

Playing a dangerous game Stop them on their track

It was an act of zealotry extending an open invitation to civil strife bordering on sedition. A group of people calling themselves Islamic scholars held a rally on Friday at Paltan maidan, announced hartal for the following day, and what they did through all those programmes were a veritable incitement to social destabilisation.

In the very first place, their reactionary excesses were unwarranted, let alone the agenda articulated thereby which were pernicious and outrageous, to say the least. If they had been discomfited by the High Court ruling declaring *fatwa* invalid as any legal opinion they could cool their heels in the knowledge that the Supreme Court stayed the HC verdict subsequently. Its Appellate Division is in a process of dealing with an appeal filed by a religious group, so that the matter is in fact *sub judice*.

Showing complete disdain for the judicial process they have not merely declared Justices Golam Rabbani and Nazmun Ara Sultana, who gave the original judgement on *fatwa*, as *murtads*, they have even called for their outright execution. And, as well as vowing to allow only Islamic law in Bangladesh they have declared *fatwa* to be the sole vehicle through which they would like to see that Islamic law implemented here. Is it Islamic to ask judges to be hanged? Does Islam permit the bashing of transports and damages to public property in furtherance of a cause taken up by anyone claiming to serve Islam? The very word Islam meaning peace it cannot have any room for such violent and rowdy behaviour.

Then the so-called Islamic scholars had no right whatsoever to engineer resistance against the United Civil Society Movement's programme announced a month and a half ago predating the HC verdict to hold a grand rally of NGO and civil rights activists from all over the country on Saturday in Dhaka. That huge rally was held to focus, as usual, on the issues of democracy and good governance, corruption and terrorism, and oppression against women, including *fatwabaji*, without inventing any new battle-cry. But their detractors have had the hyped one-point agenda of seeing the registration of all NGOs cancelled by the government, they being 'enemies of Islam' in their eyes.

We want this abuse of religion stopped and the society rid of the new tensions the zealots seem hell-bent upon breathing into it for their own selfish gains.

Musharraf-Vajpayee conversation

Light at the tunnel's end

The unprecedented tragedy of the Gujarat earthquake has provided a positive catalyst for rapprochement between India and Pakistan. After Pakistan's gesture of sending relief to victims was welcomed by the Indian Prime Minister, leaders of the two countries spoke on the telephone -- the first time they have spoken since General Pervez Musharraf took power in Pakistan, in October 1999.

We are heartened that Vajpayee and Musharraf are talking to each other. The already precarious relations between India and Pakistan had worsened after nuclear tests in the two countries in 1998, followed by a provocative military encounter in Kargil, which India blamed on then Pakistani army chief, Musharraf. After Musharraf's takeover Vajpayee studiously refused all contact with him and also called off a scheduled meeting of SAARC leaders.

Signs of a thaw have been evident since last Ramadan when Vajpayee announced a unilateral ceasefire, still being upheld, in Kashmir. That India has agreed to play against Pakistan in a regional cricket benefit tournament in aid of earthquake victims in the UAE this month, has invigorated expectations of détente. The Vajpayee-Musharraf conversation has diffused a cloud of mutual distrust, but it must be followed up with confidence-building measures and meaningful dialogue, especially on Kashmir, the stumbling block in Indo-Pakistan ties. We urge both sides to augment their initiative, undertaken in such tragic circumstances, with sincere and solid commitment to bring about a lasting peace in South Asia.

Keep the President above all controversy



M. M. REZAUL
KARIM

"If the President wishes to resign, we will not create any obstruction to it. ... We have the way to appoint a new one," so said the Prime Minister. She was speaking in reply to a question posed by a journalist at the press conference held on her return from a tour of Cambodia a few days ago.

Most of those who were present got startled. Clever ones chuckled under their sleeves. But ordinary innocent public when they learnt of Prime Minister's remarks got perplexed and worried. Those who were aware of the Awami League's game plan found the statement fitting well into the latter's election strategy. The innocent and the ordinary unsuspected people, however, became dismayed, witnessing yet another prospect of uncertain and violent time before

election.

