

We denounce it Punish the killers

Whatever prevarication the ruling party might try in a bid to confuse public opinion on the Malibagh firing incident, the truth makes itself felt. Until almost noontime on Tuesday it was all very peaceful about the hartal proceedings. Then suddenly things changed with the ruling party anti-hartal procession led by AL MP HMB Iqbal appearing on the scene and its activists opening fire on the opposition procession led by BNP leader Mirza Abbas. A normal law and order approach for the police should have been to persuade both sides away from any imminent face-off. The police apparently tried to do it, but to no avail. At any rate, by all independent accounts, and as the photographs show, some ruling party processionists were the first to empty their gun muzzles, as it were, on the other side. It was a case of opening fire not counter-fire.

So, we categorically hold the ruling party responsible for starting that indiscriminate firing which led to the ill-fated, violent loss of some precious lives of citizens. We find no words strong enough to denounce it. In specific terms, it is AL MP HMB Iqbal who has to bear the responsibility for this; because he was visibly in the company of gun-toting youths as the photograph depicted. Why did he allow armed elements to accompany him. Even more to the point was the tell-tale presence of some known gangsters in the procession a few of them on the police's 'wanted' list.

On the other hand, it is difficult to brush aside the impression that the policeman's death could have been caused by firing from the other side that is by an opposition activist. Why must the processionists carry guns, whether on the picketing side or the anti-hartal side?

If the AL believes at the heart of hearts that it is a party wedded to democracy it must then publicly dissociate itself from elements who are out to give it a fascist dimension. The terrorists and their godfathers should have no place in the AL. That is the lesson Sheikh Hasina should heed after the doings of the likes of Zainal Hazari, Maya's son Dipu Chowdhury and MP Iqbal.

Voters' list delay

EC must not botch this up

Printing and data storage of the voters' list has been delayed yet again. The EC was supposed to complete the printing by October last year. Twice in the last six months, we were told that 'technical' difficulties had forced the Election Commission to extend the schedule. The last deadline, in February, has been extended once again. Now we have been told that the EC is 'hopeful' that the list would be printed by the middle of next month.

These fits and starts are unacceptable. Printing has been delayed because the software being used was problematic. Why was this factor not taken into account before launching the project? And why has it taken the EC so long to solve a problem which became evident so many months ago? It has been suggested that Ramadan and seasonal holidays caused delays, but this factor should have been anticipated. There is no room for lame excuses that mask bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of foresight.

In view of the knowledge that the present government's term is coming to an end and elections are just months away, the EC should have given itself ample time to check and rectify mistakes and make additions as necessary. But not only has the printing been delayed, but also the list as it stands now is said to be riddled with inconsistencies and discrepancies. It is to be wondered how the EC plans to complete the final list and feed it into a central database within the short time available?

We would like to be assured that the EC is not going to botch this job up, brooking no more delays or excuses. The preparation of a complete and accurate voters' list is the most basic requirement for elections. Appropriate measures must be taken right now by the EC to make sure nothing more goes wrong. Otherwise, it would be a sorry breach of its mandate and cast a shadow on its own reputation as well as on the electoral process itself.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THE present political climate in Bangladesh cannot be said to be democracy-friendly, the major reason obviously being the Opposition's staying out of parliament for the last one and a half years without any credible or popular reasons. The abstention has created a record in the history of parliamentary democracy. It is clear that the treasury bench has been frustrated in its attempts to draw the opposition into parliament. However, the opposition lawmakers are keeping their membership alive by making token presence in every 90 days while the parliament was in session. It is by all means a double standard on the part of the BNP. Under the circumstances, Bangladesh remains a unique and a rare example in the world as far as the democratic culture is concerned.

Since the opposition is constantly at loggerheads with the government, democratic culture cannot grow in this environment. For the moment the electorate has no choice but to live with two major forces, the AL and the anti-AL alliance. Now let us look at the contributions of the two democratic regimes towards upholding the democratic culture.

