

PM's surprising conditions

Hopes for early polls dashed

WE are back to square one. The Prime Minister's hard-line statement laying down new conditions on the Opposition as a prerequisite for early elections has effectively thrown cold water on the possibility of a breakthrough in the current political impasse.

We are surprised that Sheikh Hasina should choose to backtrack on a path that she, herself, had voluntarily embarked upon several weeks ago.

It must be remembered that although the Opposition has been demanding polls for nearly two years, constitutionally it does not have the right to do so. Early polls could only be held if the ruling party were to decide to relinquish power before expiry of its term. When the Prime Minister, of her own accord, offered to hold elections whenever the Opposition wanted, she brought the prospect of early polls into the national agenda. The Leader of the Opposition then stated that elections should be held by end of May. The Prime Minister responded by stating that her government would step down after April 17th and elections would be held by June 12th. The Opposition's reaction was initially negative but later, upon meeting the President, it was clear that there was room for flexibility in its stance. An agreement between the two sides was possible and maybe even imminent.

Unfortunately, the Prime Minister has dashed these hopes. She has reversed a commitment that she had made not to the Opposition, but to the people, that she would hold early polls. Once again, we must state that this commitment came voluntarily. There was no compulsion on the Prime Minister to come up with the offer of early polls. But having made the offer, the least that this nation would expect from her is that she would stand by her commitment.

She has not only gone back on her words, she has done so in a manner which is shocking, to say the least. Using language that does not become a national leader, she has demanded that the Opposition should concede but also do so in a most demeaning and degrading form. Resorting to such highly provocative language is unworthy of the high office of the Prime Minister. It can be construed not only as a deliberate attempt to insult her opponent, but also to increase the animosity already present and throw the political process into a further spiral of challenges and counter-challenges. In the future, people will find it difficult to believe the statements she makes.

As for the Opposition's 60-hour continuous hartal, we vehemently oppose it on the grounds that they have no right to punish the people for a demand which has no constitutional basis.

Death on highway, again

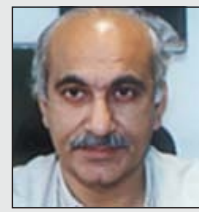
When will the authorities wake up?

FRIDAY'S early morning tragedy on the Sherpur-Mymensingh highway, which killed 20 and left 25 others injured, makes us wonder once again how many more deaths it would take the authorities to wake up to the fact that the country's entire transport network, inland waterways included, has virtually become a death trap. How long would they keep their eyes closed to the reality that making a trip unscathed is an exception rather than the rule. Media reports point at two criminal violations that led to the fatal consequence - the truck was overloaded and the trucker was too sleepy to drive properly. The fact that the 45 day-labourers paid for the fatal ride makes the whole incident even more excruciating. They were in a hurry to get back home and the trucker, transporting cement, wanted to make some extra money - perfect ingredients for a disaster.

The authorities would definitely like to wash their hands off the whole affair by putting the blame on the faulty vehicle or the criminal negligence of the driver. However, we would like to remind them that it is primarily inefficiency and gross negligence on their part that actually brought about the tragedy for so many people and their families. Overloaded vehicles are a familiar sight on the highways. But what have the regulatory, monitoring and enforcement authorities done about it? Also, what about the faulty trucks, buses and other motorised means of transport? Aren't these playing in complete violation of traffic rules and regulations?

The authorities must own up to the responsibility for the tragic deaths taking place at one place or the other across the country. Rate of fatalities from road accidents in Bangladesh is probably one of the highest in the world now. Still, road safety management languishes at the bottom in the priority list of the people at the helm. If it isn't criminal, we wonder what is.

The emperor's logic



M.J. AKBAR

THE first command issued by Sultan Muhammad Salim on ascending the throne of Agra at the age of 38 in 1605 was, to quote the Jahangirnama, "to have a chain of justice hung so that if those charged with administering the courts were slack or negligent in rendering justice to the downtrodden, those who had suffered injustice could have recourse to the chain and pull it so that the sound would cause awareness". It is true that Dilip Kumar made Salim more synonymous with Anarkali than good administration, but for nearly four hundred years now the downtrodden have measured their rulers on the scales of "Jahangiri justice". (Mughal-e-Azam changed more than one reputation, but that is another story.)

If you placed the Congress and the BJP on either side of those scales now, the balance would be even. That adds up to bad news for both. The BJP is now considered as corrupt as the Congress. Just in case memories of Congress past were fading the government resurrected the case against Mrs Sonia Gandhi's personal secretary, V. George, who apparently entered Bangaru Laxman's dollar-economy as far back as some ten years ago.

