

## Rein in egos or we perish

Proposed hartal will further fuel confrontation

HERE is no disagreement between the opposition and ruling parties on the fundamental principle of holding the next general election before the expiry of the present government's term. Yet, on details, they have locked their horns and have been firing vituperative salvos against one another with such ferocity that the baby itself risks being thrown with the soiled bath water. Looking at the irresponsibility on both sides people wonder whether the welfare of the country or good of the people have any place in their minds.

To Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's announcement of an indicative date, viz. 'after April 17' for transfer of power to a caretaker government the opposition has issued a deadline for the government to 'quit' on or before March 30. The time-lag between the two potentially negotiable positions is 18 days only. But look, what has been made about this wafer-thin difference of dates! Khaleda Zia calls it an 'ultimatum', which if not responded to in kind by the government's voluntary exit in a week's time, there will be a non-stop country wide hartal on April 1 and 2 to bring it about, she has vowed. As if that was not enough, street protests have been planned between March 23 and 29 to pressure the government into yielding. The 'unreality' charade reels further on, like for instance, civil servants are being asked to desert the government and join the opposition with donors being advised not to sanction fresh loans or disburse fund for the government.

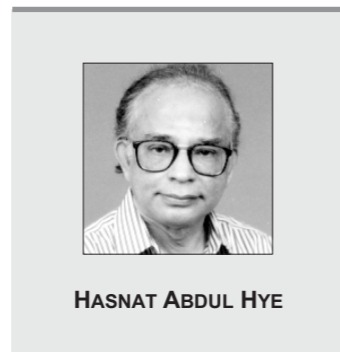
At the other extreme, reacting to the opposition ultimatum, two influential ruling party ministers Tofail Ahmed and Mohammad Nasim have put it to sword saying that the government 'would not transfer power even an hour before its end of term on July 13.'

We would like to know from Begum Zia why did not she simply re-phrase her ultimatum to say that she wanted the government to bring forward its date for power-transfer from April 17? In the fitness of things, Khaleda Zia could also ask the government to give a precise date, instead of a quick-silver one, for its relinquishment of charge in favour of the next caretaker government. What is the big deal about 18 days that both sides could not think of striking a compromise to curtail it in enlightened mutual interest and thereby spare the nation and unexpected dose of tantrums?

The government party has no less a share of the blame for the turn of events. It has dragged its feet on Hasina's initial statement that she would be ready for elections on a date of the opposition's preference and gave mixed signals about the government's sincerity. The dates that the government gave have been ambiguous so that a message of uncertainty would have been read into them. Regrettably the PM, as if as an after-thought, added several untenable conditions to her early election offer which further alienated the opposition. There have been some adverse signals, such as the filing of cases against opposition leaders, including Begum Zia herself, which were not the stuff of which a congenial pre-electoral environment is made. The way the threat of cases has been played in and out against opposition leaders has been a measure of the abuse of state power that does not rhyme with any pre-election mood of expectancy.

**In a word, we demur at the shortsighted politics across the political divide. We echo the disgust of the nation over the unending ego-trips of the major political leaders and consequently their appalling failure in doing the simple things right about national elections. The electorate have done nothing wrong to deserve the same from them.**

## The reunion in Dhaka



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

IT was a pleasant surprise, to say the least. I did not expect the call, not to speak of the invitation. He had come on a very short visit to Bangladesh as part of the whistle-stop trip in South Asia. He would spend barely two days in Dhaka and his schedule was already drawn up tightly around official events. There was no time or room for social or personal engagements. So, I let myself be content with news on his visit in the media. But my mind was on the edge, as it happens with premonition for the unexpected.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's South Asia trip took him first to Pakistan where he was seized with internationally hot issues like the nuclear arms race, Kashmir dispute and the Taliban. If on Kashmir, there was only a glimmer of hope through resumption of bilateral talks, the nuclear stand-off between the two arch-enemies and the intransigence of the Taliban over the Buddhist icons must have dismayed and perturbed him greatly. It was not farfetched to assume that he left Pakistan with mixed feelings of dormant hope and dark foreboding. In Nepal, with no short fuse on a powder keg, he had a different context. Availing of the occasion he spoke of regional co-operation, particularly through SAARC. Even as he spoke he could not have been oblivious of the regional conflicts that have stymied

progress in this regard. But being at the headquarters of the SAARC he could wax optimistic about the spirit of co-operation. It is his job and mission to be hopeful even when despair is overwhelming.

