

Price of modernisation Sanctity of Lalon's shrine at stake

WHEN construction of a modern complex, including a 500-seat auditorium and a four-storey administrative building, on the premises of Lalon's shrine was first mooted, it touched off widespread controversy and concern. Civil society leaders, professionals, students and people from all walks of life vehemently opposed the plan, fearing the so-called modernisation plan would only desecrate the shrine of one of the greatest folk philosophers of the 18th century. However, the authorities couldn't care less and went ahead with the plan.

Now, as construction work there nears completion at a frenzied pace, the shrine has already got obscured in the concrete jungle. One may well apprehend the sorry consequences once the complex is inaugurated. The rush of city-based artistes coupled with high-tech musical instruments and accessories would crowd out the bards and their pristine ways. And one day the Lalon Academy, manned by self-proclaimed lovers of the work and tradition of the mystic, as many fear, would turn into a cash-cow. The sordid saga may not end there either. The Public Work Department (PWD) executive engineer, supervising the project, has already hinted that more development works are in the pipeline.

Evidently, preservation and promotion of tradition and cultural heritage is defined in the books of the authorities as building a few modern buildings equipped with all types of modern amenities. Knowingly or unknowingly, they ignore the consequences of their modernisation plans at the implementation level. The state funding for the complex on Lalon's shrine, we are sure, has benefited a handful of self-proclaimed Lalon lovers and it is they, we fear, would want the complex to spin more money. What we are looking at is, therefore, sacrifice of pristine Lalon culture and tradition to accommodate vulgar commercialisation.

The government may feel content that it has done something concrete - the pun is intended here - to preserve the heritage of the great 18th century mystic. But in reality, it has shut out people who really value Lalon's work in its totality from his shrine and put it in the care of an academy, which has not yet carried out any research in this regard.

US-China spy plane stand-off We hope issue will be diffused

THE continuing stand-off over an incident in the air between the United States and China is cause for concern. Ten days after a US surveillance aircraft collided with a Chinese fighter, the ensuing diplomatic fall-out does not show signs of abating. The Chinese are continuing to detain 24 crew members of the US plane which they impounded after it made an emergency landing on the island of Hainan in southern China. The Chinese jet and its pilot are missing. Beijing is demanding an explicit apology from the US, but Washington has declined to offer more than an expression of regret.

It is feared that the issue reflects deeper problems than an argument over semantics. Beijing's concern to protect its territorial sovereignty is matched by the ambition to expand trade with the west and push its WTO status. The US gave China most favoured trading nation status, but has also recently spoken of China not as a strategic trading partner but as a 'competitor' and has been advancing negotiations for a high-tech weapons deal with Taiwan, something that Beijing bitterly opposes. China's trading partners, especially in the European community have been noting these signals and have studiously avoided taking sides on the Hainan incident.

With the rest of the world, we are also watching with concern how the Bush administration handles the incident. The US offers a huge market for China, but it also has to recognise the growing influence of China as an emerging economy with a high degree of sensitivity about its self-esteem. The outcome of this crisis between the world's lone superpower and its most populous nation might have consequences going beyond the horizon of Sino-US relations, so that the longer it persists greater will be the damage wrought by it. It is our hope that the crew of the spy plane will be sent home safely and that Washington and China will find a mutually satisfactory solution to diffuse this potentially explosive incident.

Bangladesh politics: In the abyss of despair?



DILARA CHOUDHURY

ONCE again, Bangladesh seems to be in an intractable political situation. The country was born in 1971 in blood and fire, and rose like a phoenix from the ashes of a bitterly fought war that held the hopes and dreams of its population without whose sacrifice it could not have come into being. Tragically, those expectations remained as elusive as ever thanks to the continuing political turbulence in the country. Just look at its checkered history in terms of change of governments only. The events of 1975, 1981, 1990, and 1996 aptly demonstrate what has been termed by eminent South Asian expert Professor Morris Jones as "pendulum politics." He emphasises that politics, in such countries, even in democracies, frequently swing from one end of the pendulum to the other with intermittent periods of tenuous and shaky existence. Even during those "lulls" the system operates under the camouflage of a democratic order rather than its actual functioning. He further adds that in order to consolidate the democratic politics there must be an end of this "pendulum politics." What Professor Morris Jones indicated is that in an institutionalised democracy the functioning of the system is predictable in terms of law and order, development, transfer of power etc. but in the countries with "PP" the system is characterized by uncertainties and instabilities engendering beginning from social fabric to the risk of being a failed state.

