

Parliament Beckons the Opposition

THE four-party opposition alliance seems to be within a striking range of eschewing hartal as the core element of their agitation politics against the government. There are signs of an emerging consensus within the central leadership of the opposition combine that in the present scheme of things they have better things to do than issue hartal call every now and then on the slightest of pretexts. In fact, they have homed in on 'mass contact' as the exact alternative to hartal, which they would like to mainly pursue from this point on.

Although hartal calls were ostensibly designed to mobilise public support these have actually ended up demobilising public support as far as the opposition went. It is heartening to note that the opposition does not want to 'lose its strength by going for hartals on petty issues.' This paper takes particular satisfaction in such a turn of events as we have consistently opposed hartals as it harmed public interest and damaged the economy.

This being an election year, it is only natural that the opposition should like to conserve its energy for electoral preparedness instead of wasting it on hartals. The futility of hartal finds vindication from none other than their callers.

While we compliment them on their appreciation of one particular reality in the shape of recognising the need to abjure the hartal path there is another reality they better not turn a blind eye to. We urge the opposition to go back to parliament if not for anything else than as an electoral strategy.

In the ten months left to the present Jatiya Sangsad at least 3-4 sessions of the parliament are due to be held. For all intents and purposes, these are going to be crucial JS sessions, not only because the ruling party would try to rush its pending legislative business through but also owing to the important electoral reform agenda that the opposition needs to press through the parliament. For instance, the question pertaining to women's enlarged representation in parliament and reform of the post-election tribunals to yield quick verdicts on electoral disputes need to be disposed of, to say nothing of strengthening the safeguards for free and fair polls.

So overwhelmingly important the potential agenda before the remainder parliamentary sessions are that it would be foolish for the opposition to say, 'Well, we cannot join the parliament in the closing months of its existence when we did not do it for the most part of its tenure.'

Deregulate Telecom

WHERE are we on the information superhighway? Surely not amongst the front-liners and, in all likelihood, not amongst the middle-rankers either. What has held us back from surfing on the worldwide wave of information technology? The answer is simple: a shortsighted government with a curiously conservative IT policy. Unfortunately, despite persistent urgings by people like Professor Muhammad Yunus and Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, the people at the helm have failed to show the desired level of activism both in infrastructure development and in encouraging private sector participation. BTB monopoly still continues with a poor telecommunications network offsetting the huge potential IT has on offer for a fantastic economic growth.

The government seems unconvinced that information technology could be more than adequate as an aid to the expansion of our export base. It could only mean that it has its eyes and ears closed to the happenings around the world. Transaction in IT businesses worldwide has gone past the trillion-dollar mark and is growing unceasingly. Indian earning from software export is already in the vicinity of one hundred billion dollars. Pakistan and Sri Lanka are alive to their potential in the field. It seems we have lagged behind by choice.

True, the government has designated our still-nascent IT industry as a thrust sector. Unfortunately, that's about all it has done so far. At crucial times, governments had taken detrimental decisions. Refusal to be linked with deep-sea cable when laid down through the Bay of Bengal, on grounds of national security, has left us without an identity on the worldwide web. Fibre optic technology in telecommunications remains largely an alien concept. Inexplicable policy rigidity has shooed away prospective private sector investment in telecom infrastructure development.

As Professor Yunus has forecast time and again, the country can really turn around and slash poverty by half within 2010, if the government nurtures IT. The first step in that direction would be to incentivise growth of the telecom sector. There are eager entrepreneurs in the private sector who can usher in an era of fabulous advancement in telecommunications. The government should be the facilitator, not the schizophrenic regulator it has been so far.

Trucks and Death

TWO road accidents in Dhaka city on Friday set the alarm bell ringing about heavy-duty vehicular movement inside the metropolis. Three persons were run over by two lorries, a mother and her child at Tikatuli and a female garments worker at Khilgaon. The vehicle at fault was set ablaze by angry mob in the former incident causing serious law and order breakdown in a wide area. The backlash should be taken as an eye-opener to the ugly public mood gruesome road accidents create to the endangerment of public order. The home ministry better take note of it.

Moreover, we have been jolted into the realisation that even in the slow moving traffic of the city, which we had pinned our hopes on as a safeguard against mishaps, terrible accidents can take place. Our attention, in this respect, is drawn to truck movements in the city during daytime. While these vehicles are supposed to enter and leave the metropolitan area during lean traffic hours, their visibility even through peak traffic is pretty pronounced.