Four C's control the image of Indian politics: Corruption, Communalism, Compromise and Criminalisation. Once the Congress had monopoly rights in the first category, and the BJP in the second while both, along with all other parties, used compromise and criminals as and when required in elections. It has evened out now. Everyone is everything.

How do you recognise a political

party falling off the pedestal? Watch the eyes of its spokesmen when they step out to defend their turf on television. Since they are all, or generally, intelligent people, they produce reasonable sound-bites. Pramod Mahajan, for instance, will come up with a terrific line pointing out that you can bring a government down by either voting against it in Parliament or defeating it in an election, but not by shouting against it on the streets. (Mr Mahajan obviously has no memory at all of what he did when he was out of power

conspiracy. That's the rule when the stink stretches across the party divide: the cash in your hand is corruption; the dollar found in mine is a conspiracy. And my scam is smaller than yours.

So far, mobile phones used to be the only objects about which men would brag that they had the smallest. Scams have joined the cellphones.

Every investigation needs a medium: the medium is the message. Tehelka had the story, but Zee News had the power. Television

privilege of a subtle difference. The government was in a crisis then; Atal Behari Vajpayee had already risen above it, as was evident when a now-forgotten chief minister of Orissa forced him into an election with his single disputed vote. There was palpable anger in the country that a good man had been forced out of office by the volatility of partisan politics. Paradoxically the worst moment of Mr Vajpayee's tenure came at a time when his government was not threatened: on the day he and his party lost all five Assem-

blishments for peace through Lahore. More simply put, he used his government to govern. Indians, tired of the stagnation and dithering of the previous years, were galvanised. When the people wanted Mr Vajpayee out, the Opposition was not ready. When the Opposition wanted him out, the people were not ready. A weak Prime Minister would have floundered during Kargil; Mr Vajpayee flowered.

We will see whether he flounders or flowers in the struggle to recover his government's credibility. His real

nothing. Rajiv Gandhi may have lost the elections of 1989 because of Bofors, but he never lost the crowd. Mr Vajpayee has to do things that are not on his agenda at the moment. He has to reshape his government, bring in fresh faces untouched by the self-congratulatory hypocrisy or unwarranted arrogance that became symptomatic of so many of those who prospered under his protection. He has to patch up cracked confidence by a series of policy measures that indicate that there is still a government which believes in an agenda. There is a serious economic problem staring at rural India an impending famine in many parts about which the government has done a whole deal of nothing. Pre-emptive action is needed immediately. If all we get at the rallies is stupid rallery at imagined conspiracies, the hot air of bogus speeches will be lost in a simmering summer. The season is changing.

Oratory is a pointless weapon in a summer storm. The Prime Minister needs to discover a will that he has not shown so far in the handling of this crisis. He does not have as much time as he thinks.

There was no television during Jahangir's rule, and all elections were determined by the sword, but you can bet your bottom dollar that there were scams. Jahangir is considerate enough to name more than a few in his superb Jahangirnama. If he retains a place in the popular imagination, it is because he understood the art of governance. You only have to read the twelve edicts with which he began his rule to appreciate this. One of the less familiar, and most striking, paintings of his time is an opaque watercolour by Abul Hasan. It shows a resplendent emperor shooting an arrow into the eye of an old and evil demon. The painting is called Emperor Jahangir Triumphant over Poverty.

Some things do not change over centuries and systems. Emperors and democrats must live by the same logic.



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against all non-BJP governments.) A brilliant lawyer like Arun Jaitley will mine the furrows of hundreds of pages of transcripts and statements to shower the confetti of confusion over allegations. How much more fun Arun Jaitley would have had if the Tehelka tapes had caught a Congress president looking pontifically at a piece of paper while a lakh of rupees slipped across his table and into a drawer. I can hear the joke at which Arun would have roared: was this money for party funds or whisky-party funds ha ha ha ha! Now there is a hollow darkness in the eyes, and a thin, mobile line of worry on the forehead that tells the masked story. You can tell when a politician believes in a vigorous attack, and when he grieves in an artificial defence. S. Jaipal Reddy, who is risking a lifetime of credibility as spokesman for an unfamiliar Congress, has a twinkle in his eyes and a firm timber in his voice when he launches into the Tehelka tapes. He can barely hide his embarrassment when he is forced to describe V. George as a victim of some

gave the facts their impact. Two weeks ago the government of Atal Behari Vajpayee was a bull; today it is a bear. Its value in every home with a television set, and every teashop with a raconteur is dribbling down. That much is certain. What happens next?