The Hon'ble President, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, was appointed President by the Awami League government itself following assumption of power in 1996. He had earlier been chosen by all political parties and already been appointed as President after the fall of President Ershad in late 1990. The current Presidential assignment is for a second term for the venerable Justice. Being a tested and consensus candidate, the

The above scenario would not have normally caused great concern for the Awami League. But the present time is not normal. Because of the rampant abuse of power, shameless corruption, inability to provide basic security of life and property to the citizen and, finally, due to overall bad governance, the ruling party has lost confidence of the overwhelming majority of the people of the country. The situation has been further aggravated for the Awami League due to the fear of

and can never be ignoble for a political party. On the contrary, it is a fundamental and legitimate aspiration of all political parties. But the question arises as to what means are to be employed to meet that perfectly lawful end. Knowing fully well the mindset of the people, the Awami League appears determined not to spare any means, fair and foul, to realise its objective. The first and foremost action taken by them which is still continuing is to place chosen Awami League supporting

flouting the sanctity and impartiality of this august body responsible for the most important and impartial task of conducting election. The government will not resign before March, lest the past Chief Justice, who had not spared the government in the interest of justice, becomes Chief Adviser in the caretaker government.

Finally, the government recently appointed two Judges in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, superseding two other senior

lessly against people, policies and actions that he did not approve and occasionally did not hesitate to ventilate utter sense of frustration.

The tip with the President with the ruling party took place in the very first year of its formation of the government when the President wanted to state that the text of the Presidential address to the Parliament did not represent the views of the head of state but only of the head of government. Then the Hon'ble President did take some admirable initiative to resolve some of the political impasses between the ruling and the opposition parties, but was curtly cut off in his endeavour. The black Public Safety Act 2000, which was in violation of the letters and spirit of the Constitution, annoyed him further. The latest action that aggravated the situation was the appointment of the two Judges in the Appellate Division.

In spite of what has happened or been made to happen, the Hon'ble President must not give up his exalted office. This is the demand of the people, who are genuinely committed to the principles and practices of democracy and show due respect to the rule of law.

The author, a former Ambassador, is Member of BNP's Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

Hon'ble Prime Minister's remarks about possible resignation by the President in reply to a question had a loud and clear message. It is obvious that the President never showed favours to any political party, often spoke boldly and mercilessly against people, policies and actions that he did not approve and occasionally did not hesitate to ventilate utter sense of frustration.

Awami League did well to appoint him to the exalted but almost sinecure office of President. His tenure of office is for five years, which expires shortly after the expiry of the term of governance by the Awami League itself. The renewal or re-election to the office of the President, therefore, is scheduled to take place during the term of the next caretaker government.

having to face the combined four-party opposition alliance, posing as a formidable foe. If the ensuing election is held in a free and fair manner, the chances of the ruling party to rule again for a second term will definitely be slim. For various reasons, therefore, the Awami League wants to win the next election.

The desire to win election is not

officers in key posts, which have some bearing or involvement in the election process. The open partisanship manifested in the selection of officers of the last batch of officials in the BCS cadre was designed evidently to take favours from such officers in future. The government appointed a retired high-ranking official, who had publicly led an anti-BNP movement, as an Election Commissioner by shamelessly

judges, and gave rise to widespread speculation and criticisms. Now, the target appears to have been set against the President.

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The Clinton legacy that could have been



DR. A. R.
CHOUHURY

Now that the Clinton presidency has ended, pundits are falling over one another in analysing his legacy. For whatever its worth, here is my two cents' worth of prediction: Bill Clinton will go down in history as an "average to slightly above-average president" relative to his forty-one predecessors.

One thing that his critics and supporters can all agree upon is that the Monica Lewinsky scandal will cast a large presence on any evaluation of Clinton. His personal insecurities and startling recklessness will remain noteworthy fifty years from now.

Yet apart from the scandals - a bit like the Chicago Bulls basketball team without Michael Jordan - this president's achievements have been short-changed by his critics. With the exception of Ronald Reagan, Clinton has dominated the political agenda like no other US president in recent history. And in what may be a seminal political development, he has moved the Democratic party to the centre and the centre to the Democrats.