BNP-led government (1991-96)

Almost all pre-election opinion polls in 1991 had suggested that the AL was to win an absolute majority. But it did not happen and the pollsters proved wrong. The BNP with the support of Jamaat came out as the majority party in the Parliament and formed a government led by Begum Khaleda Zia. While Begum Zia's regime was making a good progress

in the economic front with an efficient finance minister at the helm, her mentors in the political front were making mistakes one after another. It was mainly due to the BNP's lack of experience on parliamentary practices since the party was close to the presidential form of government during General Zia's regime. The BNP in 1991 was not only ill equipped for the newly found parliamentary system in Bangladesh but also refused to adapt quickly with such a system. One would recall that although

ocratic decisions in encountering the then opposition's (AL-led) movement initially on the issue of rigged by-elections and later on establishing a care taker government before the general election. For example, holding a unilateral general election on 15 February 1996 was a suicidal move and universally accepted as the main cause of the BNP's defeat in 1996 general election. Uncompromising attitudes of some of the BNP hardliners towards some popular demands steered by the AL-led

mental group like IOJ. This made the BNP look fragile and injured in the eyes of the neutral voters as opposed to BNP's strong position in pre-1991 election. It appears that the hardliners and the right faction of the BNP are forcing the party towards further political oblivion. Under this circumstance, of course, the winner is AL, although only in the short run. In the long run, this situation is not going to bring a healthy democratic environment to the nation. A weak opposition often takes shelter under unholy alliance.

Both politically and economically, after four and a half years in government, the AL has under its belt more or less a good image both at home and abroad. It appears that, unlike BNP, the AL suffers less in internal factionalism, although it cannot be ruled out completely. This is a plus point for the AL for keeping infighting often at bay. There have, however, been some tensions over the recent months about unwarranted and unlawful activities of some offspring and siblings of a few influential persons in the AL. The print media

With democracy's roller coaster ride in Bangladesh its future is hard to predict. However, democracy's fortune at least in the medium term hangs on two personalities: Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. The 2001 general election is just around the corner. While it is difficult to predict democracy's future, it is not difficult to guess on the possible outcomes of the next election. One of the following is going to happen: a second term for the AL, a win for the BNP-led alliance, or chaos. The way things are unfolding in the opposition camp it is likely that the government will return, unless the AL makes a blunder between now and the election. Regarding the second outcome, a win for the BNP-led alliance is a lesser possibility. Whatever equation the BNP has in mind, the majority of electorate is not prepared at this moment to forget and forgive the role of anti-liberation forces or support the violent forces of fundamentalists. Moreover, the swing voters know it well that any coalition government of the BNP, JP Ershad, Jamaat and IOJ is not going to last long and will also create instability in the nation. The BNP's harbouring and directly patronising them will make their position stronger but BNP's weaker day by day. The BNP must abandon the present path. Chaos, the third outcome, is not likely to happen if a party wins election with a decisive majority. Only a hung parliament or a soft caretaker government with a polarised EC is likely to invite chaos. This remains a remote possibility. One hopes that the electorate will avoid a hung parliament and will act decisively for democracy's sake. For, in Bangladesh's present political climate a hung parliament will simply be a recipe for a great political disaster.

The electorate will be less concerned about the extent of budget deficit or trade deficit with the neighbours but will certainly be concerned, if police is unable to bring criminals to book or justice has been denied due to corrupt practices of the officials concerned. The AL has a tough job in hand to restore its credibility to the electorate.

Begum Zia was a Prime Minister but she followed closely a presidential style of governance. This attitude was prevailing in the BNP at large until the party was unseated in 1996 general election.

As seen in the past, the BNP has supported a parliamentary form of government with reluctance. This was proved true not only by its actions over 1991-96, but also the present day action supports this claim. In the mean time, the AL identified the weaknesses of Begum Zia's regime and successfully exposed them to the electorate. For example, the AL was successful in branding Begum Zia as a Prime Minister with presidential character. In her five years term, she was seen indifferent to using parliament as the nucleus of nation's politics. This made the BNP to an extent alien to the electorate. Moreover, the BNP's political strategists took some unparliamentary and undemocratic

opposition, further divorced the BNP from people. The AL took advantages of such a shaky ground of the BNP on its commitment to parliamentary democracy. The AL's strategy paid off. They made BNP to accept a demand on the caretaker government which was universally recognised as an innovative and workable approach in a third world democratic condition. All this paved the way for AL to win the 1996 general election.

