sensible bit of public opinion which can safely be termed as the mirror-image of what the electorate as a whole wants to see happen does give a cue to the political leaders for a pause.

We have an impassioned appeal to make to both our principal political personages — Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina. First, we owe Begum Zia a professional responsibility to urge her to see the point that an agitational extremism of the kind she seems determined to embark upon is a clear recipe for disaster — political, economic and social. The nation will certainly not be the gainer for it, far less her own party, even a political novice can visualise that. The supreme irony in all this is that the whole of the ominous prospect looks so avoidable. All she needs to do is to see the merit of sitting for a dialogue in place of rejecting it out of hand which presages a whole lot of dangers.

However, the truth of the matter on the other side is the dire need for congenialising the atmosphere for talks, a problem which is no longer rhetorical now. Khaleda Zia's demands for releasing her party activists from jail and withdrawing cases started against others among her followers are worthy of active attention if we are to clear the deck for talks. As for BNP's clamour for the PM to retract her insinuating remarks on Begum Zia our view has been that an expression of regret should not amount to genuflection.

But some positive feeler should also come from Begum Zia that she would be prepared after all to eschew the hartal option and sit for a dialogue with the government. This is because she has been much too rigidly negative so far to inspire otherwise.

Primary Teachers' Plight

PRIMARY school teachers staging a sit-in at the Osmany Udyan since Sunday to press home their demands for nationalisation of primary schools is yet another case of the government's failure to address an issue before it turns into a crisis. We have always found the government's reluctance to address such matters at the initial stage rather intriguing which made us suggest earlier on that an inter-ministerial body be set up to deal with such problems. Obviously this went unheeded.

At this point of time, though, we would request the government to identify the means to put an end to the deadlock. Abstention of teachers from work at the beginning of the year is bound to have a telling impact on academic activities at different non-government schools. Therefore, the sooner the crisis is overcome and the teachers are talked into resumption of their work the better.

In the long term, however, we would like the government to come up with a definitive formula to address the problem that has remained unresolved for so many years. As we understand, the policy-planners are not too keen on nationalisation of primary education and want management of the non-government schools delegated to local communities and NGOs. Although pertinent in the context of an inclination towards privatisation, the plan nonetheless contradicts the ruling AL's electoral pledge to the primary school teachers while it is in opposition. Surely, it has not forgotten that it did endorse their demand for nationalisation when BNP was in power. Besides, by denying the demonstrators access to water and use of lavatories at the nearby Nagar Bhaban, the government has earned some adverse publicity. On the other hand, the teachers have been exposed to pickpocketing and mugging. The situation has, overall, assumed precarious character.

We would request the authorities concerned, especially people from the Primary Education Directorate, to immediately initiate a dialogue with the demonstrators to defuse the situation. Our plea also goes to the teachers to go back to their respective institutions and resume work. They should contemplate other means to give vent to their grievances than indirectly harming the students.

Shopowners Know Where it Hurts

OWNERS and employees of shops for electrical goods and appliances located along Nawabpur Road in the city's commercial hub went on a 30-minute token strike on Tuesday afternoon in protest against what they called, extortion and terror being regularly inflicted on them. The exasperated owners were responding to the call of Bangladesh Electrical Association. They brought out a procession and held a rally in front of the office of the Association. The leaders of the community were unanimous in voicing their demand to the government for curbing the menace of terrorism and extortion on pain of facing non-payment of taxes by the shopowners.

Their unified stance against the culprits who often claim links to the ruling party should send the right message to all concerned. Police connivance has also been alleged by sufferers and a number of reports to such effect have been published in the national press from time to time. Illegal toll collection, blackmailing and abduction of businessmen, and physically assaulting shopowners on refusal to pay ransom or toll have all become very rampant. The business community, in particular, is writhing from a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. But the government of the day is seemingly underplaying the potential threat to peace and security in the society. The rulers must take lesson from history and try their best to restore peace in the society for the wellbeing of the citizens as well as the future of democracy.

