

The Daily Star

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BNP's Stress on Elections

THERE was a certain self-clarifying campaign style one could expect to see in normal circumstances of an approaching election year about the Opposition Leader Begum Zia's exchange of views with editors of national dailies, weeklies and news agencies on Wednesday. As if to hurriedly remove some public misgivings generated by BNP's alliance with Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami she took pains to explain that this did not amount to dumping her party's ideals and principles. The purpose of this editorial is not to re-state our position on the merit or otherwise of her aligning with such parties because it is all too known to our readers but to point to the obligation she has felt to be answerable to the people on the question of principles with an eye to the forthcoming general elections.

Leave aside her style which is gradually getting attuned to the unfolding demands of an election year, in matters of substance, too, she is making no bones about where she feels lies her principal interest stake. Much as we are heartened by her timely mood swing towards the elections we are even more impressed by the seriousness of purpose she has demonstrated through a recital of certain suggestions on how best we can guarantee free and fair polls with certain updated safeguards built into the mechanism.

Elections are at the heart of the democratic process; for, it is through the instrumentality of polls held every five years to breathe life continually into the concept of sovereignty and supremacy of popular choice that elected public representatives keep governing the country on a sustained basis. So, all efforts must be made by the ruling party, Election Commission and the opposition to ensure that polls are held not merely smoothly but only impartially, fairly and neutrally yielding a true reflection of the people's verdict and an index of the free popular choice of who they would like to see govern the country and who sit in the opposition.

As leader of the opposition Begum Zia has expressed certain apprehensions and concerns about what she regards as adverse objective and structural conditions that could affect her party's electoral prospects, nay the credibility of elections. We think she has raised some valid points that need to be addressed not by any word of mouth but corrective measures where warranted. Just as her concern over politicisation of the administration and filling the EC with hand-picked men should not be dismissed out of hand so also her apprehension that money, arms and muscle-power could be utilised to influence poll results deserve some serious attention. She would like the caretaker government to weed out those adverse factors from the electoral scenario.

We believe Begum Zia is on the right track. All she needs to do now is take the issues to the public and win popular sentiments behind her concerns. Rather than demanding ouster of the government she must now be focused on elections going full-throated ahead with her demands for an authentic voters' list, an unblemished neutrality from the EC and a caretaker government that creates an enabling environment for free and fair polls so that these are met well in time.

The Meeting in Prague

Having exploited and impoverished the developing countries for centuries under direct and indirect colonialism the rich countries owe them debt far greater than the former do. By according debt relief to 40 Highly Indebted Poor Countries they are showing no favour to them. They will merely take a small concrete step to lessen the burden of historical baggage on their back and salve the guilt on their conscience.

But this year another subject will figure prominently in the meeting: debt relief.

It is now more than a year that the G-7+ countries promised to forgive loan to the countries designated as Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). The initiative to achieve debt relief for up to 40 countries in this category has not moved a whit from the drawing board yet. As an excuse it is now being said that the programme has been held up by current or recent conflicts in ten of these countries (Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan and Liberia, etc). Members of G-7 countries, particularly Great Britain, have now attached the condition of "conflict resolution" before debt relief is considered.

This was a consensus view in the last meeting of G-7 countries held in Okinawa, Japan recently. The G-7 countries including Britain would not only like the UN to be involved in this "conflict resolution" but also envisage roles for the World Bank and the IMF for the same task. Accordingly, they would like the IMF and the World Bank to include "security sector reform", including training for the army, in the next annual meeting. So, along with assistance for socio-economic development these two organisations are now expected to deal with rebels and bandits also. This is not only a new addition of conditionality that is being proposed but one that goes so far beyond the clear mandate of Bretton Woods Institutions as to make it appear totally outlandish and uncalled for. It is also somewhat ironic that the developed countries who waste no chance to decry growing defence expenditure in the developing countries are now recommending foreign aid to strengthen army in the name of counter-insurgency. This new and absurd development, together with the scaling down of the number of

countries in the HIPC category from 25 to 20 that will benefit from the debt relief programme by the end of 2000, reveal the lack of seriousness, or at least procrastination on the part of the developed countries to implement the programme. It is a measure of the pathetically slow progress in this respect that so far only nine countries have qualified to receive the benefit of debt relief out of 40

