

PM's call falls flat

Get the basics right

ON a snap-shot view, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's latest counsel to the Opposition might sound right but taking a close look at it one sees that wafer-thin veneer of logic torn into smithereens by the searing force of diabolic ground realities. On Tuesday, she exhorted upon the opposition to return to parliament, 'if not for any other reason' then to help the government party revalidate the 30 reserved seats quota for women in the JS for the next ten years. This is not the first time she has pleaded with the opposition to assist her in passing the bill with a two-thirds combined majority; only that her words of advice this time have proved patently netting to the opposition and flat out to the general audience given the background these were set against.

Indeed, her advice to the opposition does not sit in with the general atmospherics of hiatus seething with political confrontation and recrimination. It can hardly be exaggerated as well that this is grossly off-centre with the substantive issues of power-transfer and taking the road to early elections acquiring a new dimension of pressing centrality in view of their continual, and increasingly self-complicated, state of irresolution. Discernibly, there is a hint of some mixed message about the prime ministerial utterance in question. As well as imploring the opposition to go to parliament for the passage of the women's reserved quota bill she speaks of winning two-thirds majority in the next election or of garnering other parties' support to have the measure legislated, presumably without the help of the opposition.

The PM as the leader of the government, and particularly when she finds herself beset with a sensitive political situation as she does now, should mean what she says, or does not say it at all in order to preserve her credibility, trust-worthiness and operational flexibility. Mixed signals, negative vibes, ballistic or provocative salvoes, hemming in of conditions and insinuations have become rather characteristic of the ruling party in recent days. Concurrently, arrests of opposition activists have been made on a massive scale and cases started under the PSA against BNP leaders or MPs. Jatiya Party faction led by Ershad has been towed away from the opposition alliance. The opposition seems to have its back to the wall.

Vehemently opposed as we are to the opposition's hartal programmes we see reason nonetheless as to why the fundamentals of the government's approach need to be gotten right so that the opposition has some space despite its follies and feels drawn into a dialogue on elections or face further public disapproval.

News standards for BTV

Dismantle state influences

IT is highly unfortunate that in this rapidly advancing age of information, the government has a closed mind on media freedom, even when faced with ground realities. We are dismayed by the Minister of Information's attempts to defend BTV's performance and falling credibility in the public eye, particularly in comparison with the country's lone private channel, ETV. According to him, BTV's news consists of an 'objective' and 'balanced' coverage of events that are of 'national' importance, as opposed to the 'sensational' and 'selective' version being provided by ETV in order to gain 'cheap' popularity.

The Minister's response is a facile denial of reality. Ordinary viewers aside, even the most partial observer in this country is aware of the pro-government slant evident on BTV and the realistic and representative balance displayed by ETV. We would not be surprised if members of the government itself were part of ETV's growing news audience. That there are gaps in BTV coverage are borne out by the Minister's remarks accusing the Opposition leader of denying it access. We do not condone the Opposition's attitude, but ask the Minister to reflect on what BTV might have done to lose the confidence of the Opposition. In the final analysis, we all know that actions speak louder than words. The media is appraised by the fare it offers, no matter what reasons are offered to explain its lapses.

It is sad that the government considers the dissemination of news that is relevant to the people to be 'cheap' and adopts the posture that news gathering is a prerogative of authority. The government must acknowledge the obvious shortcomings of BTV and take tangible steps to let it become a relevant and reliable news service for the people. The least it can do, at this hour, is to dismantle state influence on this institution and expand the frontiers of democracy.

NDA's contrived 'war' cry: India's Indonesianisation

PRAFUL BIDWAI WRITES from Delhi

HOW the mighty have fallen! Take the two Georges: not Fernandes and Vincent, but Fernandes and George Verghese. If Mr Fernandes was once a Hero of the Emergency, Mr Verghese too personified the highest in both morality and journalism, with a passionate commitment to democracy, civil liberties and transparency.

A quarter-century ago, he fought a major newspaper which wanted him to kowtow to political bosses. We all signed petitions in his defence.

The same Mr Verghese is now a media "consultant" to the scam-tainted defence ministry (MoD). This is not part of MoD's exemplary cleansing. MoD is not abolishing its super-secret, paranoid procedures, nor eradicating gigantic corruption. It is only establishing a Chief of Defence Staff and a procurement board. This George may end up doing a PR exercise for the other.

Mr Verghese hasn't changed suddenly. He moved gradually from being a critic of the Establishment to one of its pillars. In 1990-91, when state repression peaked in Kashmir, he gave a clean chit to the Army in a ghastly gang rape, on the ground that the victims didn't tell him (a stranger) they were raped!

