

## Student unionism inertia

Restoration of election cycle is crucial

**H**AVE the central students union at the leading universities in the country been laid to rest? We hope not. At the same time, we are afraid that we cannot rule out the possibility either. Nine to eleven years have gone by since the last elections to the central students union at Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar Universities were last held. The student unionism inertia seems to have begun since the end of a nine-year autocratic regime of HM Ershad and restoration of democratic governance in 1990-91. The irony is that the electoral exercise had never been suspended for this long even when the country was under military or quasi-military rule.

Efforts have, however, been made at different times to revive the students unions. Needless to say, those have fallen by the wayside. In most cases, while the student front of the ruling party was ready, even eager, to have the polls, its political rivals backed out on the ground that environment on the campus was not 'conducive'. With student politics increasingly restricted to muscularity and violence, and annexation of one half of residence or the other, one must say they were justified. The vice-chancellor of Dhaka University told the *Prothom Alo* that DUCSU elections would be held "when the right time and opportunity comes by." With student politics degenerating further into criminality of all sorts, not sparing even rape, we wonder when the right time and opportunity would actually come. Does it mean we close the chapter on student unionism for good? Certainly not. That leads to yet another crucial question: how do we revive the election cycle at these universities?

As the democratic process to bring in fresh faces in leadership remains stalled, criminal elements in the guise of student leaders and activists get wider scope to reign the campuses. Therefore, the election cycle must be restored. However, one must admit, without the student organisations, it would not be possible. That, unfortunately, takes the ball back to the court of non-student, terrorist and criminal elements. It all seems a no-win situation, because the politicians of major parties refuse to do their due. Dissociation from criminal elements has never gone beyond pompous rhetoric for them. They should start translating their words into deeds. They may think that the student organisations are their political pawns. A time would come when they would themselves be mere pawns. The catharsis of student politics should, therefore, be underway for their own good.

Having said that, we would like to ask the universities a simple question: when there have not been any elections for years, why have you made the students pay for central and hall unions? Not only that, as we understand, the fee under this head has actually been increased. Why? They certainly have a lot of questions to answer.

## Mystery disease baffles experts

Why are we not better prepared?

**T**HE death of nine people in Meherpur from a mysterious disease is extremely worrying. Blood samples from people in the two villages where the fatalities occurred have been sent to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) in Dhaka and to a research laboratory in Thailand. We urge the health ministry to expedite the identification process.

Clinical diagnosis has raised suspicions that the mystery disease may be Japanese encephalitis, rarely seen in Bangladesh but prevalent in south-east Asia. This is yet to be confirmed because existing facilities are not equipped to identify diseases that do not occur commonly in this country. This approach must change.

The Ministry must upgrade its research facilities. What steps, if any, has the Ministry taken to link up with other laboratories in the region in order to be better prepared for new diseases? The 'mystery' illness in Meherpur occurred nearly a month ago, but the reticence and ignorance of village folk to properly report the disease to health authorities delayed diagnosis. The Ministry must mobilise its network of clinics to gather information and raise awareness of these new diseases.

The Ministry of Health must wake up to the reality that a germ does not respect national boundaries. The outbreak of dengue fever was cause for much bafflement only a couple of years ago. We do not wish to see a repeat of the same.

Other concerned ministries and departments need to be mobilised to ensure stringent health checks at our borders. In this age of globalisation, Bangladesh must equip itself to deal with all kinds of new challenges. Sitting back and expecting germs to keep off simply because they have not visited this land before is going to cost precious lives.

## Secular vote for change: The charisma that wasn't

PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

**L**IKE opinion-poll pundits, our politicians make wild forecasts. When these go wrong, they invent convoluted explanations. Take elections as "referendums". In 1993, Mr Narasimha Rao declared that assembly elections in Andhra would prove the popularity of his neo-liberal economic policy. Yet, the Congress suffered one of its worst-ever defeats.

In 1998, puffed by a vocal pro-nuclear minority, and ignoring Parliament (where 60 percent of all speeches criticised the blasts), the BJP declared that assembly elections that year would be a "Pokharan vs Pyaaz" referendum. Onions had shot up to Rs. 40-plus a kilo.)

The "Pyaaz" decisively won Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. Politicians discovered that Bombs don't fetch votes.

After the Tehelka disclosures, Mr Vajpayee bravely declared the five May 10 assembly elections would be a "referendum" on the NDA. The people have spoken. Their verdict is unambiguously against the NDA. They want change and oppose opportunism and communalism.

The NDA can't pretend these elections weren't important. They

covered a fifth of India's population and area. The NDA campaigned vigorously. "Star" Vajpayee left no stone unturned. But the NDA came a cropper.

The BJP was hoping to quadruple its 1996 tally of eight MLAs. But it only inched up to 12 seats out of over 800. The number isn't even a third of what it would have won with its 1999 Lok Sabha vote-share. Evidently, its Central performance had its effect!

Years ago, it ceased being the "party with a difference" even for its admirers. Post-Tehelka, its stock is falling further.

Second, the BJP is no alternative to the pre-1996 Congress. It cannot provide a fulcrum for regional parties. The BJP has at best become "half-a-Congress" despite resilience and willingness to make unscrupulous deals. It hasn't become a "natural" party of governance, as it

West Bengal is enhanced by the attractive personality of Mr Buddhadev Bhattacharjee. The LF represents a degree of innovation, on top of a history of land reform, investment in minimum-needs programmes, and a relatively clean administration.

This is not true of Kerala. The LDF's politics is rather jaded. It faced other disadvantages too: hostile communal-caste polaris-

core is a combative (Thevar-Vanniyar) anti-Dalit alliance.

Ms Jayalalitha has little respect for democratic norms. As a convicted politician, she shouldn't hold office. The "normal" rule, that a minister should get elected to the legislature within six months, is meant for those who start with a clean slate. It shouldn't apply to someone without presumed innocence.

style "guided democracy", i.e. over-dependence on Ms Gandhi. This must change.

The Left too must learn some lessons. Despite its West Bengal performance, it is not a growing force nationally. It is not seen as an agent of change. The Left was wrong to ally with super-corrupt Jayalalitha and demoralise its own cadres.

The Left can only renew itself with fresh ideas, cadres and imaginative plans. It must formulate alternative plans for water, health, education, energy, transportation, housing, employment, women's empowerment, and secular values, to name a few.

The NDA's mandate has further eroded. It isn't about to collapse. But its vulnerability will greatly increase as the gathering economic crisis turns grim. It's hard to claim that the Alliance will last its term.

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If a Laloo must (rightly) quit on being charged by the CBI