

Verdict on Ershad

WITH the Supreme Court verdict Ershad's political career virtually comes to an end. Whatever political dream he may have had - our political leaders are known to have many - are now dashed forever. As far as our immediate politics is concerned this verdict has thrown open the scramble for JP's leadership. Who will succeed Ershad and whether it will stay as one party or split into factions each led by different aspirants are the immediate questions. Already a significant portion led by Anwar Hossain Manju had split from the main faction some time back. It is possible that Manju's hands may become stronger with more JP stalwarts backing the 'winning horse' so to speak. All this will definitely have an impact on the alliance politics. Two of the original leaders are no longer there - first Golam Azam and now Ershad. As far as personalities are concerned, Khaleda Zia becomes the lone attraction for the whole alliance. In some odd way this may act as a boon for BNP as its leader will, in effect, become the natural rallying point for the whole opposition and as such be able to strengthen the inner bond of the opposition.

With the falling of the curtain on Ershad's public career Bangladesh's politics turns a significant corner in its short but turbulent history. He will be the first President ever who has been punished for his misdeeds, especially corruption. Credit must be given to the government of Khaleda Zia which single-mindedly pursued the corruption charges against the corrupt autocrat, risking pushing the JP into the AL's hands which is exactly what happened. But for the political opportunism of the then opposition, the Awami League, the JP and its leader would never have come as far as they did in terms of political rehabilitation.

However belatedly, the whole judicial process has come to its natural end with the culprit getting the punishment that he deserves and with his political career ending in total and unambiguous disgrace. Without question Ershad marked the worst in our politics. He was a usurper of power and his sole aim was personal aggrandisement. The country was for him something to exploit and the people were for him to manipulate for his own end. He considered the government to be his personal fiefdom to do as he pleased. There are two very significant aspects of the fall of Ershad. First, he was thrown out of power by 'people's power' and not by a military coup or conspiracy. Second, he was put behind bars by the judiciary after going through all its different stages. Thus his fall marks the victory of democracy and of the rule of law.

Park Sacrificed Again

NEED the city fathers be so indifferent to the fact that already the city has turned into a veritable concrete jungle? Thanks to unplanned urbanisation, compounded by blatant deviation from the Dhaka Master Plan, the metropolis has become lifeless. Whichever direction one turns to one is greeted with visual discontents. Little greenery is left in the face of grey aggression and natural water bodies derelict. The river Buriganga, the lifeline of the city, is choked, encroachers making merry of almost non-existent administrative activism. The metropolis needs some fresh air. Its residents need to have some contact with green. They need some open space to shrug off the claustrophobic feeling urban living induces. The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), especially the Mayor, doesn't seem concerned with the needs of either the metropolis or its residents. Or else, how does one explain the sacrifice of the park on the eastern side of the Karwan Bazar kitchen market? What can be the rationale behind allocation of 51 shops around the park and, intriguingly, on the portion of the road and the walkway? Commercial compulsion or what?

The small park at Karwan Bazar is not the only one sacrificed on the altar of such commercial considerations. Mushrooming of makeshift shops and eventually permanent market place on open spaces is by no means a new phenomenon. Alarming, the trend shows no sign of letting up. On the contrary, it has marked sharp rise in recent times. Unfortunately, the city fathers have facilitated, directly or indirectly, the concrete aggression on the public spaces and the greenery. They have either approved construction of shops or plazas on open spaces, or simply played the indifferent onlookers. Reports in the media and pronounced concern of the conscious citizenry have sometimes preempted invasion on the public space, but seemingly failed to wake the city authorities up to the fact that a metropolis cannot be and must not be over proliferation of concrete structures; there is the need for greenery, water bodies and open parks and spaces.

To the Editor

The Zarina episode

Sir. The stealing of widow Zarina's hard earned savings of one and a half year in the Middle East is one of many such incidents that are perpetrated everyday by gangs of rogues masquerading at ZIA. It is a common knowledge as to what happens at ZIA, how it happens and who are involved. Both the victims and the authorities seem to have got accustomed to the malpractice and tend to take it as an irredeemable routine matter and almost as the right of those criminals who are powerful enough to frustrate any move to stop their nefarious activities.

In the past, sincere efforts were known to have been made by some quarters in the government specially Biman to contain or curb these gangs operating inside the security area of the airport rendered futile. These organised gangs with active support of some powerful persons successfully thwarted all previous moves. They are merrily carrying on their job of robbing the passengers at ease and with immunity in the

cargo hold area during unloading and loading of passengers' luggage from or onto the low tractors. Arrangements of sharing the booty with all the people in the area, specially the security personnel of Biman and CAAB, ensure a permanent system of theft. Sharing system is reportedly extended to some high-ups in the line.