Let there be a fresh announcement of daily timetable for truck movement in the city. There should also be an independent investigation into the status of adherence to the existing entry and exit timings of trucks and lorries. The transport and home ministries will have to put their heads together on how best to regulate the movement of trucks in and out of the city. Their loading and off-loading points better be at the outer rim of the metropolis.

Universities: Searching for a Shore

There can be no pride in being a member of a campus (be it VC or teacher or student) which reels under the reign of non-academic pursuits. No nation can survive when its universities begin to bleed. Let us call it a day for our ignorance, lapses and lack of visions that we were subjected to in the past. We should search for the light switch. We should search for the shore. The dream of becoming a 'university person' should not end in a nightmare.

by, curtail the waiting period of students by more than six months, on average.

However, VCs are also aware of the fact that the end of admission tests does not necessarily lead to the end of the agony that students are fraught with. Classes may not resume soon due to a volley of constraints. The incumbents will have to be provided with accommodation, educational logistics, library facilities etc. Added to this, the process might demand extra shift of classes.

On both the counts, the universities would need to have extra allocation of resources for providing accommodation, transport, incentives to teachers and infrastructural facilities. However, it is the view of the VCs that the incremental benefits to the society would far outweigh the incremental costs, given that the project succeeds.

Another jeopardizing jam that public universities are grappling with is called the session jam. The extent of the jam varies from university to university. For example, in Jahangirnagar University, Masters' students of 1997 have just completed their examinations. Roughly, the jam is of three years. In few of the universities, there is no such jam or that is insignificant, but in some cases

it is of more than two years. Invariably, the cost of graduation in those 'unfortunate' universities is almost twice as high as it is in the 'fortunate' ones. If an industry tends to face a unit cost of production that goes up very high, can that industry survive competition? Universities are also industries

because they lose the chair. Because the challenges could warrant a lot of, albeit painful, changes in the behavioural pattern of academics; (b) Allegedly, some teachers do not value their jobs properly. There are complaints that they do not take classes and tutorial examination regularly and do not submit

authorities, given commitments, can do something regarding inside factors, the outside factors remain beyond the bound of their control. So what is needed is a tripartite agreement among politicians, university authorities and student bodies to deal with the jeopardizing session jam. The university authorities should do their part of the job. For example, they should (a) reformulate examination system through discussion in academic council; (b) introduce a system of accountability through regular monitoring that would require VCs to sit regularly with Chairpersons and Deans to evaluate the progress; (c) reward the leaders in the academic fields (departments or individuals) while punishing the laggards. This means that as far as session jam is concerned, a discriminatory policy in terms of resources allocation could be considered.

Public universities nowadays are criticised for growing terrorism besides session jam. Terrorist activities in campus, however, have been on a wane, as is revealed by available research reports. And given anti-terrorism stances of concerned quarters, hopefully, the extent of terrorism can be axed considerably. Session jam needs to be wiped out to put universities in the good book of society. These two vices (terrorism and session jam), reinforcing each other at times, tend to put the 'autonomy' issue into serious question. We should prove that the autonomy of universities (vide Act 73) has given us ample scope to move forward, not backward. Universities should remain autonomous in determining the modus operandi of reaching manpower targets set by the government in the realm of higher education. Autonomy has to lead to more transparent, accountable and pragmatic policies. Otherwise, a time may come when universities would cease to be autonomous, not by choice but by force. Let us prove ourselves worthy of the trusts that society put on us.

As President of the Association of Universities of Bangladesh (AUB) the author would appeal to politicians (in or out of government) to help us keep campus free from violence. University administration needs to be assured of their non-support to terrorists. On the other hand, appeals also go to learned colleagues and fellow students and others to keep up the sanctity of these highest citadels of learning. There can be no pride in being a member of a campus (be it VC or teacher or student) which reels under the reign of non-academic pursuits. No nation can survive when its universities begin to bleed. Let us call it a day for our ignorance, lapses and lack of visions that we were subjected to in the past. We should search for the light switch. We should search for the shore. The dream of becoming a 'university person' should not end in a nightmare.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



that produce an output called graduates. The graduates have a market where employers would like to see young and cost-effective graduates. Nowhere in the world, perhaps, session jams are so gigantic as in Bangladesh.