the decision-making process. Countries like China and India have long been strong critics of the policy to make the member-countries of the IMF and the World Bank conform to the uniform standard of disclosure. Similarly, the IMF report on the observance of standards and codes (ROSC), which has become a permanent part of its assessment of countries, has been

qualified. The additional loan can then be spent on social sectors like education, health, poverty alleviation, etc. This will take care of the implicit apprehension of the developed countries that debt relief may involve moral hazard in the sense that being freed from payment of loan the concerned countries of the HIPC group will become profligate and embark on unproductive expenditures and take up grandiose projects. Additional loans equal to the loan amount, proposed to be forgiven, can be spent on projects in specified sectors that will qualify according to mutually agreed criteria between the Bank and the HIPC countries. With only this conditionality it will be practical for the countries concerned to select projects and for the Bank to ensure that fresh loan money is being well spent and not being frittered away for non-development purposes.

As regards "conflict resolution" it should be pointed out emphatically that it was never the direct responsibility of the Bank/IMF and as such it should not be in their agenda either in the next meeting or in any future meeting. This will set a disturbing precedent and pave the way to distortion of their roles which are well defined. There should not be any confusion between means (development) with ends (peace and stability) and not opening up of a polemical debate on the meaning, scope and pre-conditions of development. Suffice it to say that development itself can be expected to take care of local conflict when everyone has a stake in it. If conflict anywhere grows and festers unabated whether before, during and after disbursement of loan for development the UN should step in to restore peace. If this is not considered to be within UN's mandate then it has little justification for continuing as a world organisation after the end of the cold

IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



selected initially for this purpose and even these nine have not yet received the relief formally. Jubilee 2000, the coalition of church and civil society groups spearheading the debt relief campaign, strongly holds the view that countries would have a better incentive to end conflict if the IMF/World Bank raised write-offs from 30-50 per cent of debt to a higher level. Not to speak of seeing any sign of an inclination or move in this regard, it is now rather a matter of speculation as to what more new conditions might be conjured up by the G-7 to turn the "debt relief programme" into a weeping melodrama.

Other developments that have given rise to scepticism among developing countries about the intent of the board members in the Bank and the IMF representing the industrially developed countries is the decision to make public the Country Assistance Strategies (CAS), the key document that outlines the World Bank's plan for its borrowing countries. In the name of transparency this practice has given campaigners under various lobbies to interfere with and stall

regarded as a means to force developing countries to a standard model of economic management. Both the disclosure of Country Assistance Strategy and the requirement of conforming to the Codes prepared by the IMF are apprehended to slow down the receipt and utilisation of loan from the two Bretton Woods Institutions which may not be totally unwelcome to the rich members. As regards the developing countries, this procedural tangle will neutralise the debt relief even if the latter materialises at some stage. So debt relief now does not only seem to be a distant possibility with limited prospect, it is going to be couched in so many conditions that the recipient countries will not derive much benefit. More likely, there will be a change from having one liability into another.

In view of the complexities of the situation and the uncertainty of receiving debt relief under the given circumstances any time soon the developing countries can propose that instead of debt relief additional loan equivalent to the proposed debt relief be given to the countries considered

If Ershad Goes to Jail

Power is the greatest aphrodisiac, and nothing stirs up the adrenaline like cheering crowds and prospects of popularity. But for an elderly man like Ershad, dignity is more important than power. He doesn't need to behave like a Wizard of Oz bereft of his wonder machine. He can regain dignity even without regaining power. He only needs to know that there are limits to everything in life and seek a period of grace in life, not a grace period in politics.

who has fallen victim to the wrath of a vindictive government. UDDENLY, the country is agog with speculations whether Ershad is going to jail. The cynics anticipate that the former strongman will eventually perform a Houdini-like act and extricate him from this political straightjacket. The puritans think he should go to jail to pay for his sins. While his supporters believe he is innocent, someone who has fallen victim to the wrath of a vindictive government.

