

Democracy Day Pledges

TEN years back, December 6 witnessed the fall of the nine-year autocratic regime of general-turned-politician HM Ershad in the face of a mass upsurge. Unarmed people imbued with the mantra of democracy pushed the gun-toting military back to the barracks, enunciating the rebirth of democracy after years of despotic and quasi-democratic rules. It was a bloodless change of guard at the end of a trail stained with the blood of Noor Hossain, Delwar, Dr Milon and scores of others who embraced martyrdom for the cause of democracy. From that day on, the nation has resumed its journey along the democratic path. Ten years on, the sapling of democracy has grown up with its roots deeply and firmly ingrained in the nation's socio-political psyche. There have been occasional hiccups all right; but people have never let go of democracy. Maybe not at the desired pace, the new-born democracy has grown in strength and confidence.

However, there have been crippling failures as well in our democratic endeavours. And a virtually dysfunctional parliament stands testimony to the greatest failure of the country's political leaders. Political indiscretion capped by implacable obduracy on both sides of the aisle has resulted in continued abstention of the BNP-led opposition lawmakers from the parliamentary sessions since late last year. With both camps firm on their respective positions, the seventh Jatiya Sangsad is highly likely to end its tenure on this extremely disappointing note. Similarly, Awami League-led opposition boycott and subsequent mass resignation of the lawmakers deprived the nation of effective parliamentary proceedings for nearly two years in the fifth Jatiya Sangsad.

Just imagine, if the opposition lawmakers in the fifth and seventh JS, led by AL and BNP respectively, had been true to their parliamentary role and responsibility, our democracy would have been enriched with parliamentary experiences of ten years. The role of JS as watchdog in our democracy would have been consolidated, consequently increasing transparency and accountability of the governments. Moreover, we would have had witnessed the emergence of a few adroit parliamentarians. Unfortunately, benefits of a functional parliament have got lost on confrontational and extremely personalised politics. Logical deliberations on political issues in the parliament have made way for denigration of political leaders at public meeting. Protests in the form of walkouts from parliamentary sessions have been replaced by violent clashes on the streets between rival leaders and activists. Confrontation and destruction thereby have become signature of our politics.

Nevertheless, holding on to elected governments has been our glittering success in such dark patches of democracy. Our people firmly believe that democracy holds the key to equitable governance and won't allow any form of government to supersede that. It's time our politicians read the pulse of the public right. Let their Democracy Day resolve be total commitment to a flourishing parliament.

A Sad Day for Cricket

CRICKETERS are mortals and must pass on. But the end of former Indian cricket captain Mohammad Azharuddin's career is, in many ways, worse than death. To fall from grace on a corruption scandal, after being almost a legend in your lifetime can be no less than a living death. Azhar, the most successful of Indian captains, the man who was once described as "God's gift to Indian cricket", has been banned for life by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on charges of match-fixing. The charges, framed after persistent investigation over a period of nearly three years by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) India, have led the BCCI to impose a life ban on former Test player Ajay Sharma, and to suspend for five years Test star Ajay Jadeja and international player Manoj Prabhakar.

That any sportsperson, anywhere in the world, should be charged and penalised for corruption is cause enough for sadness, but that it should happen to cricket, made famous as a gentleman's game, and to one of cricket's most talented players, makes it doubly so. Azhar was a hero who epitomised the best ideals of cricket: he had talent, he had dedication and we believed that he also had integrity. Azhar's disgrace is therefore of tragic import not merely for him and for Indian cricket, but also for the future of the game itself. The image of cricket has been seriously damaged in recent years by persistent allegations of match-fixing against top players, among whom former South African captain Hansie Cronje, initially implicated by the CBI, was eventually banned for life after confessing to wrong-doing.

But sad though these events might be, we feel they should encourage us to take a long, hard and constructive look at the way cricketers are compensated. Compared to any other spectator sport in the world, cricketers earn much less and cricketers say that the financial rewards of the game must be brought, if not on par, than at least close to the level of other sports such as football, for instance. This is not to excuse those who have tainted the name of this sport, but to suggest that if the game's standards are to improve, structural changes are needed. Therefore, we hope that something positive will emerge from this sad episode, that harsh penalties will not only act as a deterrent for future offenders, but also lead to a pragmatic reform of the rewards of the game. If that happens, Azhar's disgrace may not have been in vain.

To the Editor ...

Bangladesh's leverage in the Saar region

Sir, With the regional development of the Saar region in limbo due to eyeball-to-eyeball stance between Pakistan and India, the role of Bangladesh assumes some significance for providing leverage by the interested groups. EU is interested, as some European nations are surveying and tentatively probing the local field as trade predators, backed by the USA. Hence, the December trip to Europe of the PM of Bangladesh is worth monitoring.

