

Hartals will get us nowhere

Rethink strategy for polls

WITH the week-end that begins today, the Opposition's hartal call for February 25 and 26 is intended to bring about a four-day-long shuttering down of business. Dhaka has already been through the ordeal of ten countrywide strike calls in the first three weeks of February, let alone the usually trouble-prone port city Chittagong's predicament with nine hartals. The rest of the country reeled.

It saddens us to say that nowhere has the political shortsightedness and obduracy of the opposition been so galling as in the way they have decided to go for hartals on February 25 and 26. The latest call for strike comes against the backdrop of the opposition's February 18 programme for sit-in demonstrations around the secretariat. This was headed off by the government through an overnight ban on rallies followed up by cordoning off opposition activists and basically not letting them in through some entry-points to the city. Contrary to public apprehension of clashes taking place between both sides, things went off generally peacefully. This gave a sense of relief at the avoidance of trouble including any provocation for a further strike call. And, when on the following day, the opposition staged protests against the preventive action of the government, even an excuse for any hartal call seemed to have been effectively disposed of. But in spite of those countervailing factors, the four-party opposition alliance has deemed it fit to go for hartal, not for just a day, but two days in a row.

What for has this latest spate of hartals been decided upon? The opposition says that the government party has 'lost the moral authority' to run the show anymore, so it must quit by resignation at once. But Begum Zia should know better than any one else that hartals cannot bring down an elected government, far less the one with only a few months to go before its exit. Her own government ran its full tenure despite Sheikh Hasina's relentless hartal calls demanding the former's relinquishment of power. Similarly, she cannot topple Hasina's government by recourse to repeated hartal calls, more so because elections are round the corner giving her a legitimate constitutional option to try her luck for incumbency through the ballot box.

Hartal is a political anathema in an independent country with an elective democracy offering free choice of leaders, a deadweight on an LDC's strivings for economic uplift and certainly a disastrous electoral recipe because of its growing unpopularity with the people. Besides, it breeds violence, exacerbates political divisiveness and disrupts civil order. Consequently, the routes to constructive political discourse and dialogue between opposition political forces get sealed off.

Whereas it is incumbent upon the leadership at both ends of the political spectrum to try and create an atmosphere that proves conducive to holding the next general election, they seem ironically headed for the opposite direction. Only a dialogue between the two sides, either within the precincts of parliament or elsewhere, perhaps initiated by reputed civil society leaders can help clear the deck for elections. They must now focus their energy on reform of electoral laws, comprehensive choice of a caretaker administration and fixation of the polls schedule.

Meanwhile, keeping the hartals of February 25 and 26 in view, we urge restraint on both sides so that any further deterioration in the political atmosphere is stymied. The best way to do it would be to checkmate physical or armed confrontation between picketing and anti-hartal processions with the police seen playing its role in a highly professional manner.

The cult of blood



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

BANGLADESH has already set the world record in declaration of hartals by political parties. This distinction is not in imminent or distant threat of being eclipsed or even dimmed. No other country, not even those caught in periodic bouts of "people's power," come anywhere near challenging Bangladesh on this unique achievement. Hartal is destined to remain quintessentially Bangladeshi, having been elevated into a national institution by its votaries. It matters little that the votaries are outnumbered by the voters and that the public at large vote with their feet walking nonchalantly on days of hartal. But it is of significance that, rebuffing hartals, life goes on, limping somewhat but unmistakably up and about.

Besides hartal, Bangladesh politics has added another accoutrement with great gusto and addictive repetition. This involves blood-letting on the street in clashes between demonstrators and the police or between rival groups from political parties. In this respect the capital city, Dhaka, has set a world record of its own in terms of number of casualties on its pockmarked streets. Politics of agitation and

resultant deaths on the street of Dhaka have gone on hand in hand for such a long time that the two have become inseparable. However, much the ordinary people may recoil in fear or grimace with revulsion, the politicians seem to revel, even relish the bloodletting on the street. It is the finale of the first round of the ritual that starts with processions, slogans and with blood-stained corpses at the end assuring renewal of the cycle of violence.

In Bangladesh, as in the subcontinent at large, some of the major political victories have been earned after great sacrifice of blood on the street. The independence from British colonial rule, recognition of Bangla as a state language and independence of Bangladesh, to mention a few, were all preceded by martyrdom of many. These were just and noble causes. As the occasions arose sacrifice of blood was recognised as the price to be paid and the defiant martyrs readily responded to the call of the time. Sacrifice of blood gave rise to a kind of timeless mythology promoting collective ethos and a self-sustaining psyche. However tragic, deaths on the street conferred on the dead a majesty and greatness that time could neither take away nor diminish. Sacrifice of blood was not the denouement planned and carried

out ruthlessly by a few masterminding the events from behind. History and fate were in command. Martyrdom was ordained supernaturally, as it were.