Critics of Clinton argue that he suffers from not having one real landmark achievement - Lyndon Johnson's civil rights act, or Eisenhower's interstate highway system or Harry Truman's Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO.

But what is Ronald Reagan's specific landmark achievement? Tax cuts that produced deficits as far as the eye could see and gradually

were rolled back? Reagan's supporters would argue that he hastened the fall of the Soviet Union, for which he deserves some credit. But the actual demise occurred on President George Bush's watch. During his presidency, Clinton's high public approval rating, even in the face of a number of scandals, is a result of the booming US economy. His contributions to the best economy in ages can be exaggerated. But if it were lousy, he would be blamed. Further, his selection of a premiere economic team helped

discipline unthinkable not too long ago.

In foreign policy his record isn't as good as cheerleaders claim, but it's nowhere near as desultory as critics charge. Even though it hasn't received much praise, the Irish peace accord is a major accomplishment, as is Bosnia, and Clinton has tried to play a constructive role in the Middle East.

Clinton's greatest foreign policy successes involved international economics - because it interested him greatly. Resisting domestic

lower trade and investment barriers with Mexico and Canada (NAFTA) and via other regional trading blocs.

He paved the way for Chinese entry into the WTO, arguing that this would open up the country's closed society. He improved relations with emerging markets such as India. He helped Asia overcome its financial crisis by keeping US markets open to Asian goods even when Asia couldn't afford American imports, causing the U.S. trade deficits to soar.

Bill Clinton's foreign policy leg-

policy principle seemed to be ad hoc, as it stumbled repeatedly into unexpected trouble in places such as Somalia and Kosovo. It was stronger on rhetoric than performance. Yet for reasons that future scholars need to analyse, the Clinton legacy in foreign policy as a whole looks much better than its parts.

To learn why, it helps to recall the mood when Clinton was elected. The world was uncertain whether the United States would remain the global leader. The US was falling

such impressive result? The answer lies in America's astonishing economic revival in the 1990s that conferred economic supremacy. And that economic supremacy translated into international political clout.

On the domestic side, there are the truly superficial and insignificant initiatives, typified by the push for school uniforms. But other accomplishments, such as parental leave, have made a real difference in everyday American lives.

Clinton's critics in the Republican Party had charged that a federal guarantee of twelve weeks of parental leave would result in massive economic dislocations. Those fears never materialised and, in the first two years of the bill's passage, an estimated twelve million Americans took advantage to spend time with a newborn, adopted child or a child who was gravely ill.

But like Ronald Reagan, Clinton's most important contributions are more intangible. There has been a reversal in the political standing of the two major parties in the American political arena during the last eight years: it used to be the extreme liberal wing of the Democratic Party that most worried centrist voters; today it's the Republican right. The Republican Party created many of its own problems. But on issues like crime, federal spending and taxes, Clinton had brought his party to the centre. Sometimes he had been demagogic, like on welfare reform. But in other areas, like education and health care, he had moved the centre more to the Democratic positions.

It is true that Bill Clinton was in stronger shape politically than Presidents Carter or Bush were in their final years. The tragedy here is, all things being equal, the odds are that the Clinton legacy would have been pretty good, certainly much better than a Carter or a Bush. But by giving his enemies such openings and ammunition with his own reckless personal behaviour, Clinton's legacy will pay a price.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

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him to cut budget deals in the Congress that clearly imposed effective cap on both spending increases and tax cuts, a fiscal

pressure, he made economics the centrepiece of post-Cold War foreign policy far more effectively than his predecessor. He pushed to

acy will be the one that will be debated the most in the coming years. It's a legacy that almost defies summation, left by a president who came to office uninterested in foreign affairs and had to be pressed to pay attention. Indeed, in the early days of his presidency, the administration's guiding foreign

behind in global economic competitiveness, and many people predicted that a united Europe or a vibrant Japan would soon challenge the US for the lead. But America today is by any measure the world's unchallenged military and economic power. So how did such haphazard conduct of foreign policy produce



TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

President provoked

I commend you for your editorial "President must ignore this provocation" (The Daily Star, January 28). As acting president, Shahabuddin steered the country in the right direction, conducting the most neutral, peaceful and successful general elections in 1991. It is his uncompromising and unflinching character that made him bold enough to sack two defence chiefs of staff. Again, it is Shahabuddin who at opportune moments has not spared either the Opposition party or the party in power for shallow actions and narrow vision harmful to the nation. In fact he acts like a farsighted statesman and beloved guardian to both the parties. He was at all not interested to become president, but at the national call he subsequently agreed.