Had the Saar region started working practically, say, ten years ago, today the development and cooperation scenario would have been more optimistic, considering the region is a market of one and a half billion consumers, and remembering the sad fact that trade within the region by the member states does not rise above three per cent annually. The conclusion points to the lack of statesmanship in the regional leaders.

One reason of the poor show is the huge energy spent internally to stabilise the political situation in the three countries. Today Islamabad and New Delhi are weak, and in Dhaka the tug-of-

war game continues between the two major political parties, each with past personality blocks in their respective systems. The attitude is not improving even after three decades. Perhaps third parties are needed to defuse the situation.

Now there is a cold front between Pakistan and Bangladesh, and it will take some time for the wound to heal. Therefore, the interested partners might have to start with Dhaka as a base for Saar operations. A fall-out is the Quadrangle concept consisting of nations along the eastern nations of the Indian Ocean rim. But there are snags: the take of points in Myanmar and NE India would take longer. Also ASEAN and APEC have to look differently at Saar (the just concluded APEC conference failed miserably). The situation is fluid, but it cannot be said that there is lack of interest.

Catalytic agents would play a thawing role in integrating the regional development concept. The start, however small, has to be made with small beginnings, before public opinion would veer with outward visions. The US, EU, in the developed group are more interested than the developing nations in Asia. Unfortunately, the role of Australia and NZ towards Asia is rather ambig-

uous; and the two Koreas are inter-meshed with survival problems, one with the famine and the other with the economy. The huge Himalayan chain of mountains places China more at a distance; and of course the leadership role has to be shared between India and China, both huge countries with huge potential.

Dhaka has to come out of the shell and has to activate the parliament, for more substantial debates on the neighbourly relations. But the energy of the nation is dissipated elsewhere since the 1990 elections. The leaders who count are not looking actively at the other options available to expand trade and commerce. The garment industry (earning three-fourths of the foreign exchange) is passing through an anticipated crisis, reacting to global conditions a few years hence; and the diversification of export items does not look very impressive.

In Dhaka election time is near, but the Election Commission is facing internal rift and political consensus on any issue is as far away as sentimentalism would allow. Those who were waiting to watch the rainbow arc of the Saar may be disappointed, or kept waiting.

A HUSNAIN
DHAKA

Barak in Political Turmoil -- Only Peace Option may Return Him to Power

There can never be any peace with East Jerusalem remaining with Israel. The last proof was the debacle that Israel has been facing since September 28-- the day Sharon visited the Muslim holy sites. If only a visit, though by an unwanted person, could trigger that sort of disastrous response from the Palestinians, the refusal to return the same to the Palestinians may lead to a greater disaster-- the magnitude of which cannot even be gauged at this stage.

ries. But Arafat has not responded to their call. He still believes in the peace process and appears ready to go to the negotiating table any time Barak is ready.

The world expected Prime Minister Barak to go all the way to achieve comprehensive peace that he promised earlier. Indeed, he started well and more or less prepared the Israeli public in favour of "peace for land". But he fell into Sharon's trap and could not deal with the situation. Thus the peace process collapsed.

The violence put Israeli politics into turmoil. Knesset (parliament) has decided to dissolve itself and go for the fresh election. The election is likely in May-June 2001. Therefore, Barak has about six months in hand to manoeuvre things in his favour. As Israeli politics has gone against him because of mishandling of the situation, the only escape for him appears to be having a peace deal with the Palestinians that can reasonably ensure peace and security to Israeli public. Apparently Barak is also pinning his last hope on the possible peace deal. But instead of remaining flexible on the peace issues which could be on the table for negotiations, he has come up with some fixed suggestions like 50 per cent (40 per cent already with the Palestinians + another 10 per cent to be given now) of the West Bank territory to the Palestinian State, which is only about half of

92 per cent he promised earlier and was also on the table in the last Camp David summit. The only positive thing that he added was that Israel would recognise such a Palestinian State. Any way, this was nothing new as it was a forgone conclusion. Barak also said that issues like Jerusalem and refugees would have to wait for final negotiations in

from them during the negotiations would put him in a difficult situation with Israeli public if and when such a deal is placed before them for endorsement. If he is really interested in a peace deal, which he apparently is, he should have agreed to start from where the issues were left in the last Camp David and subsequent meetings in Washington. This



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

about "one, two, three years" meaning thereby that the present one that he is proposing would be an interim agreement. Palestinian officials have already rejected the offer by terming it as an election ploy and said that they would accept nothing less than a comprehensive peace agreement. And obviously that agreement must include resolution of all pending issues including Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Barak's offer is basically a non-starter as he knows well that Palestinians would not accept such an offer. This was politically counter productive and would indeed backfire on Barak himself as the opposition parties would pin him down to these terms and any departure

would have given him enough flexibility to negotiate and such a strategy would have provided him with some chance of success. Now he has to find ways to move out of that stated position and openly agree to start from the position of the last Camp David.

