

A Point of Convergence

THAT as many as eleven leftist parties had formed a democratic alliance to speak from a common platform was a news worthy of hogging political headlines. As if to surpass that threshold they mustered strong to articulate a 16-point charter of demands in their mass rally on Saturday which was the mirror-image reflection of some public concerns of the day. And the fact that it ran into a heinous bomb blast engineered to bloody the scene with killing and maiming went to poignantly underline the essence of that list of demands. In a gradient fashion therefore, what happened centring around the rally convened by the broad leftist formation got etched on the minds of the people.

The issues with which they went to the people on Saturday last included terrorism, muscle power, black money, communalism and fatwabazis which have been veritable scourges afflicting national politics, economy and civic life in general. The unity and solidarity they have forged on those burning questions definitely constitute a potentially huge plus point to our otherwise listlessly confrontational national politics. This reminds us in a way of the catalytic or cathartic role which the left had played between the two major political forces, the AL and the BNP, during the 1990 mass upsurge, to make that historic three-party alliance possible with the attendant outcome of a 19-point understanding to reflect popular aspirations on the running of future elected governments.

We think the leftist thrusts for peace, law and order and welfare bear the potential for triggering a consensus-based approach across the political divide. This could draw upon the common realisation that the issues that confront us today are no less serious than the challenge of autocracy we had been pitted against a decade ago. Basically, we believe that at this critical juncture we need to recreate those fine moments of political consensus-building that made a huge lot of difference in the way we conducted politics entirely by locking horns as part of an errant political culture.

The issues that the left parties have placed before the people are not intrinsically partisan at all; in fact they are a set of national agenda for all political parties to embrace and pursue with an equal and shared measure of commitment. Since the ruling AL and the opposition BNP are allergic to each other's political idiom we feel the leftist character of demands is a godsend offering a way out of the political cul de sac. Only the other day president Shahabuddin spoke of a strong civil society role in reversing the attenuating socio-political circumstances into a degree of congeniality for the right kind of governance and politics to reign in the society before the thinning fabric of balance ruptures altogether.

It is all very good therefore, that the major political parties in the country have a converging point in the left parties' initiative to build bridges of understanding across the political spectrum on a set of pro-people demands and take the road-bend to constructive politics.

Bomb Victims Uncared for?

VICTIMS of the bomb blasts on Saturday have been subjected to an even greater suffering, after the blast. After being admitted to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the victims, some in critical condition, were not given even basic drugs and medical accessories. Their attendants were told to go out and procure drugs and medical supplies for them. As this newspaper reported, most of the 20 victims were found lying either unconscious or in great discomfort at the hospital. One victim had lost both his eyes, while another was still in critical condition after surgery. In one instance, a critical drug called Adrenalin, used to help dying patients recover from the acute stage, had to be bought from a nearby drug store, while in other instances, the required drugs were not available and the patients had to do without them. The DCMH could not even provide intravenous saline solutions or transfusion sets and blood bags for the injured.

It is most unfortunate that the ministry of health and the DCMH authorities have not provided the most basic medical support for these traumatised patients. Their precarious condition is obvious, for some are unconscious and fighting for their lives, while others are susceptible to potential complications. The victims are predominantly people of limited means and dependent on the efforts and largesse of their attendants. According to reports both from attendants and medical staff, the DCMH indifferently handed over a list of items for each patient, irrespective of the seriousness of the patient's condition.

The virtual absence of drugs and medical supplies that are supposed to be provided free of cost by the DCMH is an issue that we have highlighted already in the strongest terms. It has wider ramifications of course, but one stark effect can be seen in the continuing anguish of these victims. We urge the Ministry of Health to provide basic drugs and medical accessories for victims of this tragic incident on an emergency basis. We do not, by any means, accept the status quo as far as DCMH's drugs and medical supplies record is concerned. What we suggest, most strongly, is that the government takes note of the emergency situation and reacts positively and immediately to save lives and alleviate further suffering. This is the very least that the authorities are expected to do in such circumstances.

AFTER eight years as President of the United States of America, William Jefferson Clinton has handed over power to his successor George W Bush, who became the forty-third President of the USA. President Clinton was a Democrat and new President Bush is a Republican.

The departure of Clinton was bittersweet. He became one of the most successful Presidents of the USA. During his tenure America witnessed economic prosperity, the like of which has rarely been witnessed in American history. USA experienced peace at home and established herself as the sole, unchallenged superpower in the world. The mighty Dollar reigned supreme and no major issue of the world could be dealt with without the direct involvement of the USA. President Bill Clinton became the most visible world leader.

