

Political Rhetoric at its Worst

WHAT the opposition leader Begum Zia told the British Secretary of State for Home Affairs Jack Straw on gas export to India during the latter's call-on meeting with her last week should go down as the most sensible approach her party could take to that extremely delicate issue. She conveyed it to the British dignitary that BNP would have no objections to any move for gas sale to India provided it were made after due consideration to the present and future domestic requirements of dihydrocarbon and if it should 'prove profitable to the nation'. One would have thought that Khaleda's statement was the nearest thing to what Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had already enunciated as her government's stance on the question of gas sale to India. The latter's oft-repeated position has been that there could be no export of gas till domestic needs, both present and projected, have been met. But alas, the PM has taken the opposition leader's comments from the wrong end of the stick with customary prejudice and showering invectives in place of what should have been praises on Khaleda. The prime minister's tongue-lashing at her opponent contained such awkward remarks as "Khaleda agrees to sell gas if she gets profit. She will not hesitate to even sell the country if she gets profits." This is political rhetoric at its worst.

The tragedy in our politics has been that on very precious and rarefied moments when it looked as if the two key players could come closer to each other following a certain conciliatory tone from one of them, it is the other's abrasive remarks that would force the former back into the bunker bristling more than before. Sobriety is regarded as a sign of weakness, rather than that of realism and sagacity. The reduced intensity of harlots can be cited as another example of where prudence from the opposition leader has been met with sarcasm and mockery from government circles. It was not attributed to any healthy 'change of heart' nor was the credit given to where it was due but seen wholly as an opposition debacle vis-a-vis the triumph of the ruling party's political strategy.

It is the bits and pieces of mutual appreciation at the right time and in well-deserved cases that can make a whole lot of difference in the embittered political atmospheres rendering these congenial to rapprochement. People feel grossly wronged when precious opportunities for political reconciliation which present themselves but only rarely are lost through thoroughly irresponsible utterances.

Dubious Police Role

TWO young men in their late teens were brutally murdered on suspicion of their involvement in an alleged hijacking incident. Their decapitated bodies were recovered at Sutrapur on Saturday in twelve pieces from sewer line. Each of them was cut into six pieces in such a cold blooded manner that one shudders to think of the cannibal on the prowl amidst us.

If one goes by the press reports, the pleading and prodding of the parents of these hapless creatures for police help had no effect whatsoever on some of the officers of Sutrapur police stations. The parents of Mohsin and Saem entreated the police to help them as soon as they heard that their sons had been taken to the Gandaria Rifles Club by some known miscreants of the area by the scruff of their neck. At first the police brushed aside their request but as the day progressed they went to the spot, talked to the miscreants, had drinks with them, came back and assured the guardians that the boys would be released the following morning. Instead, the mutilated bodies of the unfortunate youths were recovered by the police. The main culprit, known as Sumon, at one stage asked for a ransom of Taka fifty thousand from Mohsin's mother who obviously could not pay it. Newspaper reports say that Sumon and his mother, who is a local ruling party somebody, are pretty influential in the area and even police are alleged to be on their side because of the influence they have. This is another glaring example of police inaction despite being furnished with timely and proper information.

The manner in which these boys were murdered shows another side of the human psyche that has become so warped these days. This double murder once again tells the horrific story of law and order situation in the country despite government's tall claims to the contrary. We demand that the culprits be brought to book immediately despite their political clout and officers responsible for negligence of duty and indirectly helping in the killings be suspended and proceedings drawn against them.

Low on Economic Diplomacy

THAT 27 out of 46 Bangladeshi missions abroad have failed to meet their respective export targets for the 1999-2000 fiscal actually mirrors the country's weakness in economic diplomacy. The redeeming factor, however, is that the embassies in such business-intensive countries as the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Oman, South Korea and, crucially, the United States have fared far better than expected. Consequently, the country's overall export earning has exceeded the fixed target by 14 million US dollars and stood at 5,752 million US dollars at the end of the fiscal. That means had all the embassies been able to live up to expectations, our showing on the export front would have been fantastic.

Worrisome, however, is the fact that many in the losing pack - Iran (31.85 per cent), Jordan (28.21), Malaysia (30.91) and Pakistan (22.90) - have missed their targets by miles, so to speak. A wide range of reasons may have been at work; however, we should be on the look out for any inadequacy at our end. Setting targets in the first place does speak for the government's intent on cashing in on the increased significance of the missions abroad in a changed reality, especially in the face of fast-paced globalisation. There is a crucial question we would like to raise - are the missions well equipped to face the intense challenge of a virtually frontierless business world?