But what does Ershad think of it in his own mind, now that the spectre of another jail term hovers around him? Is that how he wanted to spend the last days of his life, chasing a Supreme Court judge across the country so that he could get a few days more before beginning his second prison term? Does he repent in the inner sanctum of his own conscience that in the heydays of his undisputed authority, he may have gone a little too far? Most people sell their souls, and live with a good conscience on the proceeds," observed Logan Pearsall Smith. Is Ershad haunted by his conscience for selling his soul? Or, is he happy to live with a good conscience on the proceeds, pretending innocence only for politics' sake?

Most of us tend to forget that the book of life must balance at closing. When former Cambodian strongman Pol Pot died in the jungle hideout near the Thai border, many people were dismayed that he had escaped justice for his responsibility in the death of three million of his countrymen. But did he escape justice

indeed? Stripped of his power and betrayed by his comrades, he lived the last days of his life in house arrest under the watchful eyes of his own associates who betrayed him, his soul languishing under the burden of guilt and hatred of the entire world. Who knows the agonies of lost authority may have persecuted him more than a thousand execu-

one-time occupant of the peacock throne, would be spending the last days of his life being abandoned and airborne, going from country to country to seek asylum! Thus the strongman who lived long after power ended endures the twilight of shame and guilt. Pinochet, the octogenarian ex-dictator of Chile, is now being dragged from court to court for

Napoleon's young aide-de-camp, General Gaspard Gourgaud, left a journal describing the Emperor's last days on Saint Helena. He used to walk in the garden, discuss superiority of stout over thin women, call Gourgaud a nunny from time to time, and reminisce that he once ruled over 83 million human beings, which was more than half the population of Europe. Besides, he read Paradise Lost, showed interest in cows and pined for the company of people of his own fortune.

Perhaps there is no soul on earth more pathetic than a deposed ruler, who lives to gaze on memories of bygone dominion, while struggling to cope with the paranoid retrospection of public hatred. How is Ershad planning to cope with that dreary feeling within the confines of his cell, when the peculiar loneliness will descend to impregnate its anguish on him once again? Is he going to miss his women, wealth and wanton luxuries, things that were perquisites of wielding power? Is he going to regret the killing of Nur Ahmed, or the crushing of students under the police truck? Is he going to resent staying on in politics instead of relaxing with the fortune he is said to have amassed?

More importantly, is Ershad going to spend his time in jail mulling over his predicament as a private man or measuring his life as a public figure? He is still one ruler who has ruled this country longest, and he could better dedicate the sunset years of his life to popular causes with no

political strings attached. That is the difference between a dictator and a democratically elected man of power. Former US President Jimmy Carter is enjoying his life after power as a philanthropist, who even volunteers to fix the roofs of houses in the American ghettos. Harry S Truman, the 33rd President of the USA, lived for almost two decades after he stepped down from office. In retirement, he willingly faded from public life and spent his days in Independence, Missouri as a private citizen.

Unlike the retired statesmen, the strongmen are accused animals, who like infuriated lovers cannot take no for an answer, their minds forever circling in the orbits of power. Ever since he returned to politics after his first jail term, Ershad has promised to come back to power again and again. Not a bad wish for an autocrat who was removed from power on popular demand, whose legacy includes, amongst other things, a long list of women other than his wife and a trail of corruption charges, which still haunt him.

If Ershad goes to jail this time, he should think about writing his memoir, or building a library like a former US President does. He should even consider going back to poetry writing, something he hasn't done in a long time since he resigned from office. Power is the greatest aphrodisiac, and nothing stirs up the adrenaline like cheering crowds and prospects of popularity. But for an elderly man like Ershad, dignity is more important than power. He doesn't need to behave like a Wizard of Oz bereft of his wonder machine. He can regain dignity even without regaining power. He only needs to know that there are limits to everything in life and seek a period of grace in life, not a grace period in politics.

Crosstalk

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan



tions!

Dictators are mostly desperate men whose power goes to their heads and they ignore in that heedlessness the dictum of life that one must reap as one sows. When Emperor Nero entered his Golden House for the first time and surveyed its enclosed lake surrounded by buildings that were designed to represent the cities of the empire, their ceilings of gold and fretted ivory inlaid with jewels, he said, "At last, I am beginning to live like a human being." Eventually, Nero's armies revolted and the Senate condemned him to be flogged to death with rods. He fled to resign from office by stabbing himself in the throat.