With such outstanding performance it is surprising that Bill Clinton did not receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The reason is not far to seek. During his second term, President Bill Clinton got embroiled with his Republican opponents in a sex-scandal, that greatly tarnished his standing within his country. Monica Lewinsky became the bane of his brilliant presidency. It is likely that he fell into a trap, carefully crafted by his adversaries, in order to humiliate him and force him to resign. The pity is that Bill Clinton in an unguarded moment

Good-bye Bill Clinton

With the departure of Bill Clinton a star vanishes from the sky... From the manner of the election of George Bush, we can deduce that the American political scene will continue to be a turbulent one. George W Bush will have to muster all his charm in order to win back the wounded Democrats. His is a paper thin, loudly contested majority. Will he be able to bridge the American divide?

allowed himself to fall into this trap. His opponents nearly dragged him through the internet and advertised his sex related dalliances throughout the world, thanks to his adversaries in the Congress. He faced impeachment and was saved thanks to the votes in the Senate. President Bill Clinton had to offer apologies repeatedly to his people. Finally at the time of his departure from office his detractors had their last pound of flesh for he had to offer apologies one last time and pay a fine of US\$250000. He thus had to admit guilt before the Congress would close the file on him. That the whole episode is bound to leave a bad taste in the mouth is undoubted.

Bill Clinton and his wife, newly elected Senator Hillary Clinton, had an agenda of welfare programme particularly in the health sector and amongst the aged. The Conservative lobby and the multinationals came heavily down and frustrated the efforts of President Clinton. The gun lobby is too strong in the USA and they too would not allow Clinton to have his way in this effort to restrict free gun running in a civilized country. On the other

hand the citizens enjoyed continued peace and prosperity. It is thanks to Bill Clinton's wonderful compact with his people that his detractors miserably failed to unseat him. The American public were too secure and too comfortable with Clinton

Balkans, an area which has specialised in warfare for the better part of its existence. Bill Clinton devoted the better part of his presidency in trying to find a solution to the Middle East conflict. When the dust will have settled down, the world will grate-

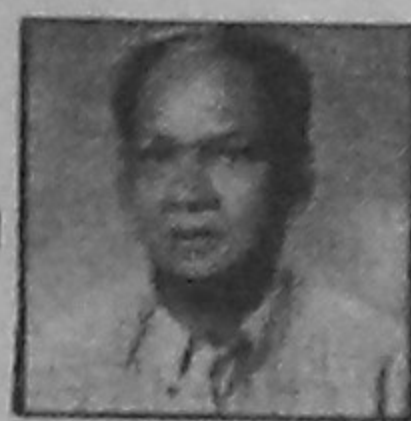
On the question of Peace Treaty between Palestine and Israel Bill Clinton brought the two parties tantalizingly close. All his painful efforts fundered on the rock of Jerusalem and the question of its sovereignty. Bill Clinton had the Wye river accord, he travelled to Palestine, Israel and Egypt repeatedly in order to clinch a deal. Alas it was not to be. This became Bill Clinton's biggest failure. It was rather the biggest failure of the leadership of the two adversaries for they are unlikely to find another more even handed leader of the stature of Bill Clinton. Indeed past US Presidents have almost always been partial to Israel and it was Bill Clinton, who succeeded in establishing himself as an even handed honest broker, who enjoyed the trust of both the Arabs and the Israelis. Since the power of the Israeli lobby is a well known fact of life, it would take a lot of effort on the part of new President George Bush to earn the trust of both sides. What is even more probable is that President Bush will have to devote a lot more time to his domestic agenda and the Middle East may vanish from the scene with the sand of the desert.

The legacy of Bill Clinton is a bittersweet one. He has been a peacemaker par excellence. We must exclude from this his dealing with Saddam Hussein of Iraq. President Clinton inherited this from his predecessor George Bush, the father of the new President. The US policy on Iraq suffers from a certain myopia and Saddam is a favourite whipping boy. Col. Gaddafi is another one but Saddam is a much bigger target and whipping Saddam is a favourite sport of US Presidents. It is to be feared that US policy towards Saddam is unlikely to change during the regime of new President George Bush, since Saddam was put in the dog house by his father.

Rather than allowing President Bill Clinton to depart peacefully, with dignity, the Congress had thought fit to extract the last ounce of blood. With the departure of Bill Clinton a star vanishes from the sky, a star that rode through with aplomb. From the Monica Lewinsky episode and the manner of the election of George Bush, we can deduce that the American political scene will continue to be a turbulent one. George W Bush will have to muster all his charm in order to win back the wounded Democrats. His is a paper thin, loudly contested majority. Will he be able to bridge the American divide?

