

Lesson from Brahmanbaria

Launch an information offensive

The nation is at pains to absorb the shocks administered by Tuesday's violent disturbances in Brahmanbaria, home to Islamic Oikya Jote (united front) leader Amini. His arrest in Dhaka earlier on had enraged his native supporters to call a hartal in that township. They attempted to take out processions through the streets of Brahmanbaria brandishing assorted weapons and were to soon come into armed clashes with the police and BDR who had been deployed there in strength to tackle them. Intermittently, the latter resorted to firing as the situation apparently went out of control.

A heavy cost was exacted in terms of death toll and infliction of bullet injuries and other kinds of wounds. The use of fire arms and bombs was on a scale that conjured up a warlike situation, which we should do everything in our power to avert in the future.

It was all no-holds-barred raw nerves coming into play. The elbow joint of a police officer was cut apart as some coffin shrouds were tied around the heads of zealots who vowed to avenge the deaths. Two journalists were beaten up, one while taking the photograph of a firing incident and another when clicking the camera to record the spiriting away of a dead body. They came under attack from both the policemen and activists while discharging their duties under circumstances that demanded the best from them.

Why section 144 was not clamped to prohibit assembly of people as a text-book precaution against escalation of troubles under those pressing circumstances is a question that begs answer. In fact, we would like the entire gamut of the law enforcement operation in Brahmanbaria on that day to be gone into with the lapses identified and accounted for, and the right lessons drawn for the future.

What, however, is quintessentially important for the government to do now is to launch a public information offensive (not a propaganda offensive) alongside the law and order offensive, so that the mass of our people are not misled by those who abuse religion for political purposes.

Counting the cost

Improve air quality in the city

The impact of air pollution in the cities, especially in Dhaka, is of serious concern. Research has established that poor air quality is harming infants and children by damaging their vulnerable respiratory systems and irrevocably stunting their physical and mental development. Estimates released at a World Bank meeting in Dhaka this week have quantified the impact further on the adult population. Air pollution kills 15000 people and causes a million cases of sickness annually in the urban centres, while millions more are afflicted by minor illnesses. The economic cost of poor air ranges from US\$200 to 800 million per year.

We endorse the recommendations made at the meeting, namely for public and private sector capacity building through pilot projects and institutional support for environmentally safe and cost-effective alternatives. We urge the government to review the decision to phase out auto-rickshaws over a five-year period by preventing the import of the two-stroke chassis on a gradual basis. This has given the 'baby' taxi a longer lease of life than justifiable and in any case, the possibility of cross-border penetration is diluting the ban. So, the entire timetable needs to be brought forward with a high degree of vigil mounted at the border. Simultaneously the government must develop and encourage practicable options, such as the conversion of the two-stroke engine into a liquefied gas or battery-powered vehicle. A World Bank Energy Sector pilot project to eliminate hazardous emissions by improving maintenance levels of auto-rickshaws and diesel vehicles, should be replicated in all urban centres. The government must clean up emissions from its own large fleet which includes vehicles used by its employees and allocated for public transport.

The introduction of unleaded gasoline for cars has been a welcome relief, but poor air quality remains a serious health risk for the cities. Unless the government embraces the attainment of clean air as a high priority development objective, the quality of life will continue to deteriorate.

MANZOOR AHMED

A new education policy has been adopted by the Parliament on 28 January. It is the culmination of a process that began with the appointment of a committee headed by Prof. Shamsul Haque in January, 1997, followed by a review of this committee's report by another committee headed by Prof. Nazrul Islam, and the approval of a policy document by the Cabinet in October last year. This policy has now received the parliamentary seal of approval, a few months before the general election, without the participation of the opposition who continues to stay away from the Parliament. Would it make a difference for nation's education?

Except for the usual hyperbolic statements by the ruling party MPs in the Parliament, there has been little reaction in the media or the education circles, not to speak of the general public, to the new education policy. The authorities have done its best to make it a bureaucratic exercise, has kept the document approved by the cabinet and submitted to the Parliament under wraps, and have not encouraged or initiated any public discussion on it. The professionals in the country's education establishment have also failed to raise any question about it, which speaks volumes about the professionalism and the preoccupations of our educationists.

The Parliamentary Committee on Education, a body circumscribed by its limited authority and capacity, as far as we know, has not held any discussion or review of the education policy and has not made any recommendations on it.

The opposition in the Parliament, which keeps boycotting its sessions, has not seen it fit to comment on the policy in public. This is in line with its political stance, which is to continue the agitation for the ruling party to abdicate, rather than address public and national issues.