ZIA has long been looked upon as a dreaded place to pass through by the Bangladeshi passengers, specially the arriving ones. Scores of passengers are losing their valuables everyday at ZIA, some complaints are lodged, reports in the national dailies appear occasionally but the thefts go unabated, unchecked as before. The desperate wail and tenacity of a poor lady victim namely Zarina Khutun, this time kicked up a lot of dust, the press media had taken up the cudgel for her that led to rousing of wide public reactions and ultimate declaration by Oman Air Lines compensation for the loss.

In the greater national interest and for the image of the country

the matter should not be allowed to end here. The suspension of a few Biman personnel and ordering of departmental inquiry are some of the routine steps that are perfidiously done to appease the public wrath and in the long run to shield the criminals. In order to stop the heinous activities of the thieves inside the airport permanently we demand an inquiry into the incident by a high level committee which will also make enforceable recommendations from the airport of the thugs.

S M Zaman Dhaka

The image of politics and the politicians

Sir. The politicians in the emerging nations in the third world are so busy looking after the never-ending problems (old, and the newly emerging problems) of the country that they have scarcely any time left to pay attention to the correct image of the politics and the political leaders

Vicissitudes in the Life of an Enigmatic but Controversial Person

Politicians, like other people, have to work in order to promote their principles and objectives. In doing so and to be successful, they must take stock of the situation and be pragmatic. If Ershad remains detained in prison, it has been asserted by his Party stalwarts that the constitutional provisions and arrangements would ensure that his Jatiya Party's support to the opposition would remain unabated.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

India where he was undergoing a National Defense Course, and was installed as Deputy Chief of Army Staff following the coup in 1975. He appeared to have served diligently his mentor, General Ziaur Rahman, as Chief of Army Staff till his assassination in 1981 and soon thereafter revealed his real intention. He toppled the regime of the elected President Justice Abdus Sattar through a bloodless coup and assumed power in March 1982 on illusory and untenable grounds.

Speculation is, naturally, rife as to whether this act sounded the death knell of the political career of a soldier-turned-politician who had ruled the country for long nine years, the longest ever by any other person. He has since appealed against both his conviction and detention. Even in the event of the granting of appeal on his behalf, many think his political image has been severely tarnished.

In the opinion of most of the many I talked to, no other person could match a colourful, though checkered, life as represented by H.M. Ershad. He is a virtual epitome of the two extremes -- a rare combination of virtues and vices.

People often wonder how a gentle, soft-spoken and exceedingly well-mannered person, as if a visible embodiment of all that is good, could be so devoid of many other human qualities. His illustrious behaviour and seemingly undivided attention to people deserving attention appear to many in sharp contrast to his many acts of falsehood, deceit and utter ruthlessness. His outward disposition of courtesy and attitude of helpfulness did not, and perhaps will not, brook any consideration and means, fair and foul, to attain his own ends. He is a master demagogue and could easily sway people with convincing assertions. The result was apparent; he won all the five seats he had contested in the parliamentary election in June 1996, even though he was then in prison. His charm and graciousness with the opposite sex is well-known and evoked envy to many, who may not admit it though. Some say, he may have been in his mid-sixties, but he looks like in mid-fifties and acts as one in mid-forties. He is, no doubt, a repository of indomitable energy and the vive necessary for achieving success which he did in so many fields.

Hussain Muhammad Ershad, a professional soldier repatriated from Pakistan following liberation, was abruptly called from

following drying up of the traditional source from the then Soviet Union. In the wake of assassination of General Zia, due to the insistence of President Sattar, I persuaded Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Jiyang to visit Bangladesh. That became the second visit of a Chinese Prime Minister after Zhou En Lai in the sixties. Zhao Jiyang had cancelled his official visit to Bangladesh after hearing the death of

our President, but I goaded him to transform his joyous official visit to a trip to express solidarity with a friendly nation in mourning.

During this time General Ershad categorically told me that the Bangladesh Army will always uphold the constitution by all means and showed me in his office newspapers of the day reporting his statement to that effect during his visit to Comilla Cantonment the previous day.

But the very next year, he abrogated constitution, declared martial law and assumed all power of the state. His pledge to return power to the civilian rule in two years dragged on for nine long years and that too he had to give up as a sequel to a country-wide movement supported by major political parties. Perhaps, hypocrisy is imperative in the trait of the usurper of state powers and such unlawful acts are totally and inextricably abhorred by all democratic minded people.