Mr Verghese also advanced grandiose schemes for tapping the Ganga and other Himalayan rivers although they conflicted with the neighbouring countries and people's preferences. He dogmatically supports the Narmada dam despite its destructive impact and

Coca-Cola, only to inflict Germany's Siemens upon the public sector BHEL.

In 1974, Mr Fernandes attacked Indira Gandhi's nuclear explosion; when millions of Indians lack food and shelter, it's obscene even to think of nuclear weapons, he said,

took long to move from (selectively) crusading for truth to censoring stories, attacking minorities, and genuflecting before Hindutva.

Mr Ramakrishna Hegde fooled many with "value-based" politics. But even after Tehelka, he can't decide whether to quit the NDA

and his lack of focus all in the belief that he respects democratic decency.

But after the Tehelka disclosures, Mr Vajpayee has emerged just another run-of-the-mill politician who thinks nothing of subordinating probity to profit, party to PMO,

confidants in the PMO thus only delivering another hammer-blow to its credibility.

The BJP's main concern is to ensure that its discontented allies somehow stay inside the NDA. Because of Tehelka, the power balance between them and the sangh parivar has changed in their favour. How the new equations play themselves remains to be seen. Will the regional allies grow stronger, or will the BJP assert itself by playing the communal card, a la Kanpur or mandir?

The second possibility spells grave danger, the first more uncertainty. But one thing is clear. The NDA has further weakened Indian democracy and mocked at accountability. It no longer represents popular sentiments, concerns or interests.

Such a government can survive for a limited period, but is unlikely to complete its term. It will increasingly resemble the sleazy, crony capitalist Wahid regime in Indonesia. Mr Wahid survives by dodging crises. When people get butchered in ethnic strife, he simply leaves the country. He has made 50 trips abroad in 17 months.

The NDA too can devise its "Wahid Formula". Thus India will survive by following today's undulating Indonesian model. Why tragedy that would be!

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dubious benefits.

The final break with liberalism came in 1999 when Mr Verghese joined the Subrahmanyam Committee which exonerated top Army officers for their grave intelligence lapses in Kargil. Meanwhile, Mr Verghese, once a critic of nuclear weapons, became their apologist.

This is the sad story of a public intellectual with past courage to stand up for secularism, human rights and justice. Even more extreme is the other George's tale.

For many of us in Mumbai, Mr Fernandes' seemingly uncompromising unionism was always gimmicky. His leadership of the 1974 railway strike was irresponsible and lost thousands their livelihoods. By 1977, as industries minister, he was hypocritically throwing out IBM and

By 1998, the number of such Indians had risen, but Mr Fernandes had become the Bomb's slave. He was speechless when in a Doordarshan discussion I told him he was "talking rubbish".

Why did this progressive turn so reactionary, even an apologist for the RSS?

As he once confessed: "I have stopped thinking." But the real explanation may lie in power without principle and phenomenal cynicism.

The two Georges are different. Mr Verghese retains his urbanity and Boy-Scout-like morality. Mr Fernandes' rebelliousness has turned roughish. Between them, they encompass trajectories of many in public life with variations.

Mr Arun Shourie, for instance,

matter how indefensible its policies and corrupt ministers. The same evolution from sanctimonious moralising to unabashed cynicism is replicated by Ms Jaya Jaitly. What an abysmal moral collapse for a former social activist!

No less disappointing is the state of India's armed forces, long our holy-cow. Corruption may be more rampant in them than in other spheres because the military is shielded from scrutiny. Its budget has doubled in five years the largest such increase since Independence. But transparency has shrunk.

For BJP supporters, the greatest letdowns must be Mr Vajpayee and Mr Advani. Mr Vajpayee's admirers forgave him his RSS past, his dependence on sleazy business houses and Mr Ranjan Bhattacharya

and transparency to telecom rackets. He shows no political savvy, leave alone astuteness.

Mr Advani's camp, for its part, can't explain how the would-be "Iron Man of India" has a spine as limp as rubber, and allowed the party to be overpowered by the PMO. His doublespeak on Tehelka's "doctored" tapes has exposed his hollowness. Advani cronies were delighted with the Tehelka disclosures but soon got preoccupied with planning people in key positions, starting with Mr Jana Krishna Murthy.

