

FOCUS

SHAHJALAL UNIVERSITY HAPPENINGS

Government should Solve the Problem, Not Aggravate It

SITUATION in Sylhet and the happenings at the Shahjalal University arising out of naming a few buildings and offices, some of which are yet to be constructed, merit serious attention of the nation. Eminent novelist Humayun Ahmed has recently written on this — "I realise that a sort of game is now being played around naming." What he said is very true. It is indeed playing with fire. And in order to properly understand the nature of the game, it is necessary to go into the depths of the historical background of the situation, the attitude and orientation of the main actors, the role of the political parties and the hope, aspiration, sentiment and reasonings of the local people. Unfortunately, this, I feel, has not been done.

It appears that the government and the ruling party have embarked on a well thought-out programme of naming and re-naming institutions, roads, bridges, buildings and squares. In some cases these are ridiculous, in some these are anti-people's wish, but in most cases these are unwanted, unwarranted and undesirable. This trend has led to naming of the Shahjalal University buildings. Then again, in a Varsity office buildings are normally known as Registrar's office, Controller's office etc. and not buildings having different names of celebrities. In this case in particular, since the Vice Chancellor Mr Habibur Rahman is known to be an ardent Awami League, the naming game initiated by him under the patronisation of the government has naturally been interpreted as a political move.

In different circles and newspapers, the current movement in Sylhet has been termed as "fundamentalist". But why? This anti-naming movement, in spite of the opposition of the government and the ruling party has become so popular and successful in Sylhet that some newspapers editorially

commented — "Is there no government in Sylhet? Would it then mean that the people of Sylhet have turned fundamentalists? The reply is an emphatic 'No'. Sylhet took a leading role in the liberation movement, and gave the nation the Supreme Commander of its armed forces, General Osmany, and also the Deputy, Major General Rab. And suddenly today, a popular movement in Sylhet, connected with one of its institutions, becomes 'fundamentalist'! The real truth is that this movement is against the politics of naming initiated by the Awami League government, and its indiscreet shortsightedness and repressive measures.

Many people outside Sylhet perhaps do not know that the first official decision to establish a university in Sylhet was taken in 1945. At that time the Chief Minister of Assam was Muslim League's Sir Mohamad Saadullah, and the Finance Minister was Sylhet's renowned national leader Abdul Matin Chowdhury. Though the Sylhet University Act was passed during their rule, the Muslim League could not form government after the next general election and Mr Gopinath Bordoloi of the Congress party led the provincial government in 1946. Due to the emerging political situation at that time and as Mr Bordoloi was an Assamese, he wanted to set up the first University of Assam in a truly 'Ahom' city like Gauhati. The proposal of setting up the university in Sylhet receded into the background. However, the Education Minister in the Bordoloi Cabinet — which, strangely enough, was a coalition of Jamiat-e-Islam Ulama-e-Hind — was Jamiat nominee Maulavi Abdul Rashid, an MLA from Sylhet. Minister Abdul Rashid continued efforts for setting up the university, and at one time even threatened to leave the coalition on this local issue.

We should rise above petty factionalism, narrow communalism and indiscreet self-interest and sincerely try to solve the problem. There should be no further politicisation and polarisation. There should be no effort on the part of anyone to fish in the troubled waters in the name of "spirit of freedom-struggle".

by Enam Ahmed Chowdhury

The demand for a university in Sylhet was even older. In pre-partition days, there was no university in Assam, and the only university in Eastern India was in Calcutta. After the annulment of the Partition of Bengal, the University of Dhaka was set up and a demand was made for a university in Assam. In 1916, under the leadership of Khan Bahadur Syed Abdul Majid CIE (Kaptan Miah), money was collected for a new building for Sylhet M C College. At the time of its foundation laying by Governor Sir William Marris, Kaptan Miah Shaheb (then the first Education Minister of Assam) discouraged the idea of associating his name with any of its wings and hoped that it would subsequently grow into a university. The name of Maulavi Abdul Karim, a legendary educationist from Sylhet, was also recalled on this occasion. In 1925, while inaugurating the new building Governor Sir Bidson Bell commented: "The good and brave Khan Bahadur has gone before seeing the completion of the new college at Sylhet, and the other boons and reforms for which he worked so hard." Khan Bahadur Kaptan Miah's untimely death about two years earlier put a wet blanket on the efforts for further development of the institution.