Towards a Point of No-return

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

In her final delivery in the Businessmen's Conference on January 24, the BNP chairperson had unambiguously declared that there was nothing to discuss with the Awami League government. It must handover power to the caretaker government now or else face ouster, she said categorically. If needed she would have hartal every day because she could no longer afford to see the ruin of the country.

as 'grabbing power from the back door. Though there is no elucidation, it is very much palpable. It is an oblique pointer to the military rulers between November 1975 and October, 1990. Irrespective of the envisioned 'some other way' it is good to see that Begum Zia has been able to measure the innate strength of the ruling party. This, incidentally, coincides with the statement often made by the leaders of Awami League rejecting the opposition threat to oust the government before the end of its 5-year term. Begum Zia's willingness to participate in a discussion with the government, subject to latter's ensuring a proper environment' could have been the outcome of such a realisation, though belated.

Sheikh Hasina's innovative 'government of consensus' though consistently rejected by her political adversary, chiefly, Begum Khaleda Zia, seems now to have created positive impact on her mind and on the thinking of her party leaders. In this connection, we have at hand a recent observation from BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan. He said that if voted back to power BNP would form a 'government of consensus'. At it quick came a recort from the Awami League Secretary General, Zillur Rahman who branded it as the 'government of anti-liberation forces'.

It is regrettable to note that the Awami League leader has missed the moral and political victory that his leader, Sheikh Hasina and her 'government of consensus' has won. At least the efficacy of such a government now in vogue has been openly appreciated by the main

opposition, though late than never. We recall that when in opposition, before June, 1996 election, Sheikh Hasina led the mass movement on one single point, i.e. election under a Caretaker government. Begum Zia and her party literally jeered at Sheikh Hasina and sarcastically behaved such a demand as a product of a lunatic brain or that of a child. But she couldn't withstand the massive popularity of the demand and eventually had to concede. And now she doesn't foresee any election, be it the national election or the elections of different tiers of local government without a caretaker government. She didn't relish 'hartal and now she finds it just otherwise. By now, we have had enough examples to corroborate.

Notwithstanding the apparently agreeable note on a discussion with the government the concurrent overtures in the opposition movement would offer an altogether different, hostile manifestation. The latest example, the formation of 'Sangram Parishad' would negate the prospect of any positive development on a compromise. In this regard, the stand of the government is equally intriguing for the opposition in as much as that its offer for a dialogue with a parallel castigation of the other side remains charged with uncertainty. 'The need of the hour is to command restraint, till the holding of the proposed discussion, by both the entities. Sheikh Hasina's renewed offer for a dialogue, even on opposition's 1-point demand, in the opening day of the FBCCI convened Businessmen's Conference on January 22, could only then deserve consideration.

By and large, FBCCI organized 2-day conference devoted to create a new dimension towards solving the current political crisis. The Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was the chief guest on the first day while former Premier Khaleda Zia was the chief guest on the 2nd and concluding day. Commerce Minister Tofiq Ahmed observed that if the intention of the organisers of the conference was to bring the position and the opposition nearer to each other and eventually to urge upon both for a consensus on major national contentious issues then it would have been rewarding to unite the leaders of both the ruling party and of the opposition together on the opening day. Indeed it was a pertinent point raised by Mr Tofiq Ahmed which, too, can be considered as a positive indication of the willingness of the ruling party to forge a settlement with the opposition. The chamber leaders didn't however make any clarification on the point. They intend to go by a different strategy. FBCCI President and that of BGMEA Abdul Awal Minto and Anisur Rahman Sinha, respectively, had made a dispassionate appeal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to take a meaningful initiative even if it meant greater sacrifice on her part. Mr Sinha in particular, thought no amount of concession granted by Sheikh Hasina would be dearer than the price being paid by the business community due to hartal and the concurrent political unrest.