R.M. Thomas, the Harvard University educationist, listed ten critical variables for successful implementation of educational reform or policy change. Among these are (a) validity, appropriateness and sustainability of the policy objectives in the particular context or circumstance; (b) the degree of commitment at political, administrative and technical levels to the policy change; (c) participation in the press of policy development and implementation of all stakeholders; and (d) an effective political strategy for garnering

support for and overcoming resistance to implementation of change.

The education policy falls short seriously on all of the factors related to successful implementation of policy change. Questions arise if and to what extent the policy can be implemented. But the more important question is whether it would make much difference, even if the policy is implemented.

The policy statement does identify the needs for expansion of the education system, improvement of quality, better management, and the mobilization of

policy, not to speak of a strategy to tackle the problem.

On the question of improving quality of instruction, the usual recipe of re-writing curricula, more teacher training, stronger supervision and active managing committees is offered. The fact is that the same recipe has been tried for decades with little to show for it. The need for establishing and enforcing performance standards and accountability of teachers, schools and the administrators and what can be done about it is missing in the policy statement.

The priority should be on creating the ground rules for dialogue and consensus-building on the major afflictions of our education. A good place to start would be how to rescue education, especially students and teachers, from partisan politics. The political parties could announce in their election manifesto what they propose to do about it.

larger resources. But going beyond these broad objectives into the specifics of what should be and can be done, the policy fails to address the most serious problems which concerned citizens, the media and the President of the country keep raising. And it discussed various other issues in hackneyed rhetoric, rather than offering workable strategies to tackle the core of the issues.

The pervasive influence of partisan and corrupt politics in all aspects of education has brought down the nation's education system to an unprecedented state of decline and chaos. This destructive influence has made inroads into construction of educational facilities, printing of textbooks, recruitment of personnel, holding of examinations, and the functioning of students' and teachers' organizations. It has resulted into criminal activities, killing and violence, mafia-style protection networks, and an atmosphere of terror in educational institutions, all condoned and protected by political "godfathers". The responsibility ultimately lies with the leadership on both sides of the political aisle for this state of affairs. It stands as the most serious obstacle to educational reforms, however well-meaning and urgent these are. This issue hardly receives a mention in the

A strategy has not been proposed for building a comprehensive and unified system (not necessarily a uniform system), with the opportunity for all children whether they go to a government primary school, a madrassah, an NGO school or a private institution to acquire a defined level of skills in literacy and numeracy and basic knowledge.

The ideas regarding changing the present colonial model of centralized decision-making by a few bureaucrats about the smallest details regarding a remote rural school is presented more in terms of efficiently implementing decisions still to be made centrally rather than making the administrative structure genuinely decentralized, responsive and participatory.

On the question of resources, the need for greater resources is noted, but a target for raising the low public expenditure by international standards (and in real and per capita terms) is not indicated. Nor is there a mention of how waste and corruption can be prevented or the ways of public-private partnerships for mobilizing and using effectively educational resources.

Coming to the question of commitment to the policy objectives and a political strategy for its implementation, consider the content of the policy and the process of its adoption. The fact that the critical questions that must be

Accusing without revealing the truth is of no use

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

PEOPLE are puzzled. Only one incident. But the versions are many. And the version of one side is completely different from the other. Seven persons were killed and more than 50 others injured in two separate bomb explosions, one at a completely peaceful rally of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) at Paltan Maidan and the other, at Bangabandhu Avenue on January 20. The incidents rendered general people speechless but the tragedy made our leaders shrewish and quarrelsome. And the violent deaths of some innocent people did not stir up their grief and incite sympathy. This has been a classic example of heartlessness of our so called politicians. Their hearts do not ache for the disaster of the victims. Rather they have been quarrelling and blaming each other.

Before conducting any investigation and inquiry into the incident the government was of the view that the rightist anti-liberation forces had carried out the horrifying bomb attack to discredit the government and gain political dividend in the election year. The government wanted to say that the fundamentalist anti-liberation forces were creating law and order situation in the society to create panic.

Immediately after the incident the Bangladesh Nationalist Party chief Begum Khaleda Zia flatly accused the government and in a statement said that "the Awami League government plotted the incident after foreseeing its defeat in the coming election." The Prime Minister had been out of the country for three days. She could not give befitting reply immediately. But on return from Cambodia while addressing a public meeting at Barura (Comilla) on January 24 Sheikh Hasina indicated Khaleda Zia's "involvement in the bloody incident." She alleged that "Khaleda Zia knew everything".

In a statement in the Jatiya Sangsad on January 21, the Home Minister also "blamed the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies for Saturday's bomb explosion at the CPB rally." Mohammad Nasim said, "Since we fought the war of independence together in 1971, CPB is our political friend and the fundamentalists unleashed such heinous attack to weaken the progressive force." Giving his instant reaction to the media persons the over-enthusiastic Commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police directly accused the fanatic and fatwabaz elements for the heinous crime. He behaved like a party activist and overtly wanted to please his 'bosses'.