The first time General Ershad was sent to gaol was almost immediately after he was toppled from power in December 1990. It was under orders of the caretaker government of President Shahabuddin Ahmed. Ershad remained in jail during the regime of Khaleda Zia and his trial started on a number of cases involving corruption, misuse of power, favouritism, etc. Following election in June 1996, Ershad found himself catapulted in the role of a king-maker. Since no political party won majority seats in the new parliament, the Awami League succeeded in entering into an entente with Ershad, and with the support of his Jatiya Party members in the Parliament succeeded in forming government. In return, Hasina surreptitiously arranged bail for Ershad and took him out of prison. Without support of Ershad and his Jatiya Party, the Awami League could not form government and rule the country for all these years. But soon, the entente with the Awami League ruptured, the Jatiya Party split and Ershad came out of the coalition with a larger section of members of his erstwhile

Jatiya Party. Ershad's next move was to seek a place in the sun, in country's politics. His popularity appeared dwindled, though the postulate is contested, with his diminished power of bestowing loaves and fishes to his supporters. He found time was ripe to join hands with the opposition and became a partner, along with Jamaat-e-Islam and Islamic Olyka Jote, in the four-Party Opposition Alliance under the leadership of Khaleda Zia. The latter found it expedient to secure support of other political parties in bolstering the one-point movement of

whatever may be true, politicians, like other people, have to work in order to promote their principles and objectives. In doing so and to be successful, they must take stock of the situation and be pragmatic. If Ershad remains detained in prison, it has been asserted by his Party stalwarts that the constitutional provisions and arrangements would ensure that his Jatiya Party's support to the opposition would remain unabated. If he is freed, the status quo ante remains. Even the Awami League leaders' open allegation of Ershad's involvement in her husband's killing would not deter Khaleda Zia to go ahead with the pledges she had made to strengthen opposition alliance. Politics, indeed, is a place to accommodate strange bedfellows.



Enigmatic but controversial Ershad going to surrender at court. - Star photo

International Protest Day on Violence against Women

Women's Rights, Our Constitution and Global Perspective

by A K Roy

WOMEN in Bangladesh have been subjected to exploitation and negligence for decades. In a society which is basically male dominated, women have always been oppressed by religious fanaticism, superstition, oppression and various discriminations. Their merit and labour have only been recognized in domestic lore. They have never been integrated in the development process of the country. In one of her clarion call for women's advancement, Begum Rokeya, the pioneer of women's movement, once said: "Educate your daughters and then set them free. They will earn their own bread." There is a clear message in her call pointing to the paramount importance for the achievement of women's right. At the fag end of the 19th century, the renaissance of women centered around their education. Besides, women become aware of their rights through their participation on the movement against British rule. Women also participated in the Language Movement of 1952. Mass Uprising of 1969 and in the movement for self-determination during the Pakistan period.

Bangladesh achieved her independence through a sanguinary war where women, along with men, made significant contribution. They assisted in many ways apart from active participation in the war. They sacrificed their husbands and sons in the liberation war and set a unique example of supreme self-sacrifice and patriotism. Two hundred thousand women were violated

by Pakistani soldiers. Such heinous crime of human rights violation can never be forgotten. Women became more conscious of the need to achieve self-reliance from the experience of liberation war and its aftermath.

Now great enthusiasm is being observed among women for education and employment. Even illiterate rural women aspire to become self-reliant through job opportunity. The necessity for women's participation in the national production process is strongly felt.

Bangladesh fell victim to the misrule of undemocratic and autocratic regimes after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation. In the absence of democracy people's plight seemed to be on rise and matters related to women's advancement virtually suffered a setback. Violence against women and negligence towards them increased immensely in complete disregard to the existing laws. But, sadly the trend of women oppression still continues. Women organizations at this time have a leading role to play towards containing violence against women and establishing their rights. NGOs will execute their different programmes for the socio-economic development of women living in remote areas of the country. Political parties as well as women organizations should participate directly and indirectly in the movement to establish democratic rights in the country whereby women become aware of their political, economic and

social rights. We must harness the possibility to achieve the cherished goal of women's development. The present government is determined to bring out the womenfolk from their backward position by improving their fate this should be reflected in deeds. To achieve this objective comprehensive development and empowerment of women are to be ensured.

Women's human rights and basic freedoms have been incorporated in our constitution. Article 27 of the constitution states: "All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to get equal protection of law." It has been stated in Article 28(1) "that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth". Article 28(2) states, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life". Article 28(3) of the constitution provides "no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution". Article 28 (4) states that nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women and children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens. Article 29(1) provides: "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic". 29(2) states, "no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution". Article 28 (4) states that nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women and children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens. 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