Notwithstanding pressures, the BJP isn't about to enforce a real "code of ethics" or undertake serious "introspection" of damage to its credibility. It will brazenly try to stick to power, even by sacking Vajpayee

Sino-US stand-off

AS M NURUNNABI

ON April 1, after years of close calls between American and Chinese military craft prowling the waters and skies of Asia, a US Navy spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet that was tracking it. The Chinese jet crashed and its pilot remained missing. The US aircraft suffered sufficient damage to force an emergency landing on a military air base in China's Hainan island.

For the US, the main diplomatic goal now appears to get-back the plane untampered and the crew of 24 in number. The plane had been equipped with classified equipment. For the Chinese, it was a bonanza to inspect the plane and get to know the type of the equipment installed in the US spy plane. The US aircraft is a veritable "treasure trove" of interesting gadgets for the Chinese military.

In the opinion of analysts, US-China relations are taking on Cold War overtones on account of this incident. The collision and the resulting stand-off over the fate of the US crew and aircraft has come in the wake of a senior Chinese military officer's defection to the US in December last and China's detention of a Chinese citizen and US permanent resident on espionage charges. The saga over the US surveillance aircraft plays into an already heated debate in Washington over how the new Bush administration should view China as a rival, an enemy, or something else again.

The affair, many experts say, is having an impact on the US debate over what arms sales the US should approve for Taiwan during the annual arms sales review in late April. China's handling of the collision so far, according to an analyst, will strengthen the voice of those who want to sell a more robust package of arms to Taiwan.

China can hardly afford to see a major rupture in relations with Washington, particularly if the result is a US policy towards Taiwan that seriously undermines China's interests. China's bid to host the 2008 Olympics argues against such a confrontation. Again, the crisis is already posing a serious challenge for the Chinese leadership. For domestic political reasons, China's President Jiang Zemin and his col-

leagues cannot appear too soft towards the US, particularly when a Chinese pilot has remained missing. Jiang may also worry about his support within the Communist Party and the military in the run-up to a key party congress next year at which he is due to give up his civilian and party posts but may hope to retain his chairmanship of China's Central Military Commission.

When by midnight of April 2, China had still not granted US diplomats access to the American crew on Hainan island, US President Bush broke his silence to say what the US priorities were: "The prompt and safe return of the crew and the return of the aircraft without further damaging or tampering." Positions then began to harden.

The priority for the US now is getting the 24-member crew back to the US. Bush drove that point home later: "This accident has the potential of undermining our hopes for a fruitful and productive relationship between our two countries." An American expert on Chinese affairs, was hopeful that relations can return to some sort of normalcy with repatriation of the crew. He said, "Ideally, simply allowing the American pilots to return to the US would defuse much of the tension over the issue, and allow the experts to deal with the recovery of the aircraft."

Nevertheless, the longer the affair drags on and mutual recriminations fly, the greater the likely long-term negative impact on mutual perceptions. The story of China's holding of the American surveillance aircraft and its crew is dominating media reports in the US. "People are perplexed. Nothing bothers Americans more than seeing other Americans being detained," said a congressional aide.

The collision of the planes took place at a time when the relations between the two nations are tense over Taiwan. China is alarmed at the prospect of sale of sophisticated radar equipment to Taiwan by the US while the US is concerned that China reportedly deployed its new CSS missiles at bases across the strait from Taiwan. Some strategic analysts argue that US surveillance was likely related to observe the Chinese build-up of missiles and China obviously did not want the ability of the US to monitor their missile bases.

OPINION

The politics and the press: Hope and a prayer

OMAR KARIM

BETWEEN the intransigence and obduracy of the ruling party, and the stubbornness of the opposition, we, the commoners and the working people, are caught between a rock and a hard place. The shenanigan that the two sides are involved in has a common thread and a shared goal but a mutually exclusive reaping of that goal. And that, as everyone knows or can guess without difficulty, is winning the forthcoming general elections. The two sides have differing method to their madness. The ruling party is attempting to take proactive and pre-emptive measures, while the action of the opposition is strictly reactive. In both set of often contrived and conniving techniques we the people, and the country are of secondary or tertiary consideration and importance. We, the people, are mere conduits and pawns in their quest for power, authority and associated fame (or infamy, as in the case of a gaggle of party luminaries, Ministers, MPs and other minions) and fortune. What is sadly and sorely missing in the whole exercise is any shred of compromise, flexibility or understanding for the good of the people and the country. The strident and shrill tone of the two sides would imply that we, as a nation, are in for a protracted period of mayhem, conflict, unrest and chaos. With a bit of wisdom, good sense, and statesmanlike behaviour on the part of either side, much of these could easily have been avoided. It now does not appear that we will get any peace and calm, harmony or order now through the elections and even after the transition.