AL-led government (1996-present)

It had been universally recognised that the AL would make politics difficult (in political terms) for the BNP after assuming power in 1996. Until now the politics becomes so hard for the BNP that it had to form an alliance with two formerly rejected forces in Bangladesh (General Ershad and Golam Azam/Nizam) and with a funda-

A weak opposition can make the AL fall prey to conspirators. It is, however, possible to argue that a weak opposition means the government in power is either doing a good job, therefore, opposition becomes redundant or weak (the case of Singapore), or the government becomes undemocratic in nature and rules by muscle power suppressing the opposition (Nawaz Sharif's period in Pakistan). Of course, the consequence of the latter is always suicidal.

After four and a half years of AL-led regime one wonders which side of this coin the AL belongs to. The start of the government in 1996 under Sheikh Hasina after almost 21 years in the opposition by all means was good through election of a credible person, Justice Shahabuddin, as President. Even the anti-AL forces acknowledged this move as a triumph on the part of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

has been getting a free run under the AL regime except the government run broadcasting media. And the demand for autonomy of the electronic media has to some extent been neutralised by making way for introducing private TV and radio channels. However, the government's steps in addressing corruption or improving law and order have not been effective so far. In any democratic movement corruption and law and order issues come in the forefront of debate during pre-election campaign. For example, the electorate will be less concerned about the extent of budget deficit or trade deficit with the neighbours but will certainly be concerned, if police is unable to bring criminals into book or justice has been denied due to corrupt practices of the officials concerned. The AL has a tough job in hand to restore its credibility to the electorate.

The future

How interest groups influence American policies

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

writes from Princeton

AMERICA used to be a predominantly white country, with a substantial black population in a subservient role. Over the last fifty years there has been a dramatic demographic shift. If the current trend continues, by the middle of this century no ethnic group will predominate in the United States. That scenario currently holds true in New York City and California, the nation's largest city and state respectively. As diversity accelerates in America, more and more ethnic, religious and common cause groups are attempting to sway public opinion, public funds and public policy their way.

Activism is rooted in American history. The South lost the Civil War and the battle to keep the blacks enslaved. Soon after the abolition of slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, a ruthless white activist group if you will, was born to protect the white interest and to keep the blacks in check through violence, cross burning, fire bombing and lynching. By the 1920s, one in eight white American was a member of the KKK.

The Southern legislators fought mightily and thank goodness unsuccessfully, to keep lynching legal. Up until Franklin Roosevelt, blacks belonged to the Republican Party, the party of Abraham Lincoln. Roosevelt's New Deal convinced the blacks to switch parties. After the US Army was integrated during the Second World War on Harry Truman's watch, things really began to change. Having tasted freedom abroad, the blacks demanded the same at home. Dr. Martin Luther King's civil rights movement of the

1950s and the 1960s began the process of the true emancipation of the blacks.

If one talks to white Americans now, one gets the feeling that the civil rights movement was the best thing that happened to America and that they were all for it. Actually, most whites, especially those in the South, were vehemently opposed to it. America has a habit of embracing the winner; just ask George W. Bush! The South used to be solidly Democratic. As blacks entered the Democratic Party, the Southern whites vacated it, and became staunchly Republican, especially beginning with the Ronald Reagan Presidency. With the civil rights for blacks enacted, the KKK lost its appeal.

America does not necessarily acquiesce on an issue because it is right; it does so only when a significant number of Americans demand it. America did not grant the blacks their civil rights because it was the right thing to do; they did it because the blacks fought mightily for it. Lobbying has been an integral part of American politics. Violence in America can be directly traced to freedom to bear arms that is guaranteed in the constitution. Yet, the powerful gun lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA) with actor Charlton Heston as its head, sees to it that any attempt to curb the availability of guns is defeated in Congress. Everyone concedes that cigarette smoking is detrimental to one's health, and adds billions to every state's medical bill. Yet, no judgement against the use of tobacco seems to stick. Then there is the powerful labour lobby (AFLCIO), environmental lobby (Sierra Club), lobby for the elderly (AARP, American Association of

Retired Persons), the Israeli lobby, and most recently the Muslim lobby.