Judging from the criteria above Bangladesh certainly falls in this category as the most crucial indicator of a stable system, namely the peaceful transfer of power, has always been subjected to either direct violence or intimidation as well as the prospects of violence looming large in the horizon. It can be argued that it was so until the parliamentary democracy was reintroduced in 1991. But the question is: has there been any qualita-

tive change in the nature of politics in the country since then? Not so. Most disappointing has been the performance of our elected representatives. True, reintroduction of parliamentary democracy through a free and fair election, conducted under the non-party caretaker government, was a watershed in Bangladesh's history. But ten years have gone by since then the country is still struggling with the fundamentals of democratic order, like holding of a free and fair election. As a matter of fact, the hopes were dashed within two years of the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in 1991. The main political parties - BNP and Awami League who are never tired of preaching about their respective commitment to democracy, themselves began burying the seeds of the nascent democracy installed through the election 1991, as boycotting of the parliament by the then opposition AL and hartals over the demand for a constitutional provision incorporat-

ing a non-party caretaker government became endemic. Once the demand was accepted and transfer of power took place in 1996, everybody heaved a sigh of relief. But people were dead wrong. Soon the history began to repeat itself all over again, and this time it was the opposition BNP's turn. What it all meant was that the losing party's acceptance of the election outcome was in question. The present political imbroglio began over the probable date of the next general election. The ruling AL was voted to power through a non-party caretaker government and for a period of five years. The term expires on July 13. There was a lot of speculation that the government would hand over power to the non-party caretaker government before its term expires. Country's increasing deterioration of law and order situation, terrorism, erosion of the rule of law, random use of small arms and terrorism by the student armed-cadre of the political parties in the university campuses as well as pressure from the opposition were thought to be behind the decision of

the Prime Minister. Although she backtracked from her promise of giving an early election, both BNP and AL were getting ready to fight it. But interestingly BNP and AL had two totally different perspectives about contesting the election. AL was not only mobilizing the people politically through its slogan of pro-liberation forces but also reshuffling the administration allegedly by its own men appointing DCs and Magistrates, who play a crucial role in electioneering, through the so-called "fit-lists". BNP, on the other hand, put a seven-point demand (like electoral law reforms, removal of partisan officials both from EC and administration, recovery of small arms etc.) whose implementation was to make the process of election free and fair.

However, they seem to have an agreement on point i.e. both felt that each would win with a significant margin and this election would decide their existence. Obviously, people in general were apprehensive and worried about such zero-sum mentalities of BNP and AL as it was a sure recipe for violence. But on the whole the feeling was that both sides would come to a compromise over the fixation of the date of the next election and other election related issues. And the civil society, Election Commission and Election observers were to make sure of a free and fair election. This was thought to be a crucial and important task as the election is the main vehicle through which the consolidation of democracy takes place. It is through this vehicle that the electorates judge the performance of the incumbent and decide whether to keep them in power or throw them out by allowing the opposition in power. All of these are possible if there is a free and fair election. So its importance in a democracy can hardly be emphasized.

This was the political scenario of Bangladesh as of February 2001. It was hoped and expected that our nascent democracy would be consolidated through the holding of a free and fair election demonstrating the wisdom and sagacity of our

political parties and our people. The country would opt for a genuine constitutional politics instead of present confrontational and agitational one, thereby paving the way for fulfilling our hopes and aspirations. However, alongside it there were apprehensions as well. Questions like the dependence of the EC on the allegedly politicized administration, influence of black money and muscle, and on top of everything, the use of small arms in influencing the outcome of the election have been on the upper most minds of people. Indeed the use of small arms in impacting the election results in a country like Bangladesh where there are already available 100,000 to 150,000 small arms, where 100 small arms enter the country everyday through the borders with India and Myanmar and where from 80,000 to 90,000 arms users operate under the instruction of mainstream political parties, ensuring free and fair election is a gargantuan task. In this

context, people were worried that the country would be pushed into further violence and terrorism if the outcome of the election were not accepted by all. Because usually the legitimacy of the government that comes to power through such elections remains in question and people do not identify with the system, which is manifested in these alienated and disaffected groups' underground activities. It was thought that in a country like Bangladesh if the election is not free and fair such scenario as painted above is most likely to happen. The statements given by the civil society leaders and the representatives of the donor countries have also aptly underscored such concerns.