In subsequent years, many education ministers of Assam, who were mostly from Sylhet, kept up the dream of Sylhet university alive. They were Rai Bahadur Promode Dutta, Shamsul Ulama Abu Nasar Wahid, Maulavi Munawar Ali, Maulana Abdul Rashid, and in the post-partition days Education Minister Abdul Hamid and Pakistan's Central Education

and Labour Minister Basanta Kumar Das (who was also for some time Finance Minister of East Pakistan). The movement for a university in Sylhet reached its climax in the sixties during Ayub Khan's regime, and some repressive measures (like police arrests) were taken. Janab Ajmal Ali Chowdhury (subsequently Pakistan's Central Minister) and Begum Serajunnessa Chowdhury MNA and, among students, Shah Aziz, Nur Ahmed Maslam and others took a leading role in the movement. National Professor Late Dewan Azraf also lent support to this. In the post-liberation period, the demand for setting up university in Sylhet was neglected, and subsequently in 1987, during President Ershad's rule Shahjalal University of Science and Technology was established. In the early nineties, the university started functioning.

One can thus see that hope, aspiration and efforts sustained for about eight decades led to the establishment of this university. Naturally, the names of people whose contributions and sacrifices made the dream come true should be in the fore while naming any of its buildings. The first Vice Chancellor of the University Prof. Sadrudin Ahmed Chowdhury generated a great deal of enthusiasm among the people to come forward for making financial contributions; and it was thought that some of the university buildings could be named after substantial contributors. I was a member of the first Syndicate as a government nominee and I recall that it was decided that if substantial help could be obtained from the Turkish government, the main building would be named Atatürk Hall. Philanthropist Dr Jamshed Bakht donated Tk 20 lakh for construction of the medical centre.

When it was subsequently found out that there is any non-governmental or foreign contribution for construction of any approved component of the university project, similar amount from the ADP or revenue budget of the government could be deducted. This realisation dampened efforts to secure developmental finance from non-governmental sources. That time it was thought that some buildings could be named after some eminent sons and daughters of Sylhet who were the guiding spirit behind the establishment of the university like Syed Abdul Majid (Kaptan Miah), Abdul Matin Chowdhury and the like. It was also discussed that Ladies Halls, when constructed, could be named after rivers of Sylhet like Surma and Kushiyara. However, the first hall was named after Hazrat Shah Paran.

When the present move was taken by the Vice Chancellor with the support of the ruling party to name the half-constructed and un-constructed buildings of the university, it was interpreted as a political game, particularly with the political background of the Vice Chancellor. It was first opposed by a socio-cultural youth organisation which demanded that if the buildings are to be named, then the feelings and aspirations of the people of Sylhet, and the names of its principal architects, should come first. But most unfortunately, the distinction immediately termed the opponents as "fundamentalists", and this gave rise to more stringent opposition. Social organisations and political parties joined hands and they demanded that any controversy in naming be avoided and the buildings be named after the principal associates of Hazrat Shah Jalal.

It should be borne in mind that Hazrat Shah Jalal is regarded as not just a religious leader but also as a political liberator and social reformer who brought in messages of egalitarianism and enlightenment among the people. Along with his three hundred and sixty companions he drove away the communal and oppressive king of the area Raja Govind Dev and freed the people from feudal tyranny. One can, therefore, clearly see that no religious fundamentalism or bigotry is linked with the opposition to naming. It is the group which took the unnecessary and unwanted move to name the proposed and under-construction buildings without any consideration of people's sentiments and wishes, and without any reference to the architects of the University that kicked up the row. It is they who have initiated the process of disturbing the educational atmosphere of the university and peace of the area.

The Chancellor by an order now has suspended the implementation of the decision of the Syndicate to name the buildings and asked this to be referred to the Senate, which is yet to be formed. As a matter of fact under section 25 of the Jalalabad University Act, the Syndicate is competent to review its decision. Suspending the implementation of the deci-

The Political Impasse: Can the Civil Society Do Anything?

THE political situation in the country has increasingly become confrontational and unstable. The situation has turned such that whatever superstructure of democracy we have now is bound to break down. Already we see that the major political parties have boycotted the Parliament on the pretext that they are not given a fair amount of time to talk and allowed to bring their motions. There is now practically a non-functional Parliament. The major political parties have also been abstaining from participating in various elections on the pretext that the elections are being rigged by the ruling party.

The country's tumultuous politics is having another lethal dose of its own kind in the form of AL's and BNP's 'take your turn' demand all in the name of making the electoral process free and fair' wrote Prof Dilara Chowdhury in a recent article in The Daily Star. Even the innovative institution of 'caretaker government, incorporated into our constitution through the 13th amendment to help bring trust among the political contenders, does not seem enough. She further said "the cosmetic treatment of the system has thrown us again into a political abyss — this time holding of all elections under the supervisions of the caretaker government."

Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud, wrote recently "We are unnecessarily wasting time and energy on political disputes. Our real problems and challenges lie elsewhere. The incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is still among the highest in the world..... He further said that it is within our means to make Bangladesh poverty-free, if we could achieve high equitable economic growth in an uninterrupted way for the next 10-15 years. But for that, "we need the right kind of environment and preparations. Confronted with such enormous problems but also endowed with possibilities, why in our national politics, are we moving towards self-annihilation?"

Several problems that we encounter today are due to lack of commitment of the political parties to basic norms of democracy. The civil society now is again forced to ask: Is this going to be a failed state? We need to continue our journey on the path of democracy and demand from the politicians to end the impasse and get on the road to social and economic development.

Political competitors do not necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate one another and acknowledge that each has a legitimate right and important role to play.

by Feroz M Hassan

One of the most difficult concepts for the parties is the concept of the 'loyal opposition'. But the idea is a vital one. It means, in essence, that all sides in a democracy share common commitment to its basic values. Political competitors do not necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate one another and acknowledge that each has a legitimate right and important role to play. The right of the minority (opposition) does not depend on the goodwill of the majority (treasury bench). The loser in an election, now in opposition must not feel that they will lose their lives or go to jail, but be convinced that they need to continue to participate in the public life, with the knowledge that its role is essential and equally important in a democratic state.

But in reality, what is happening today has been well articulated by Prof. Rehman Sobhan in his recent article published in The Daily Star. "Each party questions the legitimacy of its rival up to a point where it behaves as if it would like to drive out its rival from the political arena." He further said, "The confrontational approach to politics in Bangladesh is now a decade old. The very issues, which now put the opposition on the street, also kept the Awami League on the streets during BNP's term of office. In fact the source of the problems lies in the culture of intolerance, dissention and confrontation among the principal political parties."

Effective and Meaningful Parliament: 1. Parliament is the representation of the society, for working in a democratic state, and therefore the Parliament should work with the society, not only for the society as the MPs demand.

2. People want Parliament to be citizens' parliament, with which citizens can work easily, continuously and responsibly. This could be done by: a) Opening the committees to civil society groups for more open consultation and discussion; b) Opening important issues of national significance for public debate through circulating the draft bills.

3. Parliament must be run by both treasury and the opposition, while government must be run by the majority party. A number of measures in these regards can be taken which could also help to ease off the animosity among the ruling and opposition parties. Some of these are: a) Distribute the important parliamentary positions among the treasury and the opposition; b) Some parliamentary delegation when going abroad, may be led by competent opposition members.

Independence of Government-owned News Media: News media in a democracy plays a very important role — having a number of overlapping but distinctive functions. One is to inform and educate, to help citizens make intelligent decisions about public policy. Citizens not only need accurate but also unbiased information. They must have access to diverse opinions. The second function of the media is to serve as watchdog over government and other powerful institutions in the society. As such an independent authority (for example BBC in London) should run the TV, and an independent authority should run the Bangladesh Radio.

Women's Participation in the Legislative Process: We must ensure effective participation of women in the law making process. The present system of 30 reserved seats also is contrary to democratic practice and gives undue advantage to the majority party. Therefore the following should be done: Increase the number of reserved seats for women in the parliament to 64 representing 64 districts of the country, and holding direct elections to these seats.

1. Party must have a list of its subscribing members. That list must be submitted to the Election Commission and be available as public document.

2. Party must have regular meetings.

3. Party must have annual general meetings and the proceedings must be submitted to the Election Commission.

4. Party must elect all its officials whose terms should not be more than two years.

5. There must be a minimum of two candidates for every party executive position up for election.

6. Party leadership (president) should not be allowed more than two terms.

7. Party must have accounts of its receipts and expenditures, and those must be available for public scrutiny, and public accounting firms must audit these accounts.

8. Party leader's authority should not be so much that people with diverse opinion within the party are thrown out very easily.

There may be political parties allowed to function that do not follow the above formula,

but they will not be allowed to participate in elections at any level and seek representative positions.