Apparently, there is lack of co-ordination between the government and the embassies as well as amongst the missions. In an era of greater inter-connectivity, facilitated by the IT revolution, economic wings of the missions abroad should be ideally networked with the relevant ministries and, more importantly, the leading chambers of commerce and industry. Moreover, we don't think the vast potential of e-Commerce has been even marginally tapped. There is also the need for a change of approach. Shouldn't the missions play a major role in attracting investment?

Hasina versus the Judiciary: A Political Analysis

by M. Rashiduzzaman

Considering all the facets of what has been characterized as the contempt of court politics Hasina's exaggerated claim that she had only echoed the popular sentiment against the judicial loopholes would not stand the test of time.

THE legal technicalities of the contempt cases will be more a domain of the community of lawyers, which is already frayed but a growing schism between the executive and the judiciary could have far reaching political consequences further dividing the nation that is already divided even at the civil society level.

One strand of the pro-Hasina thinking is that the Prime Minister was only expressing a public frustration with the judicial penchant for bail to the accused and it is further stated that as the leader of the majority party, she had a right to vent her feelings. On that point, she would possibly have the sympathetic ears of those ordinary men and women who often become victims at the hands of seasoned criminals freed on bail on specific justifications. Legal scholars and politicians in the United States have from time to time raised such questions about the role of the judiciary in public life, and demanded more rights of the victims of crime than the rights of the accused. But in her repeated derision of the judiciary, Hasina was not an intellectual flame-thrower in an academic forum.

Whenever she spoke against the judiciary, she never fleshed out her vision of correcting what were presumably the existing judicial impediments to better governance. Much of her anti-judiciary invectives are either a breezy thoughtlessness or a deep intellectual confusion to put it mildly. Hasina does not seem to appreciate that the judicial institutions, bound by the Constitution, tradition and hierarchy, are accountable in their own way, trusted and held in esteem for centuries in numerous countries. It is difficult to explain to her that the Judiciary cannot be under the sway of the Prime Minister! Worse still, she does not seem to accept that granting of bail to the accused, subject to legal provisions, is an essential component of the due process allowed by law

in a democracy.

But it is a question of Hasina missing the conceptual logic that separates the judiciary from the executive or her compulsive outbursts against the courts and the lawyers are the contrived face-savers to divert public attention? One may still wonder if it was a pursuit of single party domination? People will keep on asking about the real motive behind her anti-judiciary position, no matter what is the legal outcome of this dispute. Hasina's dissatisfaction with the judiciary is not her new doctrine of judicial reform; much of her election promises to separate the judiciary from that of the executive remains unfulfilled. So the volley of arguments defending Hasina, both in and outside the court, is little more than a kaleidoscopic array of digression to cover up the real motives of the strident confrontation with the judiciary.

Except those pro-AL lawyers who disputed the Supreme Court Bar Association's right to file a contempt petition, few non-partisan legal stalwarts have come forward to support Hasina in her encounter with the court and the lawyers. So far, the spin-doctors have failed to turn Hasina's anti-judiciary bickering into a populist cry against the legal process and the lawyers. So far the pro-Hasina politicians and her intellectual cohorts have failed to allay the fears of those who considered the court-and-lawyer-bashing as a threat to individual rights which the opposition must challenge for preserving civil liberties. Those who wish well for the AL fear that the fault line, which pits Hasina against the judiciary will loom larger in the future, an unsavory prospect for the AL's credibility with a national election that is not too

far. But the Hasina-loyalists would not agree with this prognosis.

Neither Hasina nor Khaleda is known to be a lethal debater -- but Hasina's unrestrained garrulity has put her in confrontational headlines, long before she was on warpath with the lawyers for her attacks on the judiciary. Her repeated ordeal with the court has created ripples of concern among those (AL) leaders and supporters in her party who want to remain viable well beyond Hasina's stewardship. Hasina's trouble with the judicial process has only exacerbated the division among the lawyer politicians both inside and outside her party, which can be traced back to the sudden resignation of her first attorney general.