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



In order to seek adventure and change.

Since the home scene was one of peace and prosperity minus the continuous tugging at his sleeves because of his sexual misdemeanors, high profile Bill Clinton threw him with all his energy in dealing with world problems. He worked tirelessly, whereas it was Bosnia, Kosovo, Africa or the Middle East. Clinton took tough decisions like bombing the hordes of Milosevic in order to bring him to the negotiating table. He achieved notable success in the

fully recall that at the White House porch Bill Clinton made two bitter enemies. Palestine leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shake hands. During Bill Clinton's presidency Israel became an accomplished fact in the Middle East. Israel established Diplomatic relations with Morocco and withdrew from South Lebanon. Israel engaged in serious negotiations with Syria on the question of her evacuation of Golan Heights of Syria.

LETTER FROM KARACHI

Fatwa-watch, Split in PML

by M.J. Zahedi

Pakistan has an Islamic Ideology Council and there are the Shariat benches of the superior courts where men learned in Islamic law sit. The question is: does, in their presence, any individual alim or otherwise, have the right to issue fatwas declaring someone an

Islamic Ideology Council and there are the Shariat benches of the superior courts where men learned in Islamic law sit. The question is: does, in their presence, any individual alim or otherwise, have the right to issue fatwas declaring someone an apostate? The question may not lend itself to an immediate answer but surely the ulama belonging to different schools of thought should pay attention to the danger of the degeneration of the concept of fatwa poses to the society. Surely, the judicial development in Bangladesh will be keenly watched by the people, Islamic scholars and others.

THE Pakistan Muslim League (PML) not any particular group but the PML as a single, undivided party has ruled Pakistan for most of the country's life of 52 years.

But the party has greatly lost its lustre since it split into groups. Now it looks like it is going to be further broken up. The split between two factions (the Nawaz group and the dissidents who also call themselves the like-minded group) may be a precursor. The latter includes such front-rankers as former federal ministers Ch Shujaat Hussain and Ejazul Huq and a former provincial governor Mian Mohammad Azhar. Anyhow, each side seems to be hardening its posture. The result is that an unrestrained control of the party

has become the bone of contention. Both the groups, one led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif (his supporter Javed Hashmi who is acting as the president) and the other seemingly by the former interior minister Ch Shujaat Hussain, have convened or held meetings of the General Council. It now seems that the split has (or soon will) become irrevocable, rather a reality. However some other leaders, like Raja Zafrul Huq, are trying to bring about a rapprochement between the two groups, at least a rapprochement of sorts.

The moves and counter-moves being now made by both sides have boiled down to a test of strength of each side (among party cadres, of course). Differences of opinion on important policy matters are nothing new in a political party. But if differences occur on personalities they are not usual. This is exactly what has happened in this case. What has apparently caused (or has speeded up) the intra-party discord is the nomination of Javed Hashmi as the acting president of the party by Nawaz Sharif. This decision of his (made before his departure for Saudi Arabia) to nominate a middle-ranking loyalist to head the party had apparently ruffled many sensitive feathers in the party ranks.

The question that is being asked now is: was the decision a well-planned move in the long-term interest of the party? Or was it yet another self-serving tactic to keep everybody off-balanced? Some think that the deepening rift has also harmed the credibility of the central working committee of the party and thus has indirectly strengthened the dissidents' hands. Some also think that it has reinforced the strength of the like-minded group. This group's decision the other day not to attend the session of the party central working committee further dimmed the chances of an intra-party patch up, for which

Raja Zafrul Huq launched a fresh initiative.

In fact the departure of Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia has weakened the political forces in the country besides debilitating the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy with which the PML(N) agreed to work in conjunction for the restoration of democracy in the country.

The ARD has been dealt another blow by the pullout of the MQM. The PPP's stance, too, is not going to help the alliance; Benazir Bhutto's party has ruled out any pre-poll working arrangement with the PML(N). It has further reduced its chances of remaining as a vibrant political entity till the next general elections. And now the intra-party split (or a showdown?) could lead to a further sidelining of the mainstream party. Observers think this process will only be a great loss to the political forces in the country.

Yet another factor that could upset the political apocryph is the reported voter turnout of nearly 46 per cent in the recently held local body polls. It will indeed be interesting to note whether the PML(N) will manage to survive the intra-party strife (described by some observers as hara-kiri) that is going on.

But it was apparent for the last few months that the PML could split but few could predict that

The politicians have traditionally showed little respect for moral values and democratic norms. Most of them have sought power and personal benefit through their political activity and sacrificed almost everything to achieve these goals.