If one browsed Jewish websites before last November's elections, one would have noticed that the sites were full of accusations that both Al Gore and George Bush were catering to Muslim votes. To accuse Al Gore of partisanship towards the

independents were bending over backwards to please the Israeli lobby. Because of the judicial use of Muslim voting clout, things have changed noticeably. These days, whenever religious institutions are mentioned, President George W. Bush and his surrogates always talk of "churches, synagogues and

the attention of the winner. Muslims maintain that their bloc voting in Florida on behalf of George Bush pushed him over the hump in that state.

In last November's election, New York's Republican Senatorial candidate Rick Lazio accused his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton of supporting Muslim groups accused of blowing up US destroyer Cole last October. Lazio returned Clinton campaign contributions, criticized Hillary Clinton for hosting Eid parties at the White House, used footage from the October 28, 2000 "Pro Al Aqsa Demonstration" at Washington DC in his television commercials to label some of the demonstrators terrorist, and categorically stated that all he cared about was the interest of Israel. New York Muslims voted overwhelming for Hillary Clinton, turning a close race into a romp for Clinton. The Rick Lazios of the world learned the painful lesson that these days blanket condemnation of the Muslims and the blanket commendation of Israel may not get one elected. Although Muslims may have neutralized the Jewish votes, in terms of wealth and influence, however, they remain miles behind the Jews.

New Jersey Muslim organizations were about to endorse Republican Dick Zimmer for Senate from New Jersey in 1996, when Zimmer accused his Democratic opponent Robert Torricelli of patronizing a Muslim gathering where "terrorists" were in attendance. Muslims asked Zimmer for an explanation. When none was forthcoming, 90 per cent of the New Jersey Muslims voted for Torricelli, turning another close election into a rout for Torricelli.

In New Jersey's 12th congressional district, Dick Zimmer once again ran last November to reclaim his seat from incumbent Democrat Rush Holt. Mindful of Zimmer's record, several local Muslims, including the writer, worked tirelessly for Rush Holt's campaign. This was one of the closest contests in the nation. After repeated recounts, Holt won by a few hundred votes. Almost 100 per cent of the Muslims in his district voted for Holt, giving him the margin of victory. After the election, Rush Holt acknowledged his debt to his Muslim constituents. Muslims have realized that to derive maximum benefit for their community, they must continue to reflect their ever-increasing voting prowess by voting as a bloc in every local, state and national election.

Now an update. According to The Washington Post, after Al Gore's election defeat, he and President Clinton had a testy confrontation at the White House. In a blunt exchange, Gore blamed Clinton's Monica Lewinsky scandal for his defeat, while Clinton countered that Gore's bad campaign tactics and refusal to run on the Clinton administration's record cost him the Presidency. With a lot of time on his hand, Al Gore is teaching a non-credit course on journalism at New York's prestigious Columbia University. Commented the late night comedian Jay Leno: "Isn't it ironic? The guy who did drugs (Bush) goes to the White House and the clean guy (Gore) goes to Columbia (actually, it is Columbia)"

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Lobbying has been an integral part of American politics....there is the powerful labour lobby (AFLCIO), environmental lobby (Sierra Club), lobby for the elderly (AARP, American Association of Retired Persons), the Israeli lobby, and most recently the Muslim lobby.

Muslims is the ultimate insult. Throughout his political career, Al Gore has been known for his unflinching support for the state of Israel. When both the presidential candidates were asked if they would support the shifting of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Gore answered with an emphatic "yes," whereas Bush waffled, "I will think about it."

Twenty years ago, the Reagan administration was so impressed with American Israeli Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) stubborn fight to stop the sale of AWAC communications planes to Saudi Arabia that subsequently the Reagan administration cleared all important appointments with AIPAC and its chief Thomas Dine before proposing them! Ten years ago, at the height of the Gulf War, politicians of all hue Republicans, Democrats and

mosques." Who can forget that in last year's second presidential debate, candidate George Bush went out of his way to criticize the "secret evidence act," which is applied predominantly against Arab Americans.

AIPAC and the like are single-issue lobbies. Their litmus test is unquestioned support for Israel; politicians can hold views at variance with the lobby as long as their support for Israel and its interests are unwavering. American Muslims have very successfully emulated that strategy. Last year, American Muslims' associations endorsed George W. Bush for President. "We don't want to cancel each other's votes," was the unifying cry. There was logic behind the bloc voting. Even if Bush had lost, the ability of America's seven million Muslims to vote as a bloc would have grabbed

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.