From Nepal Kofi Annan came to Bangladesh, where, on the basis of published itinerary, his visit was going to be very hectic. The programme drawn up covered only the public domain. Either through oversight or for lack of time there was no meeting with the civil society or visits to see their programmes. His reference to the achievements of civil society and empowerment of women during the presentation on Sustainable Development revealed that he is fully aware of their role. I followed Kofi Annan's programme in Bangladesh with great interest and a certain sense of excitement. It soon became certain that I would not have the chance to see him even from a distance during this visit. So I wrote a note welcoming him to Bangladesh and conveying my regards and I sent it to his hotel address. I was not sure that the note would reach his hand.

I was still in bed watching cricket test match taking place down under when I was informed that the personal secretary to the Secretary General Kofi Annan was on the phone. I thought that acknowledgement of receipt and thanks would be conveyed for my note. When the private secretary told me that the Secretary General and his wife would like to meet me and my wife at 7.30 in the evening of that day in his hotel suite I was both thrilled and stunned. How could he squeeze time from his overcrowded schedule to see me? For the second time in forty years I became convinced of the sincerity and warmth of feelings

of the man who is now the senior most international civil servant and a world figure. There is no doubt that he possesses those rare qualities of head and heart that make a man great and extra-ordinary. For them nothing or no one is too small and insignificant.

In the fall of 1995 I went to attend a seminar on investment in New York and was staying in Plaza Hotel. While going through the newspaper I came across the name Kofi Annan, Under Secretary General of the UN, who was dealing with the Bosnia crisis. The name did not immediately ring a bell but made me mull over it. Distant past came rushing in broken images and I tried hard to piece them together. Then memory began to unfold cohering images, names and dates. The name Kofi Annan took on a hazy shape in association with time, events and place. But it was still nothing more than a part of a phantasmagoria and I could not be sure. Thirty-five years was a long time and my memory did not take any 'prisoner' as it is my wont to let

bygone be bygone. Before leaving for the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the exhibition on Impressionism I requested my diplomat nephew to find out if Kofi Annan was from Ghana and if he was whether he remembered "Abdul" from former East Pakistan. (That was how I was known to my foreign friends during my student days in America in 1960-61). It was nothing more than a sudden impulse and somewhat of an idle curiosity. I did not expect any development as a follow-up to my request. When I returned after three hours I found a telephone message from my nephew waiting for me in the hotel. The message said: "Yes, Kofi Annan is from Ghana. He remembers you and would like to see you at four o'clock today in his office." I was overtaken by joy and surprise, the first at my discovery and the second by his invitation. It strained my credulity that a man with a regional crisis on his hand would want to see me at such a short notice only for old time's sake.

When we met at his office I found

that his hair had turned gray and he was sporting a small beard. Other than those there was little change in his appearance and manners. He looked very calm and well poised. It was as if he had expected the meeting to take place as a matter of course. If there was any excitement his face or voice did not show any sign. The long years in international diplomacy had definitely mellowed him. But deep down he had not changed otherwise he would not be keen to see me as soon as he heard my name. We exchanged information on ourselves and discussed about some of our old friends from the class of 1960. At the end of our meeting as I stood up to take leave he invited me and my wife to dinner with his family. I told him that my wife was not with me and I was leaving New York that night. He smiled and said, "There is always next time." I thanked and wished him health, happiness and further progress in life. He smiled at my words and warmly shook my hand in silence. A few months later he became the Secretary General of the UN. The years in office since then have not been easy going for him. There was the Gulf War, the genocide in Rwanda, civil war in Congo and Sierra Leone, Indo-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir, the Kosovo crisis, the Afghan imbroglio, the long-standing flash point in Palestine, to mention only a few. Many of these continue to challenge the effectiveness of the UN role in maintaining peace and promoting development. He must have been on tenterhooks all through and may even have felt frustrated at times, chafing under various limitations.