There are both inside and outside factors contributing to session jam. Among inside factors are: (a) Absence of a true realisation among the actors within the university that how much and how far the jam is jeopardizing. Every one advertently or inadvertently seems to take it as almost a way of life in public universities. Authorities, on the other hand, tend to be reluctant to take up the chal-

enge lest they lose the chair. Because the challenges could warrant a lot of, albeit painful, changes in the behavioural pattern of academics; (b) Allegedly, some teachers do not value their jobs properly. There are complaints that they do not take classes and tutorial examination regularly and do not submit examination scripts in due time. These famous 'fries' as they are known nowadays frisk and fritter to see students roaming in 'varandhas' requesting them for taking class; (c) The system of external examiners also add some strain to the jam. Some of the examiners make delay in the delivery of scripts. There are few more inside factors but scarcity of space do not allow that to be discussed here.

On the external front, national political programmes have an impact on the speed of academic movements. Strikes, hartals, clashes among student organizations and other elements also gear up the jam. While university

Congress in Disarray: It's the Vision, Stupid!

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The Congress' future depends in no small measure upon the "vision" factor. The party is no longer seen as representing a progressive vision that appeals to the masses. Unless this changes, the Congress risks losing its recent gains in popular support, morale, mobilising ability, even votes. It faces marginalisation even as the BJP's stock falls.

THERE could be no better time for the Indian National Congress to seize the political initiative than today. There is growing disillusionment with the ruling NDA. The BJP is in the grip of its worst-ever internal strife. Its top leadership is beset by numerous ailments, knee upwards to foot-in-mouth, not to speak of severe depression.

The BJP's allies, directionless and fractious, pursue severely parochial agendas as the coalition lurches from crisis to crisis.

Only the pampered Indian elite experiences the 'feel-good' factor under the NDA's sleazy policies. But sullen anger is building up among other strata. Over 1.1 million cane-growing peasant families of Uttar Pradesh have seen sugar mills cruelly shut down. Returns from cereal farming everywhere have plummeted to unaffordable levels.

'Surplus' grain riots in state godowns as millions go hungry. Working people are suddenly being asked to pay 70 per cent more for food and fuel. Health and education are breaking down. Misgovernance is rampant.

A classic description of ancient Rome's government controlled by wealth, a ruling-class numb to the repetitions of political scandal, a public diverted by chariot races and gladiatorial shows' like Kaun Banega Crorepati appeals strongly to today's India.

This cries out for a powerful opposition, with alternative policies and serious political mobilisation. However, the Congress's response has been passive, confused or half-hearted. It is as if the party had lost its gut-level instincts.

What else can explain its failure to confront the NDA on Mr Vajpayee's outrageous swamyamsevak speech, the Jethmalani resignation, attacks on the minorities, or communalisation of cultural and educational institutions?

And why is it so schizophrenic in West Bengal, where the NDA is out to wreck the Left Front government? Rather than defend the LF and isolate the Trinamool Congress, the party has entered into a de facto quasi-alliance with it. It can be no one's case that Mr Jyoti Basu's administration could not be more responsive to popular concerns.

But the LF's performance is vastly superior in land reforms, primary education, food security, panchayati raj and women's empowerment to most other parties. It is incomparably better than Trinamool with its mastans and racketeers.

Yet the Congress is suicidally joining hands with Trinamool. Its MLA is Trinamool's Calcutta mayor! Worse, the party's central leadership is lending support to Trinamool's reckless anti-Basu campaign. The Congress shouldn't even be toying with such an idea if it has political sense, leave alone a conscience.

Toppling the LF government on trumped-up charges means



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destroying a bulwark against lumpen politics, and opening the doors to communalism.

The Congress is disturbed by Mr Vajpayee's brazen identification with the RSS-VHP during his US visit. But it hasn't really mobilised people on this. Even on increases in food prices, bus and electricity rates, it has failed to mobilise the poor.

The Congress leadership alone is responsible for these failures.

silences, and other shortcomings. More than two years after the nuclear tests, it still lacks clear policies on the issue. It dishonestly advocates the Rajiv Gandhi disarmament plan of 1988 and, in the same breath, opposes signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty for sectarian reasons.