Taking cue from the suggestions made by the two chamber leaders Sheikh Hasina described the numerous efforts she had made so far to talk to

Begum Zia and lamented that the leader of the opposition could not show the minimum courtesy to respond. Even her personal call over telephone was neither attended nor she could give a return call to Sheikh Hasina till date. The Prime Minister asked her listeners what else she could do. She exhorted the business leaders to pursue the matter more vigorously adding that she would be ever ready to cooperate. In the course she suggested that the proposed discussion could even be telecast/broadcast directly from the venue for public viewing/listening. Even she was prepared to reply any question from the viewers.

The intervening day between the first and the second day of the Businessmen's conference was the scene of a rally organised by BNP at the Paltan Maidan. As usual the chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia was the principal speaker. The theme of her speech was the proposed dialogue with Sheikh Hasina. Her first reaction was that there was no scope for any discussion with Awami League and she thought it was already too late.

She continued that there was little time left for the government to hand over power to a caretaker government and added that only then the people might forgive it. She hinted on a mass upsurge when the Awami Leaguers would have no time to flee the country. The same old threat that she and her party leaders have been fond of, since long. These are the provocative speeches with which we have been familiar. And when the speakers make their deliberation particularly

on the alleged corrupt practices of their adversaries they indulge in such rhetoric to convey an impression that they were all celestial bodies having nothing to do with those earthly vices. Cases of corruption, abuse of power and nepotism now sub judice in the courts of law are easily branded as 'false cases'. Out of sheer jubilation and ecstasy some of the BNP leaders had foreseen that their return to power was a matter of time and that the leaders of the Awami League government would have to face a bigger number of cases on charges of corruption, nepotism, abuse of power etc. Besides, they would be subjected to people's wrath for having 'ruined the national economy'.

So, in her final delivery in the Businessmen's Conference on January 24, the BNP chairperson had unambiguously declared that there was nothing to discuss with the Awami League government. It must handover power to the caretaker government now or else face ouster, she said categorically. If needed she would have hartal every day because she could no longer afford to see the ruin of the country. Her stubborn overture was utterly disappointing to the business leaders. Their effort, as of now for a rapprochement between the government and the opposition appears to have floundered on the rock of desolation.

Frustration all around shall not be easy to be neutralized unless the leader of the opposition allows herself a second thought. The note of hope I started with taking cue from a statement attributed to Begum Zia appears at the end to be either unfounded or an incongruous contradiction. Whatever it is, the whole nation continues to remain plunged in a terrible uncertainty. May be we are heading to a point of no-return, a veritable nose-dive to the abyssal depth of total destruction.

BNP Chief reacts angrily, unwisely and destructively

Continued from page 1

closed, children cooped up at home and being deprived of education. We see students loitering aimlessly or turning city streets into play fields. We see some of them mingling with masts and becoming one of them out of sheer boredom of having nothing else to do. We also see some of them being 'politically educated' to pelt stones on cars, burn down shops that dare to defy hartal calls and throw home made bombs on the police that political party veterans make but do not dare to carry on their person for fear of accidental explosion. This is but one scenario among plenty others that our readers can easily imagine.

In the midst of the obvious losses, the more insidious results of continuous agitation and hartals is the indiscipline that spread throughout the society. The habit of a full working week is slackened, and a tendency of expecting unearned holidays creep in. Suddenly a full week starts to feel burdensome and the scrounging habits takes over. These are intangible but serious after effects of long drawn hartals.

But far above all these effects, what really damages the society is that the criminals start becoming assertive in these circumstances. They start masquerading as opposition activists looting factories or damaging properties in the name of enforcing hartals. The contrary is equally true. In the name of making 'hartal free zones' criminals become ruling party activists and attack the opposition. Some local scores are settled, even murders occur under the guise of hartal clashes. Suddenly there is no accountability for crime because both sides are committing them in the name of either 'enforcing' or 'resisting' hartals. The tragedy is that we can find the most articulate and

vigorous defence of hartals in Sheikh Hasina's statements before she came to power and the most powerful articulation of the evil effects of hartals in those of Khaleda Zia before she lost power. Now that the tables are turned, they are saying the exact opposite. Such is the opportunistic character of their political beliefs. And yet they want us to believe and trust them. How ironic?