The crack would come in such a violent and dramatic manner. In November last, just before a meeting of the party's central working committee, hundreds of anti-Nawaz party workers roughed up Nawaz supporters. The party in-fighting had in fact begun soon after Nawaz Sharif's ouster from power last year. In the '80s when prime minister Mohammad Khan Junejo developed differences with General Zia-ul-Huq, Nawaz Sharif had sided with the latter against his party chief. When Zia dismissed Junejo as prime minister, Nawaz Sharif continued as Punjab chief minister. As a result the League broke into two opposing factions. Now Nawaz Sharif has fallen out with the men in uniform while some of his former colleagues are strengthening their relations with them. History can hardly repeat

itself more clearly.

This indeed may be a suitable occasion for Nawaz Sharif to remind himself of his own role in the break up of the party under Zia's rule. He may also be regretting his few other mistakes during his years in power. One, he always appointed people in key positions on the basis of their loyalty to him, not their competence. One prominent example is his picking up his brother Shahbaz Sharif as the chief minister of Punjab although there were other suitable contenders. His second mistake was devising the rule that a person should not hold a ministerial position and a party position simultaneously although he himself retained both, the presidency of the party as well as prime ministership of the country. Yet another mistake of his was to shrink from holding party election. This made many people sympathetic towards his opponents who now refuse to accept him as the party chief and want elections to be held for a new chief. In short, the split in the PML is a sad reflection of the way political parties have functioned in Pakistan. The politicians have traditionally showed little respect for moral values and democratic norms. Most of them have sought power and personal benefit through their political activity and sacrificed almost everything to achieve these goals.

What is happening now is therefore nothing new. In fact in every government the Muslim League has split and given birth to a new faction.

OPINION

Let's Not Ignore the Corruption Issue

Abul M Ahmad

The alarming rise of corruption in society continues to be ignored by the elected political regimes because a systematic analysis of this malaise in society is being deliberately avoided by the powers that be. Some of the basic underlying causes of the germination of corruption and its proliferation were pointed out by Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud (The Daily Star, January 11) in a lucid manner. The public needs a sustained anti-corruption awareness campaign in the mass media to encourage the formation of a strong public opinion platform to deal with the players and the regulatory agencies (including the top policy makers and the civil service). This pandemic temptation has moral, political, social, economic and psychological implications. The expanding system eats itself up to the point of no-return.

It is hoped that such a public opinion platform will encourage those who are high up in society to put public pressure on the government to draw up a revised regulatory and monitoring network to cope with this evil on a long or a long-term basis, sparing no offender, regardless of his/her status.

The observations made here represent the generalised views of an untrained observer watching the scene with dismay at the utter callousness of the authorities; not to speak of the nuts-and-bolts details which need professional teamwork to draft practical proposals which could yield measurable results.

The traditional supply-and-demand equation also applies in the case of corrupt practices short-cuts to personal profits, taking advantage of the prevailing market conditions of demand and supply. Cheating, black-marketing and adulteration are different versions of the evil practice, as we observe in so many sectors of public service, such as manpower export, issue of passports, the hundi business,

land grabbing, obtaining officials permits, evasion of income and other taxes, toll collection, graft, bribe.

It needs two parties for corruption to take place, and more join in if the official regulatory authority take a passive and helpless view of the situation. "Nip it in the bud" is the motto to be followed, that is catch them before the habit becomes entrenched. If this virus enters into the regulatory regime, then the controlling mechanism is tarnished and weakened; and no amount of beating about the bush will produce the end effect desired. A deterrent has to be present and visible all the time to control and contain the situation. Undoubtedly, some residue will remain, as no human system can be 100 per cent clean.

Let us look at the deterrents in place now. Where these are weak, the authorities are aware of the reasons for this but they do not publicly articulate them, for reasons well known to outsiders. Good management cannot run on platitudes, and this is where our politics excel. Corrupt practices create a vicious circle, which grows stronger and stronger, and engulf innocents.

In the Least Developed Countries, (LDCs), the regulatory assignment cannot be left wholly to the under-developed private sector. We also have to grapple with the question of how to encourage honesty, not to discourage it. One indirect mechanism is said to be the decentralisation of governance, a principle accepted by all the regimes, but, in the absence of political will, it has been hardly implemented. People resort to short-cuts (bribery, or 'service charge' as is euphemistically known), to reduce time (waiting period) and distance required for a single public transaction. Availability of more public counter services (and one-stop service counters) may be a step in the right direction, but the back-up adminis-

trative and management resources have to be addressed first.