On economic policy, the Congress seemed to be leaning leftwards. But now it has appointed as many as 11 committees to go

into various issues under the overall charge of Mr Pranab Mukherjee, a person singularly devoid of integrity or intelligence. Such hesitation, just when dogmatic neo-liberalism is being unleashed full-blast, speaks of bad leadership.

That is a direct reflection upon Ms Sonia Gandhi. She has failed to revitalise the party. She has become a prisoner of crafty individuals like Mr Vincent George who control access and tender disastrously wrong advice to her handling of the fall of the first NDA government, her amateurish responses to Kashmir, and her hesitation to agitate the persecution of Christians. This also explains Mr Salman Khursheed's replacement as UPCC chief by a non-entity and George crony called Mr Shripakash Jaiswal.

The intriguers who surround herit was a depressing sign of sycophancy that highly respected leaders lined up to congratulate her on becoming a grandmother have marginalised more capable leaders such as Messrs Ahmed Patel, A.K. Antony and Madhavrao Scindia.

Ms Gandhi leads by default, because the Congress is not self-confident enough to think of an alternative.

This spells trouble. Historically, the Congress has

enjoyed broad acceptance partly because of its flexibility in balancing conflicting demands of different social groups; partly because it has a pan-Indian presence and perspective; and not least because it has a modern developmentalist vision.

The first function needs a core coalition of classes within the Congress support-base. This broke down when the Dalits and Muslims moved away. They are yet to return to it in large numbers.

The Congress's national presence has been eroded by regional parties. Its primary membership has shrunk by more than one-third in three years. The fall has been steep (up to 60 per cent) in UP, Bihar, Gujarat and Kerala. True, this is not an authentic index of party base; it reflects low cadre enthusiasm. But the numbers don't speak of great vigour in the party.

The Congress' future depends in no small measure upon the 'vision' factor. The party is no longer seen as representing a progressive vision that appeals to the masses. It is not narrow-minded, communal, obscurantist, jingoistic or shamelessly pro-rich like the BJP. But it hasn't demarcated itself sharply from the BJP with a people-oriented, forward-looking modern vision.

Unless this changes, the Congress risks losing its recent gains in popular support, morale, mobilising ability, even votes. It faces marginalisation even as the BJP's stock falls. This doesn't bode well for democracy. If the alternative to the BJP doesn't come from the Centre-Left, it could come from the Extreme Right.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Hobnobbing with the Chic Elite

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Ever since the Democratic Presidential convention in Los Angeles last month, the Democratic nominee Vice President Al Gore has steadily gained in the polls and now leads the Republican nominee Texas Governor George W. Bush by anywhere between 4 to 8 percentage points.

suburban Princeton residence. Old time Bangladeshis will remember Dr. Von Vorys. He taught at the Dhaka University International Relations Department in the early 1960s. Many, including the writer's wife, remember the young Professor scooting around the streets of Dhaka on his Vespa. For dinner, among other delicious entrees, Professor Von Vorys and his wife went to extraordinary lengths to serve 'Chingri (prawns) from Chittagong,' their favourite dish!

The writer first met Professor Von Vorys at the University of Pennsylvania campus in 1979. The late National Professor Abdur Razzak was staying with us for ten days. As soon as Professor Von Vorys learned of Professor Razzak's visit, he immediately came to visit him at our apartment. For the next ten days, the two Professors held innumerable intellectual discussions. A photograph of Professor Razzak hung on the wall of Dr. Von Vorys's office. Readers would be interested to know that Professor Razzak made the writer drop him off at one bookstore in the morning, and pick him up from another in the evening! Among books, is where the late Professor Razzak liked to live.

At the August dinner party when the writer asked Professor Von Vorys whether he had heard that Professor Razzak had passed away last November, he was shocked, and disappointed that no one had informed him. 'Professor Razzak had been the greatest influence in my life,' said Professor Von Vorys, an

internationally renowned Professor of International Relations, who at one time was an advisor to the late President Richard Nixon. Subsequently, the writer has sent Professor Von Vorys reports and articles on Professor Razzak's death that were published in the Internet edition of The Daily Star.

My wife and I had taken some meat somosas, prepared by a friend, for the dinner party. A few minutes later Julie appeared with the tray of our somosas, serving everyone. 'They are really delicious! Can I have another one?' she said. 'How are they made?' inquired David.