Tributes to Tawfiq Aziz Khan

We condole the untimely death of Tawfiq Aziz Khan (Bhai) who shall even remain in our hearts as a great friend of the rural journalists. May his soul rest in peace & eternity.

M.A. Rub
Consultant, Koinonia
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I am saddened by the demise of Tawfiq Aziz Khan, Executive Editor of your well circulated daily, who was a friend of my husband Mohammed Idris, Managing Director, Trans Bay Trading Ltd. It is he who inspired me to write in your opinion column. A lawyer by profession, I tried my hand on subjects that call for a different style of writing from the legal way of writing.

I wish to convey my condolences to the management and the staff of The Daily Star on the demise of our family friend, Tawfiq Aziz Khan, a man of heart and quality.

Rehana Begum
Dhaka

I am deeply shocked at the sad demise of Tawfiq Aziz Khan, the noted journalist, sportswriter and

commentator. During his student days he was associated with the amateur theater group 'Drama Circle' led by Bazlul Karim. Later, Tawfiq Aziz Khan became well-known to sports lovers all over the country through his running commentaries on radio and writings on sports in daily newspapers.

Many still also remember his historic commentary on Bangabandhu's homecoming from Pakistan via London and the visit of the former heavyweight Champion Mohammad Ali to Bangladesh.

I will always have fond memories of him. May Allah rest his soul in peace.

Abid Reza
Paribagh, Dhaka

Hartal blues

This is a typical teenagers question but I think many others will agree with me. Why is the opposition calling hartals on days like Pahela Falgun and Valentine Day? We couldn't go out the whole day. We wanted to celebrate the 1st day of Falgun. but we couldn't do it because of this hartal. And they called another on on the great v-day. We are very disheartened that we cannot meet our beloved to wish them a happy V-day.

Jack Siraji
Dhaka



STAR PHOTO: A. K. M. MOHSIN

Death Trap

This gaping manhole is an open invitation to disaster, particularly at night. Our photographer got this shot in the Tejaan Industrial Area, but there are hundreds more around the city. Manhole covers get stolen and often it is the DCC which turns a blind eye. Why? If offenders were caught and punished, this would stop. At the very least, the DCC should set up a sign to warn travellers on the road.

Hartal cost

As an expatriate working in on a medium sized development project here I have calculated that every day lost to a hartal costs our project alone over \$10,000. This is money which could be spent on doing what we are supposed to be doing - alleviating poverty, but we end up paying staff to sit at home doing nothing. When this is multiplied to include all the development projects in the country, let alone disruption to the private sector, the figure must rise to the millions.

I have worked in many developing countries and in not one of them was 'politics' conducted in such a cynical way, with such flagrant disregard for the rights of the people of the country as it is in Bangladesh.

Is it any surprise that, with such poor leadership, anyone with half a chance of being successful is preoccupied with migration?

Sunmerillion
Dhaka

Stop hartal

Political parties should not call for hartal when thousands of Muslims are travelling to perform Haj. Some of my relatives recently left Dhaka for Haj and I found they had to face a lot of difficulties because of hartals. It not only hampered their preparations but also kept them in an anxious state of mind. Many people, including I, have decided not to vote for the party which calls for hartal because it only brings misery to the poor people and the helpless patients.

Dr. Mahboob Hossain
Dhanmndi, Dhaka

What's the rush?

I have been reading with great sadness about the frequent calls for hartal by the Opposition. How can a poor country like Bangladesh afford to have an inactive

workforce, for five out of nine workdays this month. Do the politicians realize how they are crippling the country's economy? They are not hurting the ruling party, instead it's the country and the people that are being hurt.

General elections are only a few months away. Why can't the opposition political parties wait that long? What is their rush? The politicians should look around the world. How many opposition political parties in other countries resort to such tactics?

I hope good sense will prevail in the minds of our leaders, and they will refrain from such destructive attitudes.

Waseem Khan
Los Angeles, USA

False charge

The BNP chief's allegation in Rangpur that the ruling party activists were involved in the killing of the police constable inside the mosque, is ludicrous and does her reputation no credit. She repeated the ridiculous charge in her briefing to the Islamic diplomats. Was there nobody of sense present in the BNP camp to advise her against this type of mendacity?

Mozammel Khan
Ontario, Canada