Temptation is an ingrained human weakness, and the characteristic has to be kept in mind while drafting rules and regulations. It is very difficult to thrive in a prevailing controlled and disciplined working atmosphere, even if one wants to be corrupt. Therefore, before pouncing upon the individual culprit, the environment has to be cleaned up; and kept clean. Why have successive governments failed so far? Reports by various commissions and committees reveal it all, but these documents of collected wisdom are side-tracked officially.

The scientific principle of inertia has to be studied and applied to management techniques. Huge energy is necessary to bring about changes in an existing system through planned reforms or strategies. In administration, there is a segment which follows the path of least resistance. This tendency has to be monitored carefully. Also the growth rate of contamination and its effect on corruption has to come under the microscopic lens of the civil service. The latter must be smarter than the problem.

That brings up the sensitive issue the concept of monitoring, through an established systems of feed-backs, as it should be practised in the public sector in the newly developing countries. Now information technology has made it much easier to ensure better and faster remote monitoring and surveillance facilities, and to ensure quicker storage and retrieval services, for faster evaluation, and timely corrective actions.

Institutionalised corruption will not disappear if it is treated as a side effect. Those at the core, on all sides of the political divide, need to be probed. Shielding the wrong core is also a part of a corrupted empire.

To the Editor

US Embassy incident

Sir, Reference, the news item in The Daily Star on December 25, 2000, about the death of a local businessman who had gone to the U.S. Embassy at Dhaka for visa along with his wife. Actually the alleged death took place on December 19 when they went to collect their passports from the embassy. The victim's wife has alleged at a press briefing that the behaviour of an embassy staff of Chinese/Korean origin was responsible for the death of her husband. The culprit is said to have made sarcastic and cynical remarks that led to his death by heart failure.

What is appalling is the apparent failure of the embassy staff to even call an ambulance so that he could be taken to a hospital quickly. When he was taken to a hospital, more than an hour later he was already dead!

If the incident is proved to be true, we would be shocked at the callous behaviour of the embassy staff. This calls for action against the person(s) responsible. It is surprising that we have not heard anything from the embassy in this regard.

A concerned citizen Dhaka

Pork in Ajinomoto

Sir, It was shocking to read about Ajinomoto stooping so low as to use pork enzyme to process its tasting salt (Mono-Sodium Glutamate) product in Indonesia, a Muslim state. Without going into the debate whether the end-product is pork-free or not, I would think it very natural for sensible Muslims to have reacted

to the news. And it was justifiable to ask Ajinomoto recall all its products. I am now seriously wondering whether the same underhanded technique to 'reduce costs' was employed in the production of the Ajinomoto products currently on sale in Bangladesh.

In a country where certain companies gain huge market share just by branding their soap

'halal', it is essential that a detailed investigation be initiated to check out Ajinomoto products, in addition to any others that are likely to have been 'contaminated' with products of porcine/non-halal origin.

Mahbub Farid JP Morgan, Tokyo, Japan

"Preaching to India?"

Sir, Mr. Rajeev Kumar's letter, "Preaching to India?" (The Daily Star Friday Mailbox December 22, 2000) is objectionable in many ways. As an Indian, Mr. Kumar finds it difficult to accept comments on secularism from the intelligentsia of an Islamic country. One does not wish to "preach" to him about the basics of Islam, but he would benefit if he would look to his own religion because every religion teaches one to respect other religions, and to refrain from making undignified comments. He complained that Bangladesh "does not subscribe to the concept of secularism" and it should "improve the plight of minorities". For his information, Bangladesh is trying to improve the plight of all the people, not only minorities. Every country, whether devel-

oped or developing, is struggling with communal problems, to some degree. In a developing country, where education levels are low, it is a bitter truth that some people use religion as a weapon. Our earnest endeavor is to eradicate the misuse of any religion and the recent court verdict on the illegality of a fatwa is a case in point.

One has immense respect for the people of India and believes that Mr. Rajeev Kumar is an exception, not the rule. We believe in peace that can only be achieved by giving space to all religious people.

Ruchira Dhaka

Hepatitis-B vaccine

Sir, A newly discovered tablet that is less costly than the injected vaccine for the Hepatitis-B virus should be supplied to the community in the EPI programme undertaken by the government. Children up to the age of 15 should be protected by being given these tablets in school. The death rate of children has been lowered in Bangladesh, and under the government HPSF programme the Health Department has started providing holistic care or 'one stop service' through community clinics. Making this tablet available in the community programme will enhance the impact of the National Health Policy.

Dr Sajedul Islam Kamarpura, Rangpur.