But where hartals take place routinely irrespective of the spontaneous support and participation by the public, bloodletting on the street lacks the historic inevitability and the soaring greatness of tragedy. In its mundane routinisation it is demeaned and sullied. Robbed of high minded nobility attempts at stirring the emotions of the people with the display of bloodstained bodies or in its absence by repeating the number through word of mouth or in print appear as crude and ineffectual. From its awesome significance and mythologising aftermath blood sacrifice is reduced to a weird cult practised by a cabal of self-seekers. Drenched in blood, politics of the street fails to be one whit superior to or very different from black magic or witchcraft used by shamans, the faith healing spiritual leaders or the new-age occultists. In its sacrifice of the innocents, politics based on cult of blood may also be seen as harking back to pagan rites in the hoary past like the Maya civilisation of the Aztecs where the ruling elite got the poor killed to seek the blessings of their gods. Spilt without good reason and

as the last resort in a just cause, blood neither purifies nor has a transcending role. On the contrary, trivialising its sacrifice can only lead to defilement and loss of sanctity. It is for this corruption of the sacrificial role and subversion of the mythmaking force that the use of blood in Bangladesh's present day politics is so repugnant and sinister. If there is utter disregard to public welfare in calling hartals, deaths on the street serve to demonstrate a mindset that is amenable to cashing in on even the most sacred and the invaluable.

Politicians of all parties who organise hartals, processions and incite the demonstrators to attain frenzy are responsible for bloodshed when deaths occur on the streets. But the government has to share greater part of the blame when it decides to match the belligerence of the opposition parties in equal measure. It is known to the government that people at large don't support hartals or processions and they are critical of the same. That the organisers don't benefit anything of significance from these recurrent events is also no secret. Rather, they earn the opprobrium and ire of the public increasingly as hartals go by. Apart from making statements denouncing hartal the government need not take any other

action to discredit its organisers. On the other hand, the party in power being a part of the government has to show more tolerance and greater understanding of the opposition's posture. If there is no meeting inside the parliament, confrontation on the street with rival processions is not compensatory. It can only aggravate the tense political situation and become inflammatory. And what is the justification of trying to halt processions of the opposition when the government cannot stop hartal? Can an unlawful assembly be neutralised by another one, even when it has the imprimatur of the government? Moreover, why should a government minister lead a procession against pro-hartal parties? Doesn't the government have the law and order agencies to take care of them? Or is this what it considers to be the best way of politically dealing with and engaging the opposition? If it is the case, then the spectacle of a ruling party MP accompanied by gun toting goons was too much to stomach for the public. The popularity rating of the party in power was badly mauled by the event. But even after the unbelievable act of putting a foot in the mouth the situation could be salvaged. The government could immediately take steps through announcements and acts to reas-

sure the public that it was against terrorism, even by association. But defying credulity, no acknowledgement of the fact of their MP's involvement in leading a procession of armed cadre was made even belatedly. Rather, to the utter dismay of the public attempts have been made to cast doubt on the photographs showing the government party MP surrounded by young thugs brandishing revolvers, with police as onlookers. One wonders as to why the MP involved could not be suspended or even reprimanded in public by the party high command. If an ordinary MP is higher than the party then what is the relation between the party and its leading lights? While all these questions remain unanswered, shifting the blame for the shootout and deaths has been put on high gear. As a result of all these happenings and non-happenings, the credibility of the government as the custodian of law and order is now in greater jeopardy than before.

The opposition parties have been presented with a trophy that they so long strived hard to have. They can now regale in the festivity of the post-mortem. Politics of power play has got a new lease of life through the sacrifice of lives in the latest charade of the cult. The opposition has every reason to thank the party in power and the government for showing them brilliantly in the role of a victim of persecution. They now have a leverage to pursue their goal vigorously and more convincingly. The cult of blood has been unwittingly patronised by the power that be. Barring a miracle, it is destined to move to its next denouement which may not add to the transcendental mythology of blood sacrifice. But it may exact a price in terms of temporal power.

Paradoxes of poets and politicians



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN I was attempting to write poems as a boy, my Arabic tutor told me one day that the Holy Koran forbade us to seek the company of poets, because they were people who ambled in the gardens and often didn't mean what they spoke. But I know for sure that Plato hated poets, because he had vowed to banish them from his Republic. Politicians, of course, are a different breed. They not only say what they don't mean, but also make promises not to keep. Inasmuch as both poet and politician are wordsmiths, one writes as eloquently as other speaks.