The irony is that the situation described above seemed not enough to make the pendulum swing to its fullest. Because the recent trends in Bangladesh politics has superseded any kind of political imbroglio the country has previously witnessed. It is unimaginable that the political leaders of our country can behave in such irresponsible manner. The sequence is between the two, which would throw the political process into further challenges and counter-challenges' (The Daily Star, April 1, 2001).

As a result the holding of the future election has become uncertain and the country is again in the grip of uncertainties and instabilities. People have become victims of hartals, sniper bombing and shooting, terrorism armed conflicts between the police and armed cadre of the political parties. In sum, people's lives are in complete disarray. Irony is that despite the concerns of the political leaders of Gono Forum and left parties, it is alleged that AL is planning to go for the election even without BNP if it succeeds to break the four-party alliance and manage to take pro-Ershad Jatiyo Party with it; and the probable success of such political horse trading is quite high. But the question is, would that kind election have any impacts in stabilizing the current situation? By all accounts the outcome of such attempt would be nothing but a recipe for more bloodshed and armed conflicts. One

shudders to even visualize the kind of violence that would ensue given the easy availability of the small arms in the country.

Tragically, if the scenario painted above does take place, no one but the political parties would be responsible for it. The task of the political parties in a democracy is enormous so much so that democracy's other name is party-crazy. They are the lifelines providing not only the channels between the government and the society but also imparting the valuable political education to the citizens. But our parties have done no such things. Instead they have been insincere in their effort to consolidate democracy through consensus decision-making, articulation and aggregation of interests through the art of negotiation and compromise. With regards to imparting political education their track record is of dismal failure. Instead of demonstrating the qualities of courage, idealism, patriotism, integrity, sense of duty as citizens through their organizational strength, they have, on the contrary disseminated nothing but distrust, intolerance, antagonism.

These hostilities naturally thrive in the climate of violence generated by the intense disliking of their respective leaders and their mutual acrimony. All in all this is a politics of winning power by any means. Today democracy in Bangladesh is under siege and faces serious threats of almost being liquidated. It is beyond our comprehension that how can they not even realize that election 2001 in Bangladesh is not just a periodic election but a crucial election, which would determine the fate of this country. Can our parties shed their past and thereby forego the zero-sum game? Most probably not. The burden of this enormous responsibility must then be borne by the civil society. Will they be able to discharge their duties as citizens of a democratic country? Again, not likely, as they are neither organized nor above partisanship. Who then would be able to lift Bangladesh from this abyss of political despair? Perhaps a miracle.

Realistically speaking, the elite and the ruling class must address the root cause of the problem, which is the question of our national identity. Today, Bangladesh is as polarized as it could be. One must remember that a divided nation cannot, to quote Laski, 'safely bicker,' without indulging into politics that generate nothing but frustration and despair.

PANORAMA

Realistically speaking, the elite and the ruling class must address the root cause of the problem, which is the question of our national identity. Today, Bangladesh is as polarized as it could be. One must remember that a divided nation cannot, to quote Laski, 'safely bicker,' without indulging into politics that generate nothing but frustration and despair.

The General's disclosure



M.J. ZAHEDI

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE Gen. Pervez Musharraf has unfolded his plan for the return of democracy to Pakistan. He did so at a press conference in Karachi recently, which was marked by his forthrightness and unambiguity.

He said he would not retire in October next when his term as Chief of the Army Staff ends. He also did not deny that he would become the president of the country. He further said that general elections would be held in October next year. Most importantly, at least to many, he would amend the constitution to restructure the political institutions. The press conference has cleared up the doubts that were lingering in the people's minds about the general's

plan for restoring the country to democracy that his coup in October 1999 had deviated. His tenure as the Chief of the Army Staff is scheduled to end in coming October. Naturally, it was being speculated whether he would really retire on that date, or not. The General himself put an end to all the speculations by making it clear that he will not retire but will carry on. For how long more, he did

not say. Naturally, the discussion is on what it means, especially for the country's future political setup. The *Nation* commented that none of the three army chiefs who had seized power had retired when their service tenure expired (the reference is to Field Marshal Ayub Khan, General Yahya Khan and Gen Zia-ul Huq). It was not expected that Gen. Musharraf would be an exception. Only Ayub Khan had formally replaced a baton by a sceptre, thereby putting into place a mecha-

nism that permitted a transfer of command without actually relinquishing power. (But the system fell apart later resulting in his exit.)