But most dictators are not fortunate enough to take their own lives to avoid the ignominy of powerlessness. Shah of Iran, the

sins committed years ago. Jean-Bedel Bokassa, the chameleonic cannibalistic former president of the Central African Republic, caught up with his misdeeds when jailed in 1987 for killing 100 schoolchildren. The dictators who outlive power are as if condemned to an afterlife of penance for sins committed while in power.

For some dictators, the penance can be slow and oppressive. The six years, which Napoleon spent in exile on Saint Helena, was an evidence of how a man deposed from power, is gradually wasted by its opprobrium. Napoleon was only 46 when he arrived and almost 52 when he died. How did this conqueror of Europe and the one-time defender of the French nation bide his time in exile except for his occasional bouts with illness (ulcer or cancer)?

Supplementary Report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission: Some Relevant Extracts

Fourteenth instalment

The notable feature of the recommendations Hamoodur Rahman Commission made at the end of its supplementary report is the confirmation of impressions held in Bangladesh of the dark designs hatched by the then Pakistani establishment to deny political power to Bangladeshis. The Commission recommended that Generals Yahya, Hamid, Pirzada, Gul Hassan, Umar and Mitha should be publicly tried for their criminal conspiracy to orchestrate a whole series of events: usurpation of power from Ayub Khan; attempts to manipulate result of 1970 elections, persuade some political parties and elected MNAs not to attend parliament session in Dacca on March 3, 1971; and creation of a situation in the then East Pakistan which led to civil disobedience, armed revolt by the Awami League, surrender of Pakistani troops and the dismemberment of Pakistan.

(Continued from yesterday)

Recommendations

IN the concluding portion of our Main Report, submitted in 1972, we had made a number of recommendations based on our study of the various aspects of the causes of the debacle of 1971. Some of these recommendations need to be modified, or amplified, in the light of the fresh evidence which we have now recorded: while the need for the others has only been further emphasised. We believe that the object of setting up this Commission would be fully realised only if appropriate and early action is taken by the Government on these recom-

mendations. Even though it involves a repetition of what we have already said in the Main Report, we consider that it would be appropriate if all our recommendations are now finally set out on one place, for facility of reference and action. Detailed reasons and justification for these recommendations will be found in the relevant Chapters of the Main Report. We are aware that some of these recommendations have already been implemented, but this would not appear to be a reason for not including them in this final summing up.

Trials

There is consensus on the imperative need of bringing to book those senior Army Commanders who have brought disgrace and defeat to Pakistan by their subversion of the Constitution, usurpation of political power by criminal conspiracy, their professional incompetence, culpable negligence and wilful neglect in the performance of their duties and physical and moral cowardice in abandoning the fight when they had the capability and resources to resist the enemy. Firm and proper action would not only satisfy the nation's demand for punishment where it is deserved, but would

also ensure against any future recurrence of the kind of shameful conduct displayed during the 1971 war. We accordingly recommend that the following trials be undertaken without delay:

(i) That General Yahya Khan, General Abdul Hamid Khan, Lt. Gen. S.G.M.M. Pirzada, Lt. Gen. Gul Hassan, Maj. Gen. Umar and Maj. Gen. Mitha should be publicly tried for being party to a criminal conspiracy to illegally usurp power from F.M. Mohammad Ayub Khan in power if necessary by the use of force. In furtherance of their common purpose they did actually try to influence political parties by threats, inducements and even bribes to support their

designs both for bringing about a particular kind of result during the elections of 1970, and later persuading some of the political parties and the elected members of the National Assembly to refuse to attend the session of the National Assembly scheduled to be held at Dacca on the 3rd of March, 1971. They, furthermore, in agreement with each other brought about a situation in East Pakistan which led to a civil disobedience movement, armed revolt by the Awami League and subsequently to the surrender of our troops in East Pakistan and the dismemberment of Pakistan.

Fifteenth instalment appears tomorrow

Friday Mailbox

Price of fuel and suffering of people

Sir, The cost of fuel has been increased again. The finance minister, as expected, had forwarded his logic for doing so. This was possibly a part of his routine explanation, which unfortunately, was difficult for the common people to comprehend. As a result of this price hike, fare of all kinds of transports has been increased up to 20 per cent. The government, however, did not show any interest to look into the rate of increase in fare of different transports. The sufferers are obviously the common people, as they always have been in the past. The minister reasoned out that the government has been giving subsidy every year for fuel to the tune of TK 800 crore alone! I would not have questioned the authority, had I not been a citizen under a democratic government who believe in transparency. Will the authority announce the exact expenses of fuel, maintenance cost of all transports and overtime of drivers in the government and semi-government sectors? Why such matters are not discussed in Parliament?