But there are paradoxes in poetry and politics. Poetry touches the soul, while politics torches the spirit. Poets thrust their imagination on the people. Politicians thrust their agenda on popular imagination. Poets are roused by their own emotions. Politicians rouse the emotion of others. Poetry doesn't have any of the active powers of politicians. It can protest or commemorate a war but cannot cause one. But poetry outlives politics. The eternity of language reaching as far

back as forward is what politicians fear most about poetry. Politics touches some people at particular times. Poetry calls to all people at all times.

There is a Freudian twist to how poets and politicians are alike as they are different. There are similar passions in both, yet there is something sublimely irrational at their centres. Both appeal to the zealots, who need to be stirred in their souls. Poems create their own state of mind. So does politics. Each of both does an act of hypnosis by persuading its audience that reality is the world that the poet or politician has constructed for them. They appeal to young people who are idealistic, each using the power of word to mesmerise the audience.

Nicolas Boileau, the 18th century classicist, swaggered, "It's a consolation to a poet on the point of death that he has never written a line injurious to good morals." Politicians could never say the same thing keeping their hands on their hearts. Nathuram Godse and his followers believed that even the saintliest politician like Mahatma Gandhi is evil. But even these days, the poets

cannot make such a tall claim. At times, modern verses are spiked with so much vulgarity that one doesn't know what is moral any more.

In the Indian sub-continent, there was a time when poets and politicians, especially the left-leaning ones, not only observed the same dress code (soiled, wrinkled, etc) but also looked equally unkempt-long hair, shaggy beard, emaciated body, and a face hardened by struggle and privation. Many of them died of consumptive diseases, hounded by police for political reasons. They were prisoners of conscience, their zeal fired by the dream to encompass something larger than life.

The Indian subcontinent perhaps is a unique place in the world where poets and politicians shared the common fate of stringent hardship. In England a poet like John Keats died young, but then poets are not known to have interlaced their fate so much with that of the politicians, although poets enjoyed a special place in the English hearts. The institution of poet laureate upheld for more than three centuries is a proof to that fact.

In America, on the other hand, poetry has been long regarded as unprofitable and sissy, but politicians have been fond of poets. The American presidents have invited their favourite poets for recitations on their inauguration days. For example, John Kennedy had invited Robert Frost, Jimmy Carter had invited James Dickey and so on. Ted Kennedy liked to quote from Tennyson which his brothers admired and Senator Eugene McCarthy tried his hands at writing verses.

Throughout history poetry and politics have come together many times in the nexus of power. Henry VIII enjoyed writing verses whenever he wasn't busy making the lives of his wives brutish or short Mao Tse-tung, the Chinese leader, commanded the largest audience for poetry in history. Poet Leopold Senghor, former President of Senegal, and Poet Jose Sarney, former President of Brazil, are two names, which readily come to mind, who were prouder as poets than as politicians. Our own former President Hussain Muhammad Ershad was at the height of his poetic urge when he was at the peak of his

power. Then something happened to him. He lost his power to write as he lost his power to rule like a wizard bereft of his wonder machine.

If politicians have trodden the preserve of poets, poets have also returned the favour from time to time. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, WH Auden, and many of our own poets have hailed or raged against kings and governments. Which tells us that somewhere in their protean conflicts, poets and politicians are connected. Aristotle insisted that poetry must give an imaginary picture of life, not a string of facts. Politicians must paint a vision of life, but that with the brush of facts. Poetry converges with politics on the facts of life, their divergence coming when the former struggles to capture these facts while the latter tries to conceal them.

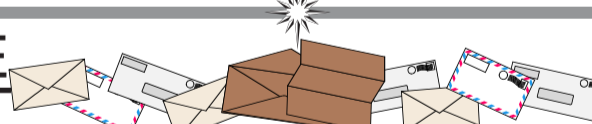
There is a Chinese legend, which tells how an evil tune had power to draw eight black birds from the south to dance on the fence of Duke Ping of Chin, while a tempest wrecked his palace. Poetry, for the information of those who didn't know, had its early association with

magic and religion, its power embedded in the tune of music. But with the growth of satire, lyric and elegy, poetry drifted from music around the 7th century BC, which in the course of centuries has led from sung ballad to chanted epic; then to ordinary recitation; then to the written word.

As poetry transformed in medium, poets transformed in moods. Etymology makes a poet a 'hostage' (though another interpretation has his title as an old dialect word for 'blind'). In the ancient time poets like Homer, Democod and Thamyris were blind. But still ancient poets were involved in the lives of their fellow men besides writing verses. Marathon, not poetry, was all that Aeschylus felt worth record on his tomb. It was Alexandria and the Roman Empire that bred the study-poets. Until the times of Chaucer, Wyatt and Milton, poets were still involved in the active world, although at a diminished rate. Since Dryden's days poets started to withdraw themselves from the worldly adventures, except for the amorous kinds.