The government is not going to collapse in a hurry. It did not during the Bofors allegations, and it will not now. Moreover, it simply does not make enough sense to most MPs to replace Atal Behari Vajpayee with Sonia Gandhi (or, worse, to exchange Brajesh Mishra for V. George). The Prime Minister is treating this as a wake-up call rather than a death knell. His response is to turn this into a political battle, into the politics of the normal. I presume he appreciates his disadvantage. The mud on the BJP face is fresh, while the mud on the Congress visage is caked and blurred into the features.

When was the last time that Atal Behari Vajpayee was in a crisis? The easy answer is when his government fell in 1999. Permit me the

problem is that this time the enemy is within. It is difficult to be credible in the war against palpable, visible, videotaped corruption with George Fernandes scratching your elbow and Bangaru Laxman threatening to break his silence the moment you have stopped speaking. By accepting Mr Fernandes' resignation and retaining him in the team, Mr Vajpayee put some space between himself and his former defence minister but no distance. The arguments that have been used to protect personal friends like Brajesh Mishra pale, whatever their merits, beside hours of film showing middlemen strutting through the defence minister's residence.

The people are certain that this government is corrupt. They do not need any court of enquiry to deliver a verdict. They saw the verdict with their eyes. Mr Vajpayee has to offer much more than oratory. There is a view bordering on conviction that alliance rallies will recover the initiative lost in the exposé. People will come to the rallies, they will hear everything and listen to

ble elections in the autumn of 1998. The BJP was wiped out under the leadership of its declared hero, by a Congress recovering from the Sitaram Kesri-Sonia Gandhi swap. Congressmen rushed to bend before the new Indira Gandhi, who now could do no wrong. It is entirely logical that Sonia Gandhi could do nothing right from the moment when the Congress began to believe that she could do no wrong.

During that winter of discontent, while Jayalalitha played cat to the BJP mouse, and Sonia Gandhi dithered in her palace because her trusted coterie told her that Uttar Pradesh was not yet ready (it still isn't ready for the Congress, incidentally), Mr Vajpayee was as vulnerable as he is ever going to be, politically. Any political leader with a feel for the jugular would have gone for it then.

Mr Vajpayee got that most precious of political assets, time. He crafted his return to public affection with a bold pincer: dramatic economic reforms through the Budget of Yashwant Sinha, and a powerful

In defence of economists



DR. A. R. CHOWDHURY

for instance, the case of John Sutton, professor of economics at the London School of Economics. In his recently-published short and clever book, "Marshall's Tendencies: What Can Economists Know?", Sutton asks economists to review the way they have conducted business for the past six decades.

Sutton's book has a problem with the standard paradigm used in applied economics. The first part of the book describes how this platform - on which economists com-

paratively doubted whether a complete yet simple model could capture the operation of an economy. They wondered whether the economy didn't consist of too many factors - some occasional but overwhelming in their influence and some difficult, if not impossible, to measure.

Sutton wonders the same. "What if there are variables that we cannot measure, proxy or control for, but which exert a large and systematic influence on outcomes?" He investi-

gates these questions in the second part of the book. His conclusion is that economists can't know much. His clinching argument is that if the standard paradigm were generally worthy then economics would have more dramatic progress in imitating the workings of the economy over the last six decades than it has.

orthodox models of the Keynesian school flopped. It was more than handy to be able to turn to the heterodox models of the rational expectations school for explanations of the Keynesian failure.

As for their assumptions, economists are doing the best they can with a bad hand. Economic models deal with human activity, and human activity does not accommodate itself to rich but precise quantitative models. Heck, economists cannot even perform controlled experiments on the level that chemists can. And finally, the math may indeed be esoteric to the untutored, but it also permits the clearest expression of hypotheses and, thus, the sharpest tests of them.

More important, Sutton's criticism of economics - that its models don't work - begs the question. If we accept his argument that events are seriously influenced by factors that cannot be known or measured then where are we? If we retreat to the notion that some models work very well some of the time, we are still ahead of the game - we know what works. And even if we retreat further to the notion that most models don't work most of the time, we are still ahead of the game - we know what doesn't work. Surely that's better than knowing nothing all of the time.



Either economists tell you something perfectly obvious: if prices go down, you will buy more. Or they don't tell you anything worth knowing: if the central bank lowers interest rates then inflation rate will either increase or decrease, depending on the circumstances.

bine formal theoretical models with chunks of empirical data to examine how the world works - came into being. It got its start with Alfred Marshall, the British economist who laid the foundation for neo-classical economics. His "Principle of Economics" was published in 1890 and dominated the field for at least half a

vague economic mechanisms from a pool of data. Even so, he was certain that the interplay between theory and evidence would in fact provide these explanations.