The *Nation* however thought that 'apparently he (Gen. Musharraf) has extended the Supreme Court's mandate to his chief executiveship to his army position as well'. Most analysts say that he will have to be around and in power to implement

the mandate given by the Supreme Court. He has promised to hold elections to both the national and provincial assemblies on party basis. May be his next action will be to remove restrictions on political activities that have been enforced since the takeover by him. There are some other points too that need to be clarified, the papers say. For example, he has not yet explained

how he will go about to provide protection to the reforms he has introduced or may yet do so.

He has also expressed his dissatisfaction with certain provisions (although he has not specified these), which explains why the army is forced to take over. But he has said that the constitution should have a role for the army while many jurists feel that the constitution does not allow fundamentals to be changed. To do so would violate the concept of parliamentary sovereignty, which is an element of the basic structure

loses its credibility due to the involvement of its commanders in civilian affairs. Gen. Musharraf can avoid such a possibility, an editorial in *The Nation* thought. By doing so, he will be setting a lasting precedent. It may seem inevitable from a realpolitik standpoint but it does seem to violate the principles of good governance, which require that tenures are respected.

Another categorical statement that the General has already made is to hold elections in or around October next year, in accordance with the

mandate given by the Supreme Court. He has promised to hold elections to both the national and provincial assemblies on party basis. May be his next action will be to remove restrictions on political activities that have been enforced since the takeover by him. There are some other points too that need to be clarified, the papers say. For example, he has not yet explained

how he will go about to provide protection to the reforms he has introduced or may yet do so.

He has also expressed his dissatisfaction with certain provisions (although he has not specified these), which explains why the army is forced to take over. But he has said that the constitution should have a role for the army while many jurists feel that the constitution does not allow fundamentals to be changed. To do so would violate the concept of parliamentary sovereignty, which is an element of the basic structure

loses its credibility due to the involvement of its commanders in civilian affairs. Gen. Musharraf can avoid such a possibility, an editorial in *The Nation* thought. By doing so, he will be setting a lasting precedent. It may seem inevitable from a realpolitik standpoint but it does seem to violate the principles of good governance, which require that tenures are respected.

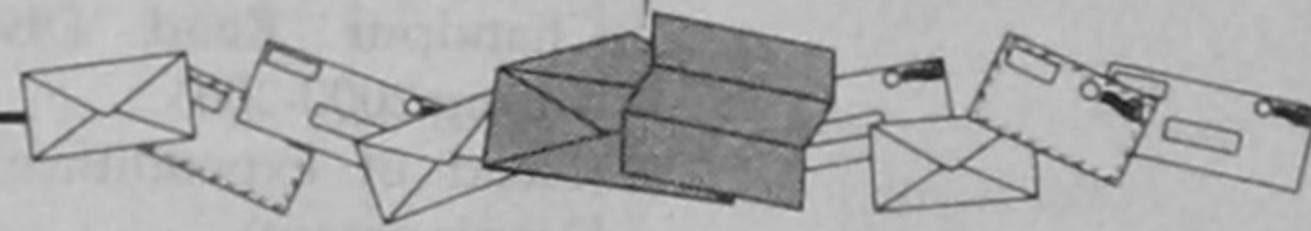
Another categorical statement that the General has already made is to hold elections in or around October next year, in accordance with the

of the constitution, they add. Constitutional pundits feel that if the government wants to give protection to its reforms it will have to revive the suspended parliament to do the needful. Although Gen. Musharraf has not ruled out the possibility, it still remains a very distant prospect, in the words of *The Nation*, 'useful more as a carrot for some sections of the politicians'.