In this whole discordant hullabaloo, the ruling party would appear to have a distinct advantage. It controls all levers of power. As The Daily Star and other newspapers have reported, they are in the process of placing their trusted lieutenants, known adherents and foot soldiers in key position to influence the election outcome, and the process is just about complete. The ruling party

wants a minuscule gap between resignation and election because it wants to make sure the caretaker government does not have sufficient time or opportunity to bring about significant changes in the convenient and cozy set up. It wants the caretaker government to be a rubberstamp. The leader of the opposition, for better or for worse, possesses none of the political savvy or shrewdness of the Prime Minister. The old and long dormant cases are being revived against the opposition leader and others to keep them busy making appearances in the court and fighting the cases. There are frequent and selective arrests and detention of opposition activists to make them ineffectual or pliant, as in the case of Ershad. Even if higher courts grant bail, they are arrested under the insidious Public Safety Act, which has a provision to detain someone for a month without any rhyme or reason, or more likely on a trumped up charge. BTV and Betar act as government party mouth-piece and incessantly spew out pro-Awami dogmatic party line. To most enlightened dispassionate people all the gratuitous misinformation and bald-faced pro Awami propaganda on the state radio and TV would seem rather inane, infantile and ineffective but apparently it may have some sway over the semi-literate naive and gullible types. There, however, are other advantages, actual and intangible, that only this particular ruling party enjoys but are not accessible to the other political parties.

Bangladesh may be the only democracy where a large majority, may even be as high as 80 per cent, by my cursory intuitive scrutiny, of the mainstream dailies, supports this particular ruling party actively or implicitly. In my opinion, the pervasiveness of pro-government and pro-Awami opinions often betray the existence or even the possibility of contrary but rational, meaningful and substantive points of view. Most of the ideas, notions, opinions and topics seem to emanate from the same dreary, constricted and dis-

tered cocoon. Rather than pinpointing and highlighting gross inefficiencies, negligence, incompetence and heinous acts on the part of the government, time, space, attention and effort are used in accentuating cultural and religious polarization, such as overstated and fallaciously exaggerated threat of fundamentalism in this country. Being termed a *Razakar* has become such an anathema and carries such a stigma that unscrupulous news outlets are blackmailing people by threatening to tag them with this reviled label. All these distract attention away from a plethora of government misdeeds.

If much of the news media is somewhat subjective and biased, the traditional and well-known vaunted columnists display the skewed nature of the inclination. They seem to share the same political preference, opinions and outlook. The pieces they write seem like clones or continuation of each other's writing. One thing they fall over each other to display is unshakable and enduring adoration and reverence for Awami League, and conversely, extreme dislike and contempt for the opposition parties. So, an appalling criminal act like shooting from a procession led by a ruling party MP is portrayed, through a set of convoluted and capricious reasoning and mendacious recall and phony precedence, as a conspiracy against the MP and a deliberate conspiracy to malign the good name of good old Awami League. Another one, staking his territory, claims that he and his like-minded old-school chums are the true blue columnists and opinion leaders, and those with dissenting and differing opinions are neophytes who neither deserve the label nor the regal reverence attributed to his ilk. One thing this self-styled, self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing cluster do well is exhaustively dissect, investigate, inquest and examine every little injudicious remark, slip of tongue or tiny acts of defiance by the opposition. The universal democratic concept of holding the government accountable is turned upside down and in-

side out in their actions pronouncements and inscription. The opposition, with no power and scant authority, generally disheveled and frantic, is held accountable to the minutest detail and the ruling party is not only given a carte blanche, they actively prop it up and help push abominable wrongdoings under the rug and cover up dreadful transgressions. Every now and then it seems that they have sold their souls in a Faustian bargain.

The main opposition party, BNP, is neither mature nor intelligent enough to oppose the Awami infractions righteously and efficiently. Or else they would not indulge in mindless, lame brain, half-witted zombie harts in the previous era, when the shoe was on the other foot and the current ruling party was in the opposition. BNP would have assiduously sought and found better and more meaningful alternatives. The problem is BNP is a conundrum and amalgamation of disparate elements, from extreme left to far right with many fringe elements in between, some of them castaways and opportunists, with similar aspirations and prone to same sort of misuse of power, corruption and misrepresentation as the members of the existing ruling party.