Even if Hasina gets off the contempt cases only with a slap on the wrist, she would still be a political loser people might think that Hasina had successfully made the judges pliable enough to let her go unscathed not a compliment for democratic development in Bangladesh. In the meantime, political extremism may spread out of frustration. When 11 eminent lawyers recently accused Prime Minister Hasina of using derogatory language against the court, it was reported that she would make a conciliatory statement following a meeting with Barrister Moinul Hosein, President of the Supreme Court Bar Association. It was expected that the controversy spurred by her remarks would be amicably settled through some form of compromise, and a charm offensive on her behalf would save her from the embarrassment. Sadly, the Prime Minister did not yield, and the Supreme Court Bar Association filed a contempt of court case against

the Prime Minister. The AL is not a monolithic forum, and a good many of the Awami Leaguers would not totally ignore that Hasina reneged on her hint for reconciliation, which not only undermined the Prime Minister's dignity, but also undercut the credibility of the party leader, and the party-in-power itself. Moreover, she was condemned for her personal attack against Moinul Hosein with unfounded allegations she blamed him to be in collusion with two of the charged killers of her father. She even accused him of trying to kill his own younger brother Anwar Hossain Manju, a minister in her cabinet. Unless she can prove any of those allegations, Hasina's credibility and reputation would tumble in public esteem.

More and more close relatives of the sitting Ministers and MPs are being implicated in serious crimes murder, rape, extortion, unauthorized occupation of government land and some of them were blamed for forcibly taking over private properties. The ordinary Awami Leaguers are worried that their party is getting a bad rap for the questionable conduct of a few privileged individuals in the party. Non-partisan observers have claimed that law enforcement cannot proceed against the suspected offenders because of political intervention influential business leaders have publicly questioned the sincerity of the government efforts to protect those who are engaged in trade and commerce. Such frustrations are the eloquent testimony to the central weakness in governance, which cannot be totally lost on the Awami League itself it may turn into an anti-establishment backlash. Since Kader Siddiqui rose against Hasina, more and more

factional and personal rivalries some blatant and violent among the Awami Leaguers are reported in the newspapers.

The on-again off-again blame shifting on the shoulders of the judges and lawyers politicizes the judiciary a nightmare that most Bangladeshis would ordinarily abhor. More importantly, it cannot assuage the pain of a nation battered by the rise of horrendous crimes, abuse of power, escalating violence and a wave of political assassinations. Most extortions and terrorists are presumed to operate with impunity as long as they have high connections. So the judicial bail for those apprehended by the police a bone of contention between the Prime Minister and the court couldn't be held responsible for the rampant criminal activities and the governance crisis that the people are raising hell about.

Considering all the facets of what has been characterized as the contempt of court politics Hasina's exaggerated claim that she had only echoed the popular sentiment against the judicial loopholes would not stand the test of time.

If the BNP-led alliance can fully exploit the fresh window of opportunity to its advantage. It is also important to ask if the ordinary people are listening to the media hype on the Hasina versus the judiciary conflict. Is she losing her believability? Political fatigue is not quantifiable, but a negative perception is by itself a driving reality; it has the potential for an open leadership struggle in the AL. Since she became the Prime Minister, Hasina hasn't spent much time to rebuild the party that has been out of power for nearly two decades. Behind the public show of solidarity at the top, the rival factions and personalities in the AL have apparently disregarded Hasina's homily for peace and reconciliation within her party. Embroiled by the infighting in the party, Hasina has started a revamping of the AL that may include cabinet reshuffling she has a tough road ahead.

Considering all the facets of what has been characterized as the contempt of court politics Hasina's alleged disrespect for the legal process, her apparent arrogance, her evident cover up for the law and order failure and the adverse effect of a dragged executive-judiciary dispute Hasina's exaggerated claim that she had only echoed the popular sentiment against the judicial loopholes would not stand the test of time.

Finally, it will be a great blunder for Hasina to use her office as the bully pulpit for her anti-judiciary drive it might split the judges by partisan rancour the worst prospect for Bangladesh since the cherished vanity of the non-political bureaucracy has all but perished. Beset with the debilitating troubles around her, Hasina will be fighting from a position of weakness, and any further loss of face on her part will be the catalyst of discontents soaring against her.

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The 'Liberal' Bubble Bursts

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Mr Vajpayee is not distancing himself from Hindutva hardliners. He is building his own base in the party. After 7 p.m., it is strictly Party Time in the PMO. Mr Vajpayee's unprecedented interest in organisational matters has little to do with competing with the RSS. Mr Vajpayee needs the RSS. It needs him.

collected billions for their Indian cousins.