The writer and this newspaper have always stood for democratic space for the opposition. We have rigorously argued against the oppressive measures of the government and have repeatedly condemned the police action on opposition. In many ways we understand that there is sufficient ground for the opposition to be extremely suspicious of the ruling party. And yet, we cannot support the total rejection of the process of dialogue as adopted by Khaleda Zia. We think it is fundamentally undemocratic, supremely arrogant and downright dangerous.

Let us leap in time and focus not on the next election, but what will happen after it is held. Obviously one of these two parties or alliances will emerge victorious. Will the AL, being forced to cut short its five-year term, accept the result and allow the new government to function for the full term? What will happen if Awami League returns to power in the next election? If Khaleda Zia finds it below her taste or dignity to talk to Sheikh Hasina now, will she talk to her then? The language that opposition uses - this government, which is subservient to a foreign power, must be brought down to save the people from virtual slavery - takes for granted that people will vote for the opposition alliance in the next election. In fact their calculation is that the AL got 37 per cent vote in '96 elections and the rest got a combined 63 per cent. So in the next election

they cannot lose unless Awami League rigs it. We asked several BNP leaders this question, and the usual answer was a certain "we cannot lose" or at best an evasive "we will see at that time." We are forced to conclude that the fact that election results may go either way is something which is not in their minds at all. This mentality cannot breed democratic behaviour. It can only breed self-righteousness and anger and prevent one from facing reality.

We raise this point simply because it was the failure to wholeheartedly accept by AL in '91, and by BNP in '96 - the election results that lay behind all the turmoil that we saw later on. What is the guarantee that we will not end up with similar problems in the future even after we have had another election - early, according to opposition's wishes? As we see, our political problems will, by no means be solved, by just holding another general election. We must have pledges from both sides that they will abide by the rules and norms of democratic practice regardless of who wins and who loses. Without such an understanding, WE, THE VOTERS, HAVE NOTHING TO GAIN FROM ANOTHER ELECTION. We will just be spending several hundred crores only to hold a replay of what we have already seen twice. Begum Zia must reconsider her rejection stand on dialogues. If she does not like to participate let other leaders talk on her behalf to AL leaders at their respective levels. Let us bring on the table, not only how to hold the next election freely and fairly but all other matters that impede our democratic process.

For example: 1. Can we think of not holding bye-elections between general elections? If we recall both under BNP and under AL it was the bye-elections that started the political crises. So let us avoid them in the future. Instead we

could agree that any seat becoming vacant would automatically go to the party that had won it in the last election. In case of an independent candidate it can go to the next highest vote winner.

2. Can we think of holding all the major elections at one go (Municipal, Mayoral and Upazila elections, etc) during the three months of the caretaker government? The idea being that we spend three months every five years in elections and for the rest we concentrate on running and developing the country. It makes elections more acceptable and strengthens AL's original argument that no ruling party can be trusted to hold free and fair elections.

3. Can we think of electoral reforms, especially of the Election Tribunal, which will decide on all election related cases within 3-4 months? We provide another two months for appeals to Higher Courts with the time limit that every thing must be completed within six months.

4. Can we think of realistic election spending ceiling, which will be rigorously enforced? At the same time can we also make party funding transparent? In this regard, we can also consider state funding for popular political parties thereby eliminating the whole cloudy business of political funding, which we all know, is big conduit for black money. This will stop a lot of corruption and may be worth the taxpayers' consideration.

Elections are not playthings and its repeated failure to give stable and durable governments will erode public confidence in process, which may give rise to serious doubts about whether democracy is at all suitable for us. This in its turn will encourage non-democratic tendencies. We are certain neither BNP or AL would want it. We are not so sure of the others.

OPINION Ijtima and Hartal

A.H. Jaffar Ullah

THE main opposition party, the BNP, and its partners in hartal, Jamaat, Jatiya Party, and Islamic Oikya Jote, are perhaps having tough time thinking that they would be able to stage any rally to oust the democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina for the duration of January 29 through January 31. The reason being Tablig Jamaat of Bangladesh is hosting a three-day Islamic conference (Ijtima) on the bank of Turag River in Tongi, the northern suburb of Dhaka.