Sutton also notes that there were sceptics to the development of these paradigms, including John Keynes and Friedrich Hayek. They

Defenders of economists and economics, on the other hand, can make credible answers to each of these objections. Disputes are signs that the profession is healthy and open to advance. Indeed, the presence of competing schools is deeply helpful. When, in the 1970s, the

are these events without officially shutting down everything. To make things even worse recently we have gone for a two-day weekend. Before taking such serious decisions, we should have done research on it. I am sure we did not do that instead it was done whimsically. In how many other countries are bank and post offices closed for two days every week? Even our print media enjoys all the national holidays. These are not trivial issues. We must understand them and we must give proper and sufficient thought to these matters. Hope the concerned authorities will pay due attention.

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

Taliban act

Following the Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan, some Muslim countries appear to believe that all Muslims have to expiate a collective sense of guilt. The matter has been certainly blown out of proportion and taken in the context of confession of a collective sin. Statues play no important role in Islamic values therefore their existence and absence are quintessentially equal. And if we talk about preserving human heritage its horizon changes into a collective responsibility of all nations including the UN and the US. However, saving a lifeless statue is a collective human responsibility and saving real Afghan lives is not? Who cared for the millions of Afghan old, women and children refugees who died in the last few years as a direct consequence of the UN sanctions? They were never a headache for the UN or US.

To sing and respect one's national anthem should be a matter of pride for every citizen. But it is unfortunate that in our country a large section of people think that it is not worthy of serious attention.

At the end of the whole day TV programmes, our national anthem is sung along with displaying of the national flag. This, I feel, is not necessary, since at that late hour nobody keeps the TV on. The same thing happens in case of radio also. Similarly, at cinema halls, before a cinema is shown on the big screen, our national anthem is played. I have noticed that proper respect is not shown when national anthem is played. People are found talking and some are even found sitting and eating while the anthem is played.

I have visited number of countries and nowhere did I see people showing disrespect to their national anthem. I was particularly impressed with the Philippines. In the Philippines, before the commencement of any official occasion, people assembled to sing their national anthem. It is really pleasant to observe that every class of people knows how to respect and sing their national anthem. If it can be practised in the Philippines, why can't it be in Bangladesh? The national anthem could be sung before the commencement of public meetings or rallies. The national anthem should also be sung and the national flag should be hoisted in all the educational institutions and it should be made compulsory.

Anika Mariam Ahmed
Banglomot, Dhak

F. Islam

Toronto, Canada

National anthem

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.

Hazardous to health



THIS PHOTORIAL HAS BEEN SENT BY AZIZ AMIRUL, FROM UTTARA. WE WOULD LIKE MORE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OUR READERS. PLEASE SEND US YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR PHOTORIAL.

Like this vendor in Karwan Bazar, thousands of similar mobile sellers of so-called herbal and self-invented medicine and potions roam all over the country. These profit-seekers lure illiterate and poor clients with their attractive speeches and slogans. Often harmful products mixed with deadly chemicals are prescribed and sold to unaware and innocent buyers. Shouldn't the Health Ministry do something to stop such violations?

Frustrating state

It is a matter of utter frustration that nowadays, students believe that cheating and copying in examinations are their right and they should be allowed to cheat uninterrupted. What is all the more frustrating that even guardians and teachers help the students in cheating and don't consider it a crime. If this is the state of our future generation, then we are in real trouble. If the authorities don't take strict steps to curb such malpractice the country will soon be doomed.

Anilla Ahmed
Gulshan, Dhaka

Are we holiday lovers?

As a nation we just love holidays and perhaps a little too much. Maybe in the near future we may appear in the Guinness Book of Records as holiday mongers of the world. One does not have to go far to search for evidence. Just count the number of national holidays in the calendar (which is even worse in the academic arena). But can we afford to enjoy so many holidays? Shouldn't we sort out our priorities first?

Celebrating somebody's birthday or death anniversary by shutting down everything does not make sense since the nation's interest come first. We can still celebrate

Dr. M. K. Hassan
Berlina

Deteriorating law and order situation

Last few years, the law and order situation in this country has deteriorated alarmingly. Every day we come to learn about crimes of all sorts like murder, rape, acid throwing and so on. Needless to say, presently people have gone astray and they don't care about anything. But isn't there anyone to control this vandalism? Isn't there any law existing in the country? Isn't there a way we could lead a peaceful life?

Mujibul Haque
Sobhanbag, Dhaka