Though refugee issue is a serious one, Jerusalem issue is still more serious. After having gone through the present violence and burying the dead, Prime Minister Barak now has a good chance to place East Jerusalem issue before Israeli public and seek to negotiate the same. Let East Jerusalem that belonged to the Arabs before 1967 war not stand in the way of bringing peace in Israel. Achieving the long term

peace and security for the Israelis is more important than sticking to East Jerusalem just for biblical reason. Indeed, Israelis already have Jerusalem; Palestinians will have only the East.

The Sharons aside, there appears to be a general feeling in Israel that East Jerusalem with all Palestinian inhabitants and with the Muslim holy sites in it will be a permanent liability for Israel. There can never be any peace with East Jerusalem remaining with Israel. The last proof was the debacle that Israel has been facing since September 28-- the day Sharon visited the Muslim holy sites. If only a visit, though by an unwanted person, could trigger that sort of disastrous response from the Palestinians, the refusal to return the same to the Palestinians may lead to a greater disaster-- the magnitude of which cannot even be gauged at this stage. Barak is apparently aware of all these.

Being the most decorated General of Israel, Barak should be bold enough to take a plunge into the present crises with his political career and agree to return East Jerusalem with its Muslim holy places (Western Wall would remain with Israel) to the Palestinian State with 92 or so percentage land of the West bank. In return he may ask for a firm promise from the Palestinians in terms of peace and security in the area. If this much is done, he may, if he wants, propose to keep

the refugee, settlements and some other related issues pending for one, two, three years as these are somewhat complicated ones and may take some time to sort out. Indeed, Palestinian State recognised by Israel, the US and the rest of the world may formally and peacefully negotiate the remaining issues over an agreed period of time. However, the best course would be to settle all these issues at one go once and for all for the purpose of achieving peace in the area instead of leaving them to the uncertain future. The area has not seen peace for ages and it's high time to have peace as the people deserve it badly. It's not only peace-- it's peace with ample opportunities for economic cooperation and development something that would turn the area into an oasis.

Such a peace deal with all these promises and possibilities has the fair chance of success at the negotiating table as well as with people on both sides. With the firm promise of peace and security in hand Barak should be in position to sell such a deal to Israeli public. This should also ensure his victory in the next general election.

Arafat should remain committed to peace process and do everything possible to resume the negotiations and find a way to clinch the deal before the next election in Israel. Despite what has happened during the last two months, Barak still remains the best and possibly the only option for any peace deal in the Mid East. In case Likud returns, which cannot be ruled out, peace process will certainly remain buried for years and both sides may have to continue to count and bury the dead.

In Israel, US is No 'Honest Broker'

Ron Fortthofer writes from Longmont, Colorado

In a recent article, prominent Israeli columnist A. B. Yehoshua reversed his former position and told the settlers: "Come home from the Palestine exile. Only thus will we be able to set up a true border, a solid border that divides us from the State of Palestine. Only thus can we defend the State of Israel better and try to hope that one day we will live as peaceful neighbours."

tinians are denied access to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

After seven years of negotiation, the Palestinians have complete control over 12 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza and partial control over another 26 per cent. Even this control is problematic since these areas are surrounded by Israeli forces which can isolate and besiege Palestinians living there, as they are doing now.

During this same time period, the U.S. continued to give Israel approximately \$4 to \$5 billion per year. The U.S. continued to arm the Israeli military even though Israel uses these weapons against civilian targets. The U.S. also prevented the U.N. from imposing sanctions on Israel for its numerous violations of international law.

An Israeli government source recently confirmed the U.S. bias when he said "The Palestinians always complain that we know the details of every proposal from the Americans before they do. There's a good reason for that; we write them." Even if this source is not totally correct, the U.S. has supported a Palestinian surrender instead of a just peace.

The failure of Oslo has disillusioned Palestinians and even long-time peace advocates have lost hope. Most Palestinians now support the Intifada in an effort to end Israel's illegal and brutal occupation of Palestinian lands.

When I was a human rights observer in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza in 1996, I saw the



The desperate Intifada

despair and I expected an explosion well before now. In May 1999, World Vision, a religious charity, stated, "an increasing sense of disillusionment with the peace process by Palestinians may well ignite future violence." Even then, if the U.S. had pushed

for a just peace, the violence could have been prevented. Instead, the U.S. continued to be a dishonest broker.