The BNP and its partners are trying for months to rally support for a movement to oust the legitimate government that came into power in mid-1996 through an adult suffrage. Now that hartal season is in full swing they did not want to waste a single day to achieve their cherished goal, which is to unseat a democratically elected government. Bangladesh must be a strange land, or else why its main opposition party is bent on such an undertaking that has already crippled the economy of the nation in the past three-and-a-half years.

The newspaper headings these days are blurring nothing but the volatile political news. The country is virtually taken as a hostage by the political parties. The dry months of winter and spring bring a deluge of hartals "celebration." This year is no different except one thing. The country will be spared from the wraths of hartal for at least three days. During these three days, Ijtima will be held not in central Dhaka but in the northern edge of the town. Religious fervour is so strong in Bangladesh that even the political parties are scared stiff to call hartals on days that have religious significance. No wonder there is hardly any hartals on Eids, Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi, Shab-e-Meraj, Shab-e-

Barai, Muharram, and, generally, during Ramadan. Now add to this list three more days for world Ijtima.

Politicians of Bangladesh are very shrewd enough to know that people in our impoverished land take their Deen (religion) very seriously. Therefore, the politicians would not dare to disturb the sanctity of the day on which religious folks would celebrate any major events dictated by the religion. In this regard, Ijtima is a special case.

By deciding not to call hartals or agitation on the days Ijtima would be held in Tongi, the politicians are breaking their solemn vows of keeping the country in turmoil. This sort of behaviour is not expected of the rowdy and lawless politicians. But they are clever. While they have no respect for law and order of their own country, they most certainly understand the silent language of religious fervour. They understand quite well that the voters would be mightily displeased if hartals are called on Ijtima-days. The last thing the devotees would want to experience is exploding tear gas and lathi charge. Therefore, to spare the God-fearing Bangalees the wraths of hartal, the clever politicians of Bangladesh have declared the Ijtima-days as hartal-free. They have saved our motherland from humiliation because approximately 5,000-strong foreign devotees would be converging into the tents on the bank of Turag River.

For the sake of having hartal free days, why can't we have religious festivities all round the year. Few more Ijtimas here and there would cause no harm. Would it?

The writer, a senior research scientist in America, writes from New Orleans.

Duality of Nature

Helal Uddin Ahmed

Freedom is forever elusive. Man's quest for freedom only leads him from one servitude to another — albeit in a different form. That is why he takes drugs — to free himself from the pains of day to day drudgery and to escape from the realities of life, but that lands him into another kind of subjugation — drug addiction. A rat freed from cage ventures out in freedom, but soon he has to race for his life to escape the wrath of the cat. The quest for sexual freedom often leads one to marry, but soon he finds himself chained to another entity — the family. Fed up with the mechanical progression of this material world, man seeks solace in religion, but is ultimately enslaved to dogmas and religious rituals.

After gaining independence from colonial rule, the free countries of the world at first relish their freedom, but very soon discover that they are subservient to other larger entities — the metropolitan centres and the global order. Aesthetic advancements and technological innovations expand the horizon of human potential, but at the same time enchains man to his own creation. And when the atomic and cosmic objects fly away from their orbits, they merely plunge into other orbits. Thus freedom is forever elusive — a contradiction, an illusion.

But in a larger context, the simultaneous coexistence of freedom and servitude is only natural, and is apparently, a manifestation of the duality of

nature. As the philosophers belonging to the Chinese school of Naturalism (300 B.C.) would have said more than two millennia ago, the basic dualism of nature involves two complementary and balancing forces — such as the rhythms of day and night, male and female, hot and cold, light and dark, push and pull, love and hate, sorrow and death, positive and negative. These philosophers used to dub the male attribute as 'Yang' and the female attribute as 'Yin'. According to them, a balance between the two attributes in an individual ensured harmony and health. 'Yang' and 'Yin' are, by the way, used in the national flag of South Korea and also forms the scientific basis of the wonder-drug (Shengsheng).