As I sat by his side in the hotel suite in Dhaka I had all sympathy for

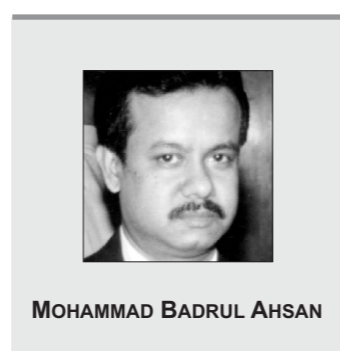
the worry and tension that my friend, the Secretary General, must have experienced and is still going through. When I mentioned about the hectic programme during this trip he wearily nodded his head in agreement. His voice had become softer and his manner gentler. Soon his wife joined us. She greeted my wife and touched with appreciation the muslin tablecloth that we had brought from Arong. When I told her that it was my second meeting with Kofi Annan in forty years she smiled and asked, "Did you have fun while studying in the US?" Kofi and myself looked at each other with glint in our eyes. We talked about our children and ourselves for a while. Kofi suddenly asked, "Have you joined politics? It has become the second career for civil servants in many countries." I replied negatively and said that after thirty-five years in civil service I became a free person and was able to speak as such in my writings. He looked at the books that I presented to him and his wife and said almost in a soliloquy, "None of my children has become a civil servant, national or international." There seemed to be a whiff of relief and consolation in his words.

Kofi Annan looked at his watch and I knew he was thinking of their next programme, the dinner at eight o'clock. We thanked him and his wife and wished that they would be able to come again to Bangladesh with more time. As we stood up for a group photograph he rearranged our positions saying, "Let us do it this way (photo below)." It was amazing that even small details didn't escape his attention. I thought that the picture might or might not turn out to be perfect but the brief reunion in Dhaka with my old friend and his wife would always be fresh in memory. After all, there may not be many years left to make that memory fade away.



The columnist (right) and his wife (left) with Mr and Mrs Kofi Annan during the UN Secretary General's visit to Dhaka.

## Is the American Presidency shrinking?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE most significant event to mark George W. Bush's weeks-long presidency after the inauguration was the budget speech he gave recently. In so much as he scored on the style of his delivery, its substance failed to impress many Americans. They didn't know what to believe in what was said by the first president in their recent history, whose motorcade was thrown eggs and orange peels by the bystanders on the inauguration day. Not to speak of his beleaguered victory in the most contentious presidential election in the US history, George W. Bush is also suffering from another image problem: he is eclipsed as a vicarious president in the long shadow of his illustrious father and his loyalists.

All of that is bad news for the American Presidency, which is perceived to be shrinking in the eyes of the American people. This is an

institution, which was once adorned by great names like Woodrow Wilson, the Scholar who would bring reason to politics; Herbert Hoover, the Great Engineer who would organise chaos into progress; Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Champion of the balanced budget; Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Militant Crusader; and Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator. In the wake of how this institution has been sullied by Bill Clinton, the Fornicator, who even raised scandalous dust on the trail of exiting his office with unscrupulous gifts and presidential pardons, George W. Bush is faced with the challenge of rehabilitating the office from its ignominy.

Political experts are already alarmed that the US has the lowest voter turnout in the West. Some of the reasons ascribed to it are the difficult voter-registration procedure, a large and apolitical underclass and a general contentment that makes people not even bother to vote. But there is another overriding reason, which is boredom. People are so disappointed with the nominees for President that they see no point in expending great effort to choose amongst them. US columnist Charles Krauthammer coined a term to describe this crisis of the American Presidency. He

called it presidential dwarfism, an affliction that diminished the height of the most respectable public office in the world.