At a press briefing on January 22, the Home Minister reiterated that "the religious fanatics and anti-liberation forces were responsible for the bomb explosion." On the other hand, the leaders of CPB have held the government "primarily responsible" for the bomb

explosion at its rally. The CPB Chief Manzurul Ahsan Khan said, "We do not officially blame anybody for the explosion. No sooner had the incident taken place than some people started blaming the fundamentalists and some others the government for the killings. It seemed that they were ready to issue statements blaming their opponents." Khan said, "Even the Home Minister and the Police Commissioner blamed Jamaat-e-Islami and other opposition parties for the blast." He questioned "If the Home Minister is so sure about the identity of the real culprits, why does not he arrest them?" A very pertinent question.

Manzurul Ahsan Khan told newsmen that "their own investigations revealed that a squad of police on duty at the rally had shifted its position only three minutes before the blast from near that spot." The implication of

the criminals then why the culprits had not yet been arrested or actions not yet been taken against them.

Nobody should accuse anybody on assumption. The pro-Awami League intellectuals have been unanimous on the point that it had been the conspiracy of the fundamentalist forces. Not only that. In a condolence message to CPB General Secretary, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPB) A B Barman said that undoubtedly it was a machination of the fundamentalists who have engaged themselves to suppress the progressive and democratic forces all over the world.

Now people want to know who could be behind this heinous crime. The ruling party, the main opposition the fatwabaz fundamentalist elements, the Jamaat-backed Hawkers' Kalyan Samity, the garments workers

It is fundamental responsibility of the administration to unearth the mystry, nab the criminals and maintain law and order. It is not fair to always blame the opposition for any untoward incident... Until and unless the truth is revealed, neither the government of Awami League nor the BNP-led opposition alliance would be able to gain anything by blaming each other.

this statement is clear. Referring to the statement of the Commissioner of DMP, the CPB president wanted to know "why he did not take pre-emptive action if he succeeded in identifying the attackers."

All the law enforcing agencies claimed that they had found "some clues" to the bomb incident and said that "some garments workers were used for the purpose." (Independent, January 23). It was also indicated that intra-party feud or a faction of transport workers union might have been responsible for the blast. One doth the scathe another hath the scorn.

CPB has been maintaining excellent relations with the Awami League from the beginning. So CPB leaders do not want to humiliate the Awami League government. Addressing a protest rally at Paltan on January 29 general secretary of the party Muzahidul Islam Selim said, the January 20 bomb incident was not a reflection of law and order situation but "part of a deep-rooted political conspiracy." "If you (Prime Minister) blame BNP for the incident, why don't you order their arrest and if Begum Zia knows that Awami League is responsible, why she does not mention the names of the criminals," Selim questioned.

Pointing to the Home Minister and the Inspector General of Police who blamed Jamaat-Shibir and fatwabaz respectively for the incident, the CPB chief Manzurul Ahsan Khan posed the question if they knew

or the intra-party rivalry or transport workers?

The Daily Star in an editorial remarked, "what these leaders do not seem to realise that making somebody a culprit without any evidence, not only allows the real culprit to slip away but also casts doubt on the whole process of investigation. With credibility eroded the law enforcing agencies are denied the public support they needed to go after the real culprit who often enjoy political protection. What we saw in this particular case was the beginning of naked political use of an extremely tragic event." (January 24)

In no time the government had constituted a three-member "high powered" Investigation Committee to probe the bomb incident. The committee during its week-long enquiry had interrogated a number of "concerned people" but made no progress for "lack of clues". But at first the committee did not miss to inform the media persons that it had found "a vital clue." Earlier it was said that "some garments workers were used for the purpose."

The purpose of investigation of any criminal incident is to find out the truth and bring the culprit to book. A proper investigation can help the authorities concerned including the court to do justice. But in our country in almost 99 per cent cases we see that the investigating officers try to extract confessions under pressure from the poor suspects and prove their involvement. They

addressed in any policy reform are neglected or given a short shrift suggests great innocence or a lack of seriousness about the policy objectives on the part of the responsible people.

There is hardly a political strategy for policy implementation, if the purpose is to generate support for policy change and seek cooperation for its implementation. Obviously, the opposition stand of not having any dialogue with the government on any matter of national importance or, for that matter, not having a public position of its own on such matters, does not help. The fact is that the most well-intentioned and essential policy change is likely to become an excuse for protest, demonstration, and disruption of education and the daily lives of citizens.

The confrontational political culture may be a reason for not taking a well-defined position in the policy document on critical issues such as partisan politics in education, genuine steps towards decentralization, and building a comprehensive and unified system of basic education for all -- all of which call for a spirit of cooperation and a shared vision of national priorities.