They are also intrigued by the Chief Executive's refusal to commit him on if he was becoming the president, with more powers than there are in the 1973 constitution. Many observers feel that there is no escape from this route. He has many precedents. Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and Zia-ul Huq had all become presidents immediately after the coup or after waiting a little while. In case this is part of the future scheme of things, he will have to get himself elected by an electoral college comprising the Senate, the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies. But it is not clear how the exercise is to be managed before the incumbent's tenure comes to an end in December 2002, or at its due time, by November this year.

The General's disclosures have laid bare the highlights of his plan or thinking. This should help create a national consensus over the plan.

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.

Ruling the roads



Half of the road in front of Khamarbari in the Farm Gate area is occupied by tempos. Their presence makes the road narrower and leaves little space for other vehicles to ply. Then there are buses off loading passengers in the middle of the road creating severe traffic jams and hindrance to passers-by. Roads are created for smooth passage of vehicles and not as a parking lot. Will the authorities clear up the roads ensure smooth traffic?

Political fodder

Who are more powerful, politicians or ordinary people? From the present political state, it is obvious that the politicians are the sole authority in the country. The political regime though depending on people to come to power, soon forgets people's contribution. And till the next elections, citizens remain in oblivion and politicians rule the country the way they please. Why don't our leaders realise that they have been voted to power to ensure peoples' rights, not to look after their own welfare?

Musa Siraj
Dhaka

not at all worried about the security of general people?

Mahmud
Leicester, UK

Where are we heading?

Our leaders always talk about democracy but follow the very opposite path. The so-called democratic governments come and go one after another but we are not being able to escape from their tyranny.

Who will rescue us from the grip of these autocratic politicians?

Shagar
Dhaka

Our beloved country

The political activists have taken up arms openly on the streets to make their point and whatever they do, they are above the law.

Ordinary people, who have always been pawns in the hands of our leaders and politicians, are today being held hostage, watching their beloved country bleed to death. The education system is in ruins, the economy is sputtering, society is rotting, the law and order situation is in the most deplorable condition.

Are we ever going to put the nation before the self?

Akram Khan
Indira Road, Dhaka

Public security?

I refer to the news item (April 8) 'Terrorists who killed four during Feb 13 hartal go scot-free'. If the ruling party can arrest the opposition activists in no time but they let the killers and terrorists of their own party roam around freely then what is the use of law and other security measures? It is really astonishing to learn that the ruling party MPs take part in processions in the city with activists carrying firearms. Is this a civilised country? Such a demonstration is really unique. What is the use of enacting new laws like Public Safety Act when the government is

City of garbage

Thank you for the Photorial of April 9. Indeed Dhaka has become a city of garbage and the authority seems to be absolutely apathetic about it. Most of the trashcans are always full of garbage and these are not cleaned regularly. Garbage remains scattered on streets and citizens seem to be very reluctant to put the trash into the appropriate place that is, into the trashcan.

Will the authorities concerned ever take notice of the garbage menace?

AAhmad
Dhaka

Rickshaws rule the roads

Whenever an accident occurs, we are always quick to blame a motorised vehicle but we allow accident-prone vehicles like rickshaw to ply through busy roads. Most rickshaw-pullers are from the villages and have no sense of how busy and dangerous the roads and streets of Dhaka can be. They cannot read the road signs, have a vague idea about traffic rules and are completely bewildered in a busy city. They take suicidal turns in front of speeding vehicles, make the most audacious moves and carry any number of passengers. They often go the wrong way, and manoeuvre recklessly at intersections.

The road in front of New Market was made one-way, but then the authorities decided to allocate a separate lane for rickshaws. Now the

rickshaws occupy their designated lane as well as the main road!

We must decide whether we will continue to allow this transport to ply on our roads. Let's have more buses and other public transports. Let us walk more. The government should help rickshaw-pullers find alternative means of income. The possibilities are endless, all that is needed is the will to change.

Aman Khan
Dhaka

Copying spree

Mass cheating and copying in the public exams have become a serious problem. This malpractice prevails in almost all the institutions of our country and this has spread among students like an infectious disease. What is most frustrating is that guardians and teachers help students copy. Students who have political connections are often protected and these students think that copying in exams is their right. If we don't stand against this malpractice, we would never be able to get rid of this vicious cycle. Strict laws should be implemented to control copying spree. All the guide books should be banned and questions should be original. It is high time citizens stand up against this malpractice and save our students from falling for this trap.

Sanaulah Sunny
Dhaka Medical College