The changes in Iran seem real. Iranian, especially young Iranians, voted for change in the last parliamentary elections. No politicians, even those in Iran who think they get their authority from God, could fail to see the quiet passion of the people who crowded around the ballot boxes during the elections. Their faith was in democracy. At least 30 million voted, more than 75 per cent of the electorate. Since President Mohammed Khatami came to office on May, 1997, a date every Iranian remembers, he promised a "civil society" with more freedom, clearer justice and greater tolerance than Iran has known in the past 20 years — or ever.

The results of the parliamentary polls indicated that the reformists under the leadership of President Khatami won a mandate for change. The election results ousted hard-liners from control of the 290-seat Parliament or Majlis for the first time since the 1979 Islamic revolution brought the clergy to power.

Whatever the people of Iran may want, none of their freedoms are guaranteed. In fact, their future is very much up for grabs. There is, however, a strong feeling that, desperate as many Iranians are for change, they were also afraid it would come too fast and, like an overheated engine, the country would blow. Nobody who lived through the years of suffering and conflict that followed the overthrow of the Shah wanted to go through that kind of violent upheaval again.

Though the reformists have gained their victory, it might not be assumed that ultraconservative clerics who have dominated the Islamic revolution would be overturned. Led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, officially the "Supreme Leader", the ultraconservatives may not have the numbers of popular supporters they once had, but they have still the guns, the courts and the secret police in their hands. The risk of violence of chaos-lurks just beneath the political surface. In the opinion of Washington, the stability of the entire Middle East depends on stability in

LIBERALISATION IN IRAN

Agenda of the Reformists Get a Boost

Iran has entered into a new chapter of its Islamic revolution and democracy has become a reality. It is believed that Iran's standing as a regional power with its growing military strength will be further consolidated by the outcome of the parliamentary elections. The changes in Iran seem real.

by A S M Nurunnabi

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Iran. President Clinton's hopes for a new "constructive partnership" with Iran announced later, can work only if the spirit of the polls becomes the policy of the government.

Reformers in Iran, as in most other countries, have large ambitions but seek to achieve them slowly and carefully, by working within the existing system. "We don't look at the Parliament as if it's going to solve all the problems in one night," said Mohammed Reza Khatami, the President's youngest brother who headed the ticket of the Islamic Iran Participation Front. His party received widespread support at the polls. Khatami and other reformers in Parliament intend to push for more freedom of expression, a policy that has served them well in the last three years. Now they want to liberate not only magazines and newspapers, but television and radio too. They also intend to change the election laws, which currently limit official campaigning to one week and discourage political parties. "We think if we want to implant democracy we need independent institutions like parties and syndicates," said Mohammad Reza Khatami.

The reformers have a foreign policy agenda too. President Khatami pursued policies aimed at peaceful co-existence with the West; his brother thinks the new Parliament should support them. About relations with the US, Reza Khatami said, "Even if we do not resume diplomatic relations we can reduce animosity. Of course, this is part of the process of restoring relations".

His brother promoted many of the US-Iran cultural exchanges of the past two years that have slightly warmed relations between the two countries; wrestlers, film makers and football players have gone back and forth. Iran is also interested in buying agricultural products, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment from America. "We have prepared the ground for investment in the oil industry," said Reza Khatami. This is an important ground indeed in a country where oil

accounts for more than 85 per cent of exports.

Under the constitution, Iran has a dual system of government. The President has limited powers while the supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is vested with enormous powers of the state. The Parliament controls the appointment of Ministers of the government. The conservative elements so far used their control of the army and security forces, judiciary and many decision-making councils to frustrate the reform agenda.

While it is too early to say how the conservatives will adjust their game plan in the changed circumstances, President Khatami's strategy has been to fight his opponents within the constitutional framework. Therefore, he held for the first time municipal elections in the country in which the reformists largely won. Now that the reformists have gained majority in Parliament, it may be easy for President Khatami to push through his reforms. There are, however, misgivings in some quarters. An analyst commented: "Even if Khatami's supporters have a clear majority, he may not be able to do much more than he has been doing so far, since both the Supreme Leader and the religious Council Guardians can veto Parliament's laws."

It, however, seems obvious that Khatami's agenda of reforms will be welcomed by the international community. Iran is known to be a strategically important country with much potential for further elevating its position in the comity of nations. The reformists' win should change the country's image and help create the necessary conditions for Iran to interact even with its enemies, such as the US. The Gulf Arab countries will perhaps see that a "radical" Iran is being removed from its frontiers. There is a view in some quarters that Arab Monarchies or Sheikdoms will be less dependent on the US as they will lose their fear of Teheran's exporting "Islamic revolution" in the Middle Eastern countries.

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by Jim Davis