The ardent hope and the fervent prayer is the two dominant and antagonistic political parties will see the light and find the truth, settle their disputes through rational and civilized means, and save us, the commoners, from unnecessary hassle, apprehension, commotion and turmoil. The hope also is the news media and columnists will perform their noble tasks truthfully, sincerely, independently and objectively. The confluence of the two blissful and exalted notions would make the system an enviable, exemplary and virtuous paragon of free, fair and egalitarian democracy that others will emulate. The hope and the prayer, alas, seem like a pipe dream and wishful musing of a deluded Pollyanna mind.

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

Hats off to Tipu

Thank you very much for the initiative to raise funds for journalist Tipu Sultan's treatment. It could have been done a few months back; however, it is better late than never. But I did not understand why the staff correspondent avoided mentioning the name of Joyal Hazari in his report, "Will Tipu Sultan become handicapped for life?" Certainly, Tipu Sultan has set an example of bravery to let people know how the political system is rotting at the core. Hats off to Tipu Sultan.

Y. Zaman
Dhaka

Stop misleading us

From April 1, a three-day hartal was observed throughout the country. The opposition party said that it was a successful one and, at the same time, the ruling party claimed that the hartal was unsuccessful.

The government declared that they are satisfied with attendance in government offices during hartal. But if they are satisfied then why did they declare that offices would remain open on Saturday? The politicians should realise that whatever they say holds significance; for, they are the leaders of the country. They should refrain from making ambiguous statements and thus misleading people.

Shimul Haq
Laboratory Road, Dhaka

Political intimidation

On the day Rajshahi University opened after a long unscheduled closure originating from the clash between university students and nearby villagers, I went to the campus only to face interrogation and threat from some ruling party activists. Having a leisure period I, along with my two friends, decided to go to a tea-stall. On our way to the stall we saw the ruling party student wing holding a street-corner meeting blocking the road. So we went to the canteen bypassing the meeting. All of a sudden some activists from the meeting came to us and stood encircling us. One of them in a threatening manner started questioning us. The threatening tone in his voice was rising even though we were answering them politely and meekly. One of my friends had a French-cut beard. Pointing to it, they went on threatening us "You all look like 'Shibir' activists. Either keep a long beard or shave it off." Our misery could have become worse if a senior had not intervened and saved us.

These people asked us a lot of questions. But the question that I could not ask them is "What authority did they have to interrogate us?" We, the ordinary students want to get rid of this type of political intimidation and dictatorship.

An ordinary student
Dhaka

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.

Endangered existence in flame and fume



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

Like many metal and vulcanising shops in the city and elsewhere in the country, this small factory also employs children aged between six and eleven. In a suffocating environment, they work endlessly from dawn to late evening, exposed to flame and fume, and toxicity of the metals. Some of these children have already developed visual impairment. Are they not entitled to child's rights?

Gasoline-electric cars

Last year, the Japanese automobile company HONDA, introduced a new type of gasoline-electric car. This car runs primarily on batteries with a standby gasoline engine to recharge the battery and provide power on long distance driving. The car produces no significant emission and one can get over 70 miles per gallon of fuel.

This type of car would be ideal in Dhaka, where fuel prices are high and pollution has become a serious. I urge the government to look into marketing this type cars in Bangladesh. I am sure, in collaboration with HONDA, a car or a taxi could be manufactured to suit the needs and means of the city population.

Mojjamal Hossein
Japan

Scarcity of oraxen

There are many patients in Bangladesh who suffer from hormonal problem due to iodine deficiency. Almost all of these patients are prescribed to take the drug Oraxen. Such patients are recommended to take 2-6 tablets daily as per recommendation of the doctor. These patients need to continue to take this drug for rest of their lives. If they stop taking the medicine regularly fatal disorders are observed and their condition deteriorates

seriously. Even it is critical in many cases. So the necessity of the medicine is highly felt among the users. ORAXEN is available in tablet form. Retail price of each bottle of 250 tablets is Tk.140. Glaxco-Wellcome is importing and marketing this medicine in Bangladesh. The medicine was available in the market few months ago. But for the last six months or so there has been a crisis of this drug in the market. On the other hand it is being sold at a cost of Tk.380-420 per bottle.

I would like to draw the attention of the concern authority to take necessary steps in this regard.

Engr. Iqbal Mahmood
ICBP LGED

Modernising the roads!

Recently, the authorities have started erecting barriers and building peculiar shaped islands in the middle of roads and this creates serious hindrance to smooth traffic. Instead of widening and modernising the roads the authorities are narrowing them with unnecessary barriers. The side lane is now being used as a parking lot for rickshaws, vans and cars and in some places for piling construction materials and garbage.

The authorities should rectify this problem immediately.

Abdulla Mahmud
Dhammond, Dhaka