From time to time, presidential candidates seemed inadequate for the job before they were elected to the office. When FDR ran for President in 1932, Walter Lippmann described him as a "highly impressionable person without a firm grasp of public affairs." John Kennedy's stature is retrospectively inflated by his martyrdom. But as a candidate he was seen as a lightweight. "There are men and there are boys," wrote Murray Kempton in 1960. "Lyndon Johnson, say of him what you will, is a man. Jack Kennedy is a boy." When FDR, ran for presidency from his wheelchair, many Americans wondered if he was ever going to become the president of the country. For a long time, Harry Truman, the haberdasher from Missouri, couldn't be taken seriously as the president of the most prosperous country in the world. But each of them left behind a legacy that not only elevated the job of Presidency to an astounding height, but also earned it an endearing place in the nation's heart. People were not just disappointed or worried when President Kennedy was killed; people wept at the loss of a

young and charismatic man, most had never even met. But then history tells that the same deep wave of emotions had swept across the country when other Presidents died in office - heroic Lincoln, debased Harding, McKinley or Garfield.

The American Presidency has been perceived by many as an oxymoron, the most powerful man who can push a button to destroy large chunks of the globe but cannot even pass his own budget. According to Richard Neustadt, Truman was contemplating in 1952 how frustrated Eisenhower would be should he win the presidency. "He will sit here," said Truman, tapping his desk, "and he will say 'Do this! Do that! And nothing will happen. Poor Ike - it won't be a bit like Army.'" Ronald Reagan enjoyed extraordinary popularity during his presidency, but when he left office he was compared with a dotting grandfather, irrelevant and ridiculed, who used to sleep through cabinet meetings.

George Bush Sr., the father of President George W. Bush, had belittled the presidency with his "read my lips" hyperbole and "read my hips" hubris, which couldn't be rescued despite the exceptional success of Operation Desert Storm in the Middle East. He was already controversial once before for foul-

mouthed Geraldine Ferraro, his Democratic opponent in the vice-presidential race. But then came the truly all-American Bill Clinton, who turned around the economy to a twenty-five-year high and served two terms in the peaks of popularity and troughs of trauma, whose image as the leader of the free world didn't measure up to that of his predecessors. His presidency never fully recovered from the bouts of scandals, although his popularity remained undiminished despite his perjury of the office. Investigators of the Monica Lewinsky affair shocked Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, the then Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, when they told him that the President was making love to the plump White House intern while discussing with him over telephone the fate of the US soldiers in Bosnia.

Of course, Bill Clinton is not the first American president who can be accused of lewdness. Thomas Jefferson consorted with a slave girl named Sally Hemmings, and Kennedy's bawdiness in the White House is now matter of records. FDR's secret liaison with his secretary is an open secret, which still oscillates in the twilight zone of American moral hesitancy. But Bill Clinton is the only president who

has publicly humiliated the office, the only president whose entire term was punctuated by scandals of his dalliance with women other than his wife.

George W. Bush Jr. has inherited an office, which is inherently saddled with an image problem. The long chain of Johnson-Nixon-Ford-Carter failures, temporarily improved by Ronald Reagan's popularity and foreign policy, has largely undermined the glory of the American presidency. Bill Clinton's era didn't sufficiently uphold the most glorious role of this presidency, which has a superman myth associated with it. He is the leader of the free world. Except for his unsuccessful bids to restore peace in the Middle East and tour of a number of East European and Asian countries, Clinton mostly confined his two terms to scandals and domestic economy.

George Bush, the new tenant in the White House, needs to salvage the dignity of his new residence and renovate the popular confidence in it. The sordid legacies of his predecessor, and his own disputed victory in the election, have instilled apathy in the minds of people towards the institution of presidency. If a man is as good as his deeds, George Bush will be as good as his presidency. The indifference to his budget speech was only an indication that if that didn't happen, both would be shrinking.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Awards and accolades

I don't understand how our Prime Minister qualifies to obtain a UNESCO peace award? What equips her to attain awards or degrees one after another? How do her personal achievements help the common people of the poorest country in the world? Peace is long gone and no matter how many awards she achieves, it will not bring sanity back in the country.