The withdrawal seemed complete as I stood before the stage in the Book Fair in Bangla Academy last week, and listened to poets giving recitations. They dealt with love, language, patriotism, martyrs and wars, but none said anything to capture tensions of our times. John Kennedy said that when power corrupted, poetry cleansed. If that is true, then politicians in a country are as good as its poets. God, that is the last thing we want to believe.

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



PHOTORIAL

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Even the BGMEA?



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

It was chaos at Karwan Bazar yesterday morning. In a massive traffic jam, even pedestrians had a hard time moving. And the reason? The BGMEA elections were underway and without a thought for the inconvenience they would cause, the BGMEA coolly put up no less than four structures, encroaching into the public thoroughfare. When reputed institutions show little respect for the law, or the public, how can traffic conditions ever improve?

Louis Kahn centenary

February 20, 2001 was architect Louis I. Kahn's 100th birth anniversary. In addition to his contribution to world architecture, Kahn is specially remembered for his seminal work at Dhaka, the National Assembly Complex. This design is now recognised as one of the greatest works in architecture ever and one of the finest in the 20th century. Kahn's design in Dhaka inspired architects around the world to design spaces rich in philosophical content and spirituality. In Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Louis Kahn has not only given us a symbol of national pride, but also an urban space that provides Dhaka dwellers with a breath of freshness. Let us hope that one day we have democracy produced and practiced within parliament, so that the philosophical content in Kahn's design proves meaningful for us as a nation

Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury
Dhaka

Outrage at Sharon

Ariel Sharon, the new prime minister of Israel, was Israel's minister of defense in September 1982, during Israel's invasion of Lebanon, when the massacre of some 3,000 Palestinian women and children took place in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps just outside Beirut. The Palestinian fighters had evacu-

ated the camps, leaving their women and children behind, after being assured by the U.S. government of Ronald Reagan that their families would be safe. The Israelis surrounded the camps with their tanks so no one could escape and sent in the butchers. For two days they kept the camps sealed while the slaughter went on. They kept the camps illuminated with flares at night to assist the murder squads. That was Ariel Sharon's work.

This massacre earned Sharon the nickname "Butcher of Beirut". In the outcry that followed, he was forced to resign as defense minister and leave politics for a while. This time, he has come back by deliberately provoking violence in the region. Last year, when peace negotiations had reached an impasse, he marched up to Jerusalem's Temple Mount with a large contingent of armed bodyguards who chased away Muslim worshippers. Palestinian anger predictably erupted in violence. Barak could not restore order, and lost the elections to Sharon. But no one is outraged. Where is the outrage among the politicians who were wagging their fingers at Jörg Haider a little over a year ago?

Concerned
Dhaka
Seize higher moral

party in power to rise above petty party and personal vendettas and search untriflingly for the compromise solution. The people expect the ruling party to put the interests of the nation above all. By declaring the elections ahead of time, restoring law and order and disciplining party members who advocate violence and intimidation, the ruling party can seize the moral high ground. The people are not stupid. They will recognize this and reward it. Similarly, this is an opportunity for the opposition to prove that this is not just a power struggle but a movement to establish democratic rights and norms in this country. They should take up the challenge thrown down by the PM and return to parliament to demand elections, thereby forcing the ruling party to live up to its word. The opposition can then claim to have right on their side and people will recognize and reward this. It remains to be seen which party has the courage and moral rectitude to actually seize this much needed moral higher ground.

I am convinced that the reward for this choice will be a clear and overwhelming mandate from the people to lead us into the next millennium. At least I know that they will have my vote.

Syed Nasim Manzur
Dhaka

ground!

As a politically neutral person, I cannot help but feel that both the major political parties hold the people in total contempt. How else can one reconcile oneself to the Opposition's continued infliction of the accursed hartals on a population that is completely opposed to them, or the blatant armed hooliganism unleashed by the ruling party, as revealed through front page photos of an Awami League MP surrounded by mercenary armed killers?

The total disregard of the opposition to the sufferings caused to the people by these forced hartals, not to mention the incalculable damage to the economy, is an insult to the will of the people they claim to represent. Equally reprehensible is the refusal of the ruling party to acknowledge the reign of terror unleashed by extreme factions and criminal offspring of the party.

The people wish to see the rule of law, an effective police force that is allowed to function without political interference, a peaceful transition of power, a chance to let the institutions of democracy flourish and most of all, a chance to get on with their lives. As a citizen of this country I implore both the parties to choose the higher moral ground, available to both, if they so wish.

The onus has to be upon the