The spark for this new intifada was the invasion by Ariel Sharon of the third holiest Muslim site on Haram al-Sharif. I say "invasion" because Sharon was accompanied by at least 1,000 Israeli police. This invasion was a deliberate insult, an act to show who is in control.

Sharon is particularly reviled by Arabs for his long history of terrorist acts against Arab civilians. To make this incitement even worse, it occurred just ten days after the anniversary of the 1982 massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon. During that massacre, Israeli forces surrounded the camps and allowed their Lebanese militia allies to slaughter 2,000 defenceless people. The Sharon-led Israeli attack on Lebanon in 1982 killed at least 20,000 Lebanese and Palestinians (mostly civilians) compared to fewer than 500 Israeli deaths.

This new intifada is an attempt to do what the Oslo negotiations failed to do: end the harsh Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Palestinians want an independent state consisting of the entire

West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza. This Palestinian position represents a huge concession because the West Bank and Gaza represent only 22 per cent of the original area of Palestine.

As I write this, the violence is intensifying. Due to the tremendous imbalance of power in Israel's favour, fighting invariably leads to an overwhelming majority of the dead and wounded being Palestinian. To end this violence, the U.S. must allow international peacekeeping forces to enter the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, the U.S. must join the international consensus and support Resolution 242, the basis for a just peace.

Even mainstream Israeli media recognize the wisdom of withdrawal from Palestinian lands. For example, in a recent article, prominent Israeli columnist A. B. Yehoshua reversed his former position and told the settlers: "Come home from the Palestine exile. Only thus will we be able to set up a true border, a solid border that divides us from the State of Palestine. Only thus can we defend the State of Israel better and try to hope that one day we will live as peaceful neighbours."

Courtesy: The Boulder Daily Camera

The author was the Green Party candidate for the U.S. Congress seat in Colorado's 2nd District.

Political Metamorphosis

by Abul M Ahmad

How far the political stamina can be taxed? We seem to have reached the breaking point. We are also facing the point of no-return in political bankruptcy. Why the leaders of the society are not pointing it out?

IN this age of change, the main political parties in Dhaka are undergoing subtle changes inside, introducing new scenarios before the public. The direct and indirect signs of erosion and disintegration are already showing through cracks in the walls of party fortifications.

The price of favouritism is high, even outside the political field. Press reports indicate that the scramble for attention and nomination has already started as a pre-election campaign. In the Jatiya Party, the rot has started from the top. In the other parties, the bottom has delat characteristcs-- muddy and slimy.

One point not stressed by the critics is negative fertility of the political soil due to overflooding caused by the behind-the-scene (not hidden) political godfathers. Reap as you sow, and the political farmers are doing well!

In-fighting within the parties are becoming more and more acute, posing problems for the party policy makers. The main reason is the accumulated bursting of the infected sores due to lack of practice of democracy within, and dependence for too long on borrowed charismatic leadership, supported by the old

guards, who recall the earlier autocratic days, or those senior members who did not get the chance to show their mettle, as autocratic regimes intervened for 16 years.

The usefulness of the old guards are diminishing day by day, as, for the younger generation, the time is over-ripe to take over some of the responsibilities of leadership. Suddenly taking over a vacuum post denies continuity of political culture, in a society impatient to take off economically. The politicians have too many hands in the pie; thereby spoiling the business and industrial fields, both in the public and private sectors.

But the problem is that retiring from political leadership is not a profitable business in a have-not society, where politics is an easy source of earning one's living indirectly, in an environment of nepotism, corrupt practices, and misuse of power and influence. Politics in the LDCs boils down to basic economic options not available in honourable private or professional life.

There are signs of weakness in AL, BNP and JP; and, it appears, these are not reversible actions. So we are going to see basic

changes in the way politics is practised in this country. Sometimes it is good to introduce changes, but these must be within the moral parameters. Bad and unethical practices form a vicious circle, and the centripetal forces needed for its eradication are not available to the people, except through another revolution.

Are we becoming revolution-prone? How far the political stamina can be taxed? We seem to have reached the breaking point. We are also facing the point of no-return in political bankruptcy. Why the leaders of the society are not pointing it out? Moral collusion is acceptable, and no other alternative. The nation is bugged with too many options. Our politics has to be simplified. Who will define the Terms of Reference?

The political top leaders have to face the winds of change. Why all of us are scared of retiring? Give a chance to others. The leaders will come and go, but the country and the nation will remain. The message to the propped-up leaders is: time your retirement correctly, and remain popular.