At dinner in the garden, David Eisenhower came over and sat with my wife and me. We talked on all sorts of topics. David, who also teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, possesses encyclopedic knowledge. He is just as comfortable discussing the Republican Party in the US, as he is talking about the Tudeh Party in Iran or the Congress Party in India. When I asked him about the Republican Party's traditional 'tilt' towards Pakistan and the Democratic Party's courting of India, he explained to me the historical friendship axis that exists between America's Democratic Party, the UK's Labour Party and India's Congress Party.

I asked whether it was true that when President candidate Richard Nixon visited India in early 1968, Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi greeted him less than warmly with a question to an aide in Hindi: 'How long is he to stay here?' 'You mean, she

said how long do I have to put up with this guy?' David added jokingly. Then he went on to say that although his father-in-law, the late President Richard Nixon, was an extremely intelligent and analytical person, he could also be emotional and upset at such slights.

I asked David whether he remembered President Dwight Eisenhower. 'I was in my twenties when grandfather died; of course I remember him,' he replied. The writer's eldest son had just written a high school history paper on the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last gamble to turn the tide of World War II. I asked David whether the allies were in any real danger of losing the Battle. 'Actually, I have written a book on it,' David said.

Then David Eisenhower proceeded to narrate certain theories that I had never heard before. Although they were fighting the Russians fiercely on the eastern front, the Germans were apparently not really interested in fighting the Western Allies during the later part of the war. When the Western Allies landed on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, Germans realized that they were serious. The Germans would provoke the Western Allies with attacks such as the Battle of the Bulge, and would hope for a counter attack. If a counterattack were forthcoming, the Germans would offer no resistance. The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces General Dwight Eisenhower saw clearly through the German subterfuge. 'The Germans wanted Western allies led by America to occupy

Germany before the Russians could come.'

General Eisenhower would have none of that, according to David Eisenhower. 'Russia is our ally in this war,' the General said. 'If the Russians sense that we are in collusion with Germany, we will lose their trust and justifiably earn their enmity for centuries.' Of such foresight, I guess, are statesmen made! David also said that President Eisenhower did not want to talk about the Second World War. 'He did not want to be told that any of his war decisions were wrong, because that could imply that his decision was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers under his command.'

David Eisenhower did say that his grandfather did not mind talking about his Presidency. The Eisenhower Presidency has been criticized for achieving little and the President himself for playing too much golf. The heart attack that President Eisenhower suffered while in office weakened him considerably. After leading the Allies to victory in the Second World War, by the time General Eisenhower became President Eisenhower, according to David, he was a tired man. That explains why his administration achieved so little. The German Autobahn (super highways) impressed General Eisenhower enormously. Learning from the Germans, President Eisenhower authorized the construction of the Interstate Highways that connect every state and city in America today.

David Eisenhower is a

member of the inner circle of the Republican Party. He had a prominent role in formulating the Republican platform for the upcoming presidential election. Although George W. Bush came out of the feel good Republican convention in Philadelphia with huge lead in the poll, David said he was surprised to hear the Press in Philadelphia predicting a Gore victory in November. The Press seems to have been vindicated. Ever since the Democratic Presidential convention in Los Angeles last month, the Democratic nominee Vice President Al Gore has steadily gained in the polls and now leads the Republican nominee Texas Governor George W. Bush by anywhere between 4 to 8 percentage points.

After dinner my wife chatted with Julie for over an hour. Julie had the same concerns as any other man about her daughter attending college. She also talked about her sister Tricia and her family. Julie has the tall and slender gait of her late mother, Mrs. Pat Nixon. The first word that comes to mind when one meets Julie Nixon Eisenhower is 'elegance.' As we were leaving, I told Julie, 'I am going to tell our friends who we met!' She smiled and walked out with us.

This has been a good summer of meeting with celebrities for the writer's family. On September 15, the writer and his wife had breakfast with the Republican Governor of the state of New Jersey, Mrs. Christine Todd Whitman, at her sprawling Princeton residence. 'Thanks for all that you have done for the Muslims of New Jersey,' the writer told the Governor. (She has actually done a lot for the Muslims, including signing the Halal Food Act of 2000). It works both ways,' the Governor replied, adding that Muslims too have contributed significantly towards enhancing the quality of life in New Jersey.

What a pity access is not influence, and celebrity does not rub off!