It is widely known that most of the high government and semi-government officials use government transports at random at the cost of public expenses. Moreover, most of them use more than one transport! Why poor country like ours need Mercedes, Pajero and luxury limousine for high officials? Did the concerned authority take account of such lavish lifestyle and huge misuse of government money when they raised the price of fuel? Let the government order fixing of red number plate for the government transports and blue number plate for the semi-government transport forthwith. Let there not be any excuse or logic for changing of the colour of the number plate. People also want to see engagement areas and parking areas of such transports. Will the authority evolve any checking system so that misuse of transports can be detected and the authority can save the cost of fuel of huge amount from the government exchequer?

If people are penalised for making the administrative head heavy then I have to say that the slogan of accountability of the government to the people becomes a misnomer. Those who have been authorised full time use of vehicles on payment at a very nominal price, they mostly misuse/overuse transports and the services of the drivers. Did the authority consider enhancement of payment of all time users of transport in the event of increase of the cost of fuel?

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Student politics

Sir, BNP is reported to be considering not to include non-students in the front organisation JCD (DS Sept 2). If the other parties follow suit, politics in the country might improve, as the students who come in would not have easy scope for profitable side business, as is happening now.

This is the initial stage of political apprenticeship, hence dedication, hard work and selfless social service to the community are the terms of reference. Unfortunately, politics today has turned into a business of personal monetary gain, with lip social service as a side issue. Easy life at such an early age spoils and weakens the character, and the victim is useless to the society in the future; as also creating social problems.

Rehabilitation is difficult and these marked personalities are avoided by the 'normal' people and

they live in a world of their own, losing professional status. The drug addiction, gun-running, extortion, toll collection and use of violence have become a way of life, now so widespread today. It is a dangerous social malaise to which the political leaders are not paying concentrated attention, because it is a weakness in their own political structure, style and application.

The ruling regime (the government) is not actively interested, as fresh approach to the basic political rules of the game are involved. The political culture has to change and some new activists groups have to take the lead non-violently of course.

There are so many vicious cycles existing in the society today, since the very nature of politics has been changing for a quarter of a century, and clean politics has not stabilised yet. BNP's new initiative would be watched with interest.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Projects and more projects!

Sir, We have 17 cement factories, whose total production will make the country self-sufficient in the near future, and leave some surplus for export later. In addition, six factories are on the pipeline, and further, 60 more new cement factories have been approved (DS, Sept 3). Which country needs 70 cement factories?

The Ruppur nuclear power plant is also coming up. Which foreign countries have agreed to finance this brand-new plant (not used second-hand unit)? The government is quite about leaking out information on this 'top secret' project! This may be debated in the next JS session, for formation of public opinion, for transparency. Why BABC is quiet about it, and there are no workshops and seminars?

The hidden projects for Dhaka metro area cannot handle the traffic jam on a crash-programme basis for about a decade now and the government is boasting about its development programmes all the time. Priority-wise, the urgent projects have gone haywire. There is no sense in the madness prevailing prior to the next national polls. Announce, announce and announce, and leave it at that! When our political governors will become practical?

A Frustrated National
Dhaka

4-day working week!

Sir, At the recent Singapore-Bangladesh meet in Singapore, Dhaka came under criticism for continuing the present 5-day weekly holiday format, with full holidays on Friday and Saturday and open on Sunday, when the export transactions are closed globally (as also missing Saturday half-day). This is also the complaint of other foreign investors. The pace of development of the country will hasten by following the international norms on weekly holidays.

Islam is a practical religion and we should not become sentimental and rigid over the practical issues faced by the nation in daily affairs (it is absurd for someone to claim that he should not work because he has to offer prayers five times a day).

The political and religious leaders should sort out the national problems and adopt a positive attitude. It is surprising that the leadership in both these sectors are rather lackadaisical about this urgent issue.

AH
Dhaka

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