Thus, the Staten Island speech was shocking, not surprising. But it should lay to rest once and for all myth cultivated by BJP sympathisers. The myth is that the BJP has cut its RSS umbilical cord and become a "normal" party not obsessed with Hindutva.

The rationale of accepting the invitation of Mr Clinton's lame-duck government was totally institutional. Its vitiation was compounded by the presence of 108 sadhus, as well as hardcore RSS members in Mr Vajpayee's audience. The attendance of other Indian ministers and officials meant the Prime Minister illegitimately mixed his agendas at Staten Island.

Worse, he failed to dissociate himself from the Ayodhya temple demand. He described it as part of the "India of our dreams", although his government formally opposes the temple.

Mr Vajpayee was fully aware of this gross impropriety. He honed his words to his audience. The only logical explanation is that he was publicly repaying a debt to the RSS-VHP, USA, who have

decision to test, which was hidden even from the home and defence ministers.

Those who see a "secular liberal" in Mr Vajpayee confuse softness of appearance with hard-nosed commitment to pluralist tolerance. They equate familiarity with Urdu with devotion to secularism, and confuse a somewhat unconventional lifestyle with radical morals.

Mr Vajpayee has never advocated radical pluralism even in his poetry. He has never accepted the liberal notion of freedom of the individual. His 1995 Sangh is My Soul article talks of the RSS's two tasks. "One is to organise the Hindus. The other is to assimilate the non-Hindus... in the mainstream..."

However, secularism is not about assimilating "Them", those "Others". It recognises that India has always been a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society, never "essentially" Hindu. "Us" and "Them" can't be defined on the basis of religion. Politics and religion must be separated. The RSS was privy to his

tropical country a person at that age remains quite energetic to serve the nation. We hope for the sake of justice and equity, this order would be given retrospective effect so that within the purview of the above age limit the persons retired could be recalled to serve the nation for few more years as within this period the new recruits could be adequately trained to fill up the gap and as such it will not effect the new entry into civil service.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Choudhury Dhaka

Pakistan must apologise and war criminals punished

Sir, The Daily Star carried out a commendable task by publishing the supplementary report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission and the readers thus became quite aware of Pakistan's atrocities in 1971. The DS appeal for the trial of the war criminals was most appropriate.

Recently, our prime minister made an eloquent speech at the United Nations Millennium Conference. Her bold and spirited statement regarding the end of dictatorship in the new millennium was the need of the day when underdeveloped countries, marginal and emerging democracies are always vulnerable to dictators and unconstitutional rules.

Sir, The recent government decision of extension of age limit of the civil servants from 57 to 60 is very reasonable as even in our

On the other hand, can our PM be as bold as her UN speech in eradicating corruption and terrorism from our society?

F. Hussain
Purana Paltan, Dhaka

Towards a smooth traffic

Sir, The communication minister said that traffic jams in the city would ease if the road users were more cooperative (IBS report in DS, September 12). He however, avoided several basic

points. Why thousands of unauthorised drivers and vehicles are being allowed on the roads year after year? The traffic congestion would ease visibly within a week of the drive. There should be a ceiling on the maximum number of rickshaws (pedal and motorised) to be allowed to ply in the city, as the road mileage is limited.

Where is the prosecution side of the regulating agencies? How many prosecutions are made each day? These data may be published for public assurance. The politicians in power are very fond of lecturing the public, without delivering as per their duties and responsibilities. The government-controlled news agencies should be balanced, not one-sided news reports. The official mass media lost its credibility long ago due to shameless and

habitual sycophancy; also losing professional pride. Let there be a census of the number of lotus eaters in this rising society.

Why the regime is so weak-kneed when administration and management are concerned? Let us hear of immediate practical steps, not views, opinions, and homilies.

Abul M. Ahmad
Dhaka

Coward mosquitoes!

Sir, A one and a half-year-old boy got bitten by the deadly Aedes mosquito and got so sick that he had to be given 17 bags of blood. What the parents went through only the parents know! So many other little children and innocent people are being bitten by Aedes and are suffering immeasurably or dying. What cowards these mosquitoes are that they bite only the helpless ones! Why cannot they bite the real culprits? The mosquitoes should bite those for whom the whole society is suffering day after day. If only the mosquitoes had this much courage our society would have been saved from a lot of menace.

But all these little monsters are doing is attacking the harmless and hapless public, who did no wrong. And our society is now polluted with not only social diseases but also a real deadly disease.

Sarah
Dhaka