SA Hussain
Dhaka

cratic and anti-people activities of the ruling party. You have rightly mentioned in your editorial that it is a clear provocation for the President to resign. In the greater interest of the people of Bangladesh, President Justice Shahabuddin is requested to ignore the ill-intentioned provocation of the Prime Minister. He must not swallow her ill-conceived bait.

M.A. Sobhan
Atlanta, GA
USA

Relocate garment factories

Dhaka is a capital city, an educational centre and a business hub. The main financial business of the country is located here. Surely, this city must be protected against the mushrooming growth of all kinds of garment factories?

It is well known that these factories provide lakhs of people the opportunity to work. But why are they allowed to set up their factories in the heart of residential areas and without observing the basic codes of building safety and beauty? If these factories must exist inside the city limits, why can't the authorities make sure they paint the fronts of the buildings and dispose off their garbage and raw materials in a civilised manner?

The best idea would be to relocate the factories within a specific zone and provide them with amenities such as schools for children, shopping centres and low-cost houses. This would be socially and aesthetically rewarding for all concerned.

Majeed Omar
Dhaka

A rumour has been circulating that President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed will resign. We are at a critical juncture, politically. Elections will take place under a caretaker government within a few months time. If the President resigns now, it will be disastrous. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed should and must remain as President till the next government is formed. The nation expects this of him.