A Ahmed  
Dhaka

### Taliban atrocity

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan appears totally unreasonable. The destruction of ancient Buddhist statues in that country is atrocious and condemnable. The existence of ancient Buddhist idols and monuments does not slight the Islamic religion. As a matter of fact, the presence of the two huge rock-cut Buddhas at Bamiyan along with a rich collection of pre-Islamic artifacts, particularly belonging to the Gandhara school, represent Afghanistan's glorious ancient culture and civilization. Indian Muslim scholar Asghar Ali Engineer in a recent write-up maintains that though Islam does not permit idol worship, these statues in Afghanistan are not worshipped by the Muslims. Moreover innumerable Muslim shrines all over the world visit heritage statues, shrines and mausoleums. By its extremist religious policies,

the Taliban is indulging in the worst form of cultural vandalism and doing a great disservice to Islam.

Robert Kader  
Chittagong

### Secretive medical doctors

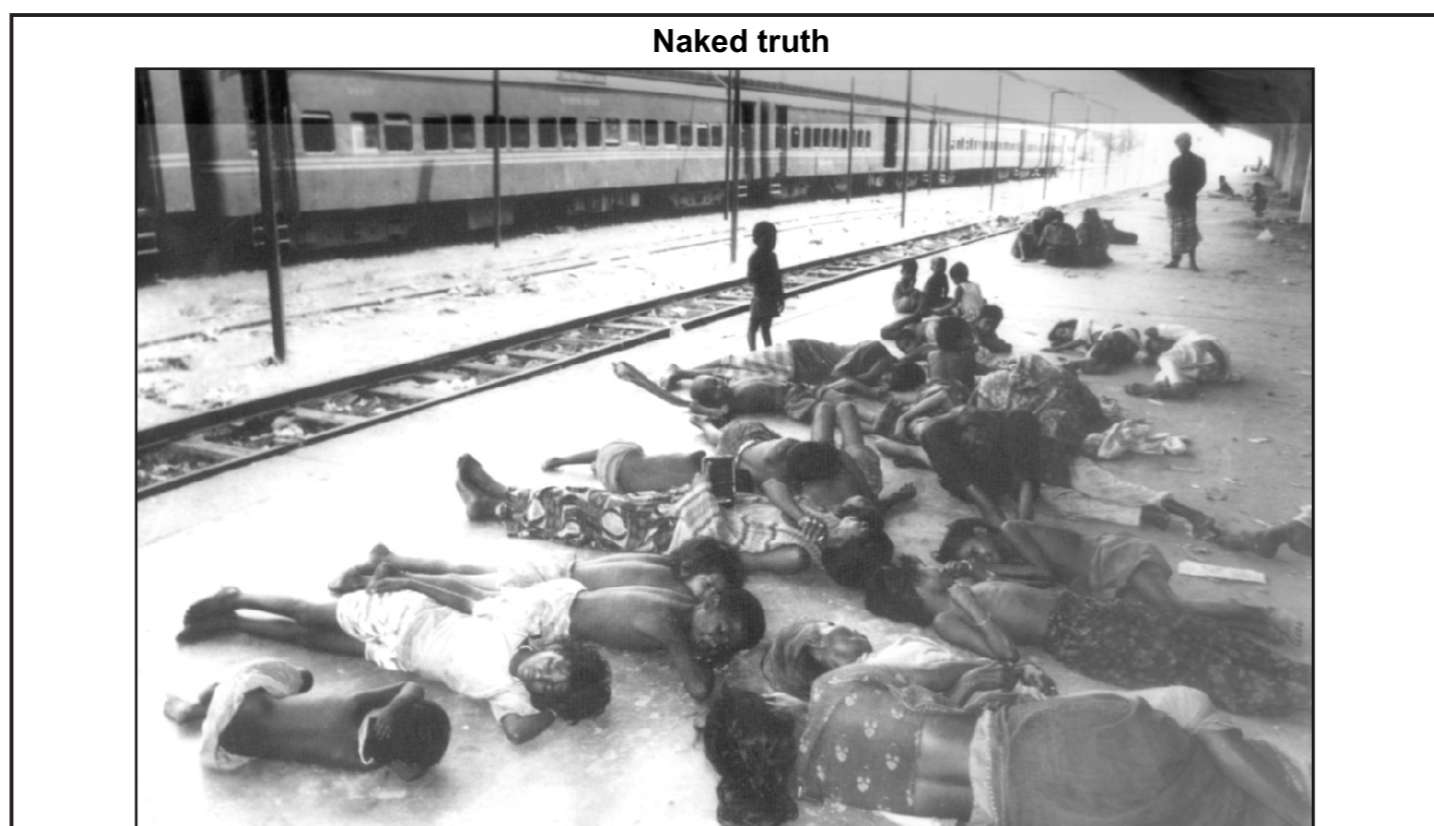
Although most allopathic doctors issue written prescriptions, I have been to a pharmacy in a bazaar where an old man sits and gives allopathic medicine to patients without a written prescription. Generally, the prescriptions have no connection with diagnosis and sometimes even the blood pressure is not noted for reference. The homeopath doctors are worse. They do not give anything in writing, only small phials without any label, and do not tell the patients what they have prescribed and why. No document or personal file is maintained. Queries from patients are brushed aside. Many doctors have no cubicle for privacy to examine and talk to patients. Why should others listen to the patient-doctor conversation? Why are such doctors not regulated by the authorities; and what is the function of the medical associations? The Health Ministry may clarify the strange doctor culture prevailing.