There is a history of all new regimes, authoritarian or democratic, attempting to formulate an education policy. The policy typically tip-toes around key but sensitive issues; nonetheless, becomes a political battle ground among opposing forces, and is implemented half-heartedly or not at all. Meanwhile the nation's educational problems continue to multiply.

Perhaps the wise course at this juncture is to take a lesson from history and downplay a national policy statement. Instead, the priority should be on creating the ground rules for dialogue and consensus-building on the major afflictions of our education. A good place to start would be how to rescue education, especially students and teachers, from partisan politics. The political parties could announce in their election manifestos what they propose to do about it. And to prove their credibility, which is in very short supply, they might begin to take some steps to disassociate themselves from student organizations and ensure that criminal activities and misconduct do not receive protection.

Manzoor Ahmed, formerly senior education adviser at Unicef headquarters, is at present visiting professor of international education at the University of Pittsburgh

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

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.

Health policy

Thank you for the special supplement on your 10th Anniversary. The article "Innovative approach to health care and family planning services" stated that about 12 per cent of the total health care for rural people is provided by the government health facility, while 88 per cent is provided by the private sector, dominated by untrained and quack practitioners. I'm disappointed to see nothing about the private sector in the article.

I'm concerned about health policy because of a bitter experience. I had a road accident and was seriously injured, dislocating my knee joint, among other things. My family took me to a private clinic, under an orthopedics surgeon. Unfortunately, the painful and expensive surgery failed. As I am a government official, my Director General (DGFP) would give me a signed letter to enable me to get a passport, but I needed a referral letter from the surgeon to avail of formal help from the government. The surgeon was unsympathetic and did not give me the required letter. Finally, I managed a private passport, and received treatment abroad with the help of donations. I am able to write, but what about less educated, poor people in my country? I appeal to the concerned authorities to take measures to prevent this kind of cruel and inhuman action by health professionals.

Dr. Lailun
Dhaka

Student woes

It is very bad news that a resident student of S M Hall, Dhaka University, was tortured because he refused to join an anti-hartal 'peace procession' on January 24th. The Third Year Economics student, Obaidur Rahman Saikat, was allegedly tortured with burning cigarette butts. The University authorities must inquire into the matter and ensure justice for the innocent student.

University teachers should remain impartial. I raise this point because university teachers issue statements for or against the government, forgetting their high stature and that they work for an autonomous body, not directly under the government. Hartal has been declared to be a fundamental political right by the High Court. But picketing does not have similar legal protection. The violent, so called 'peace processions' against hartals is an invention of the present government. A majority of people are against these 'peace processions'. The AL stalwarts must stop their tactics, and picketing by the Opposition should be stopped forever.

MAS Molla,
Dhaka.

Food for thought



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

Thousands of reasonably priced, 'tiffin' meals are supplied to working people all over Dhaka city, every day. The service is offered by ingenious women entrepreneurs who work out of small kitchens. Without bank loans or subsidies, they have established a small 'tiffin' industry that contributes to the informal economy. But for them, many in the workforce would have to toil on an empty stomach.

Timely help

It is in our time of need that we understand more about our well wishers, friends and neighbours. It was very clear that Bangladesh is a very good neighbour to India, when it rushed 20 000 tonnes of rice after the earthquake to India. It shows that Bangladesh is not only a well wisher but also a helping neighbour, ready to help in time of need. Hats off to the government and people of Bangladesh. This act has also proved that there is no need to be a super power to help. What is needed is room in the heart.

S.Sundaresan
Dubai.

Behind their back

When senior officials are out of station, their colleagues and juniors take decisions that reverse an earlier decision. Or in some instances, the decision goes against the senior official. One could give several examples, but suffice it to say that this is becoming an evil practice that erodes the principle of good administration. It leads to bad decision making. Good officers or citizens are thwarted or pushed out of their posts. We must end this kind of manipulation. We need rules specifying who is in charge and how much independent action he or she can take in the absence of a superior.

Syed Sajjad Zoha
Chittagong

Job well done

Mahathir's interview summarized in The Daily Star of January 25 was revealing. No South Asian leader talks as candidly. It needs moral courage to face unpopularity at home and abroad, and lead an under-developed nation for two decades to a position of strength.

The sadness in this leader was apparent when he wished he had remained a medical practitioner. Mahathir has performed his mission, thrust upon him, and the time has come for others to take up his example and sustain Malaysia.

A Husnain
Dhaka

"People's right to know"

Your motto, "People's right to know" has great significance in this age of information -- from strengthening democracy to reducing poverty. I know the sufferings of a citizen who cannot get accurate information regarding banking, police, judiciary and the health care system. As the next general elections are round the corner, you should campaign to include this issue in the manifesto of major political parties. An Information Act should be demanded. I wish you success!

Fakhrul Islam
Dhaka.