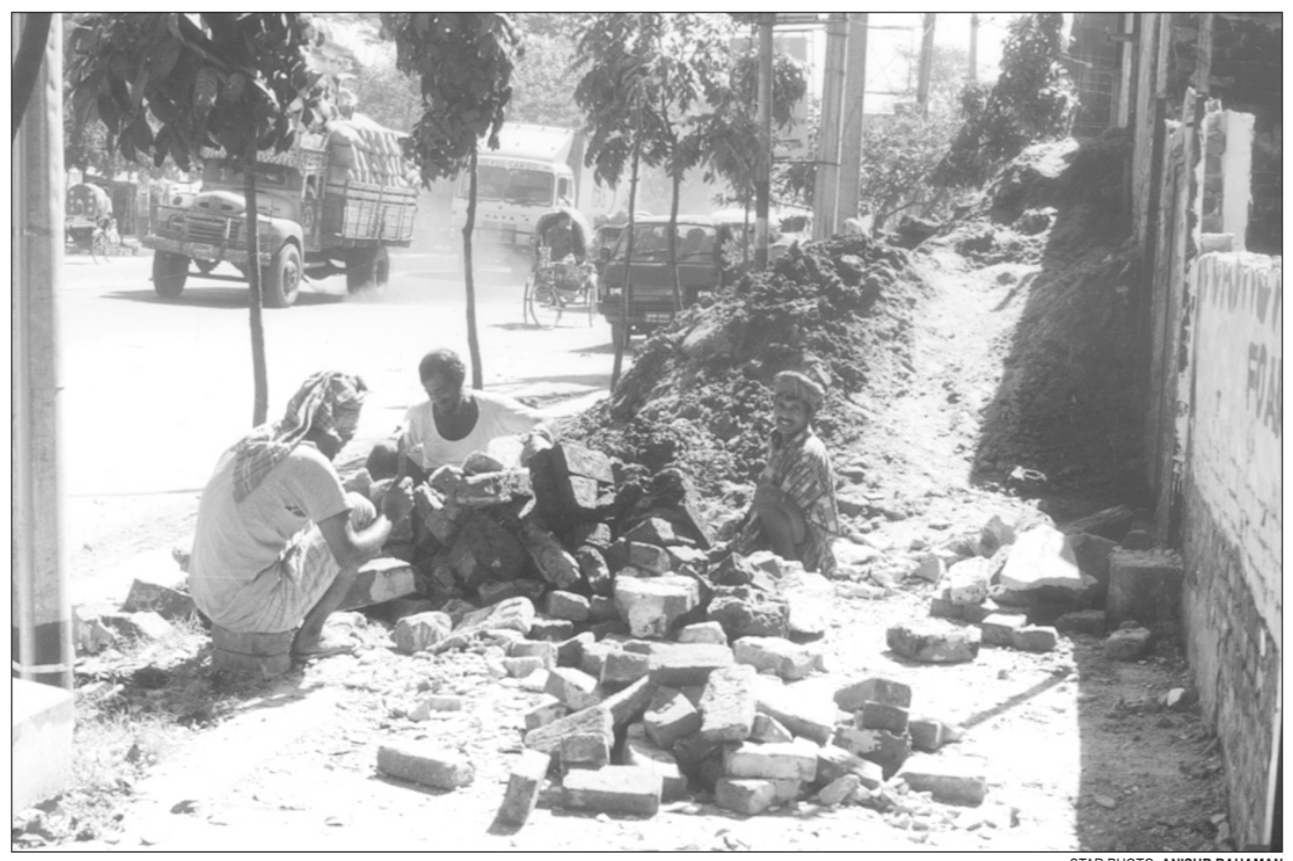
Iqbal Ahmed

Selecting Justice Shahabuddin as President was the best thing the Prime Minister did. It was commended by all shades of people, was her. He has been a constant deterrent to the various undemo-

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Stop destruction of public pathways



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHAMAN

A mountain of cement for the building alongside has been dumped in the middle of this sidewalk. The workers are treating this space as if it belongs to them. But it does not. It belongs to all residents and pedestrians in the area. Construction firms flaunt rules that prohibit destruction of public space, and never repair the damage afterwards. When will the authorities stop the willful destruction of public property and protect the community's interests?

Cowardly attack on CPB rally

We were deeply shocked at the news that people were killed and injured by a bomb explosion at a rally of the Communist Party of Bangladesh on January 20. Who could be behind this heinous crime? It seems that an evil force is at work, creating panic and unrest. It is the government's duty to give people protection, take security measures so that this sort of incident does not happen again. The government must unearth the mystery and punish the culprits. We hope the government will not accuse persons on assumption or from vindictiveness, as it has become routine to blame the opposition for everything.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

RAJUK exposed

Congratulations. Your front-page story on January 20, followed by a leader, clearly exposes the manipulative practices of RAJUK and other government agencies involved in breaching the height restriction rules over the years. Apart from Dhanmondi Residential Area, even in Lalmatia Housing Estate which is also a 6-storey zone, two 8-storey buildings on Plots, 1/6 Block A and 6/4(A) Block-B are currently under construction.

Will the RAJUK and the Housing Settlement Directorate under Works Ministry ask the plot owners to stop forthwith their illegal construction and explain why and how the rule was breached at the expense of the law abiding residents of the area.

Motihar Rahman
Dhaka

Natural solution for

arsenic

The discovery of a fern as being able to soak up arsenic is big news. As reported by you and in the latest issue of the journal Nature, the soil and water science department.

University of Florida, has discovered that a common fern can soak up an extraordinary amount of arsenic without any ill effects. This offers immense potential as a natural way of cleaning up soil and water polluted with arsenic.

I would like to request our scientists to investigate whether this fern grows naturally here? We need immediate action to test, experiment and develop a suitable variety for plantation in affected areas in our country.

K. Reza,
Yanbu, K.S.A.

Get the facts right

Congratulations for the bold rejoinder to the PM's remarks in Parliament. We want factual reporting from dedicated journalists who should perform their duties without fear or favour. Your voice in favour of 'transparency', 'accountability' and 'responsible leadership' is the burning call of the day. Please write about the ministers' (unprecedented) participation in 'moshal missil' (torch procession) and attacks on peaceful pickets and processions of the Opposition, inaction of the law-enforcing agencies in spite of so much coverage of terrorism, toll collection and mugging, with vivid pictures and facts.

How can paid servants of the people, the law enforcers, remain silent while armed goons roam peaceful villages and townships and indulge in torture, killing and terrorism? For whom then is the PSA?

A F Rahman
Dhaka