A Citizen  
Dhaka

### Political hate cam-

## 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.



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Destitute women and children resting under the shade at Kamapur Station on a scorching summer day. These homeless people are susceptible to petty crime, drugs, panhandling and prostitution. The authorities have ignored their plight. Occasionally they have been evicted and driven to places where they are once again faced with eviction. Where should they go? We urge the authorities to mount a joint initiative to relocate and rehabilitate Dhaka's destitute people.

### paign

The hate campaign between the two major political parties is reaching absurd proportions. What are the citizens learning from the process and the standards set by the political leadership? The politicians are causing irreparable damage to society and such unscrupulous politicians do not deserve to be voted into power.

What has happened to the universally accepted noble code and philosophy of life to be taught in the educational institutions? University teachers are reported to be engaged heavily in consultancy and earning an income through dubious means; while cheating in examinations has become a profitable business. There is moral degradation in every sector, led by political conduct (or misconduct). Is politics the root of all evil?

The misuse of power and influence has reached the point of no return. Only a combined civil movement can wipe out the sinful acts, and prove a deterrent to bring back good politics. Who will deliver us from evil politics? Let the coming elections be an open fight between the collective forces of good and evil and let it replace the lingering misery and sinful existence.

A Frustrated Citizen  
Dhaka

### Retrofit the nation

It was rather surprising to learn that the Bangladesh National Building

Code (1993) has not yet been made mandatory (S M Kamaluddin, Opinion, March 18). Perhaps the bureaucracy is waiting for a 7-plus quake (or shake-up) to be reminded of the perilous situation.

Retrofitting is a huge exercise. First the paper work, terms of reference, or TR, then the project planning, followed by the budget allocation for the physical work to start. How many owners of the buildings have the resources and the mental to go for it, not to speak of the readiness of the insurance sector to make some money in this new booming business?

Are we prepared to sit down and do some home-work with the hard realities of life, whether it is the building of buildings, or the building of the nation? We have been beating about the bush for many years. It is time to count the liabilities, and retrofit the whole nation!

Alif Zabr  
Dhaka

### Track for rickshaws

Recently the government has constructed separate tracks for non-motorised vehicles. But the rickshawpullers don't abide by the rules. As they are illiterate, they cannot comprehend the importance of such rules. Traffic police should be deployed in order to put pressure on them to follow the rules.

Shoab Mahmud  
Dhanmohi, Dhaka