It appears from the foregoing that the fruits of life are always double-edged. Consequently, when one is blessed with an asset, he is also burdened with a liability — almost similar to the balance sheet entries in our accounting books. Due to the same logic, the ebb follows the tide, the crest follows the trough and a counteracting force comes into play whenever a force is applied, just as Sir Isaac Newton had said more than three centuries ago. It is thus natural that freedom and servitude should go together, hand in hand. Life is a mixed blessing and maintaining harmony and balance while standing between the two opposing currents is the best recipe for success.

As appears from the editor of 'Bangladesh Quarterly'

A National Day that Smacks of Controversy

Harun ur Rashid writes from Canberra, Australia

There is a view that to get back all Australians including the Aboriginal people on the National Day, a date change seems to be necessary so that all Australians can celebrate this day in unison and with great fervour.

FEW questions provoke more heated debate in Australia on the observance of January 26 as its National Day. Unlike other countries, National Day is celebrated in Australia with the argument as to its appropriateness of January 26 as the day.

The Aboriginal population of nearly half a million in Australia consider January 26 as the 'Invasion Day' because on that day in 1788 the first European settlement, a British penal colony, was established at Port Jackson (now Sydney), displacing gradually the Aboriginal community in the country. The Aboriginal community were living in Australia more than 40,000 years ago. They were killed in large numbers by the European settlers and by diseases introduced by the Europeans.

To the Aboriginal population, January 26 is regarded as their Black Day. The celebration of this day reminds them of their forced displacement from their lands in the country. The day is perceived as an Anglo-Australian celebration of the victory over the Aboriginal community, the original inhabitants of this continent.

History tells us that on January 1, 1901 the colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania federated through a referendum to form Australia, formally known as the Commonwealth of Australia. By all logic this day of Federation should be celebrated as the National Day. In 1902, it was legislated that there should be a public holiday on the day of its Federation. Since January 1 was a New Year's day and a public holiday, it was decided that another specific day was to be decided. In 1915, it was legislated that January 26 be specified as the National Day (Commonwealth of Australia Day).

There is a view among some prominent white Australians that the celebration of January 26 as the National Day divides the Australian community and it should be changed.

National Day is observed to unify the nation but in Australia it is not a unifying day at all. There is nothing to celebrate on this day as it marks, in fact, the beginning of oppression for the Aboriginal people. Some say that hands over eyes

would be more appropriate, perhaps than hands on hearts on this day.

Rather ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) Day is a truly unifying day in the country. The ANZAC day commemorates the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli (Turkey) in 1915 during the First World War. Many Australians and New Zealanders died at Gallipoli. The day is celebrated on 25 April every year with due solemnity and it is a public holiday in Australia and New Zealand.

The Aboriginal-Australians are the most disadvantaged community in Australia. While the rest of the population can expect to the ages of 75.5 for males and 81.3 for females, Aboriginal males will be lucky to reach 60 and females can only expect to live up to 55. Safe drinking water and reliable health care are still denied for too many Aboriginal persons in remote regions in Australia. An Aboriginal leader in an official address on this day, pointed to the general community's ambivalence towards the Aboriginal people.

Australia has now brought together people from virtually

every corner of the earth unlike any other. More than a quarter of all living Australians grew up in other lands. The histories and cultures of the migrants are as different and diverse as those found anywhere. The Australian people are mostly new-comers and they including the oldest inhabitants must form a lasting bond. Otherwise the Australian people will remain poorer in unity.

There is a view that to get back all Australians including the Aboriginal people on the National Day, a date change seems to be necessary so that all Australians can celebrate this day in unison and with great fervour. Some suggest that Reconciliation Day could be the National Day and that of course will depend on whether there are some concrete steps on behalf of the government to compensate for the past injustices meted out to the Aboriginal people and first of such action is the offer of apology by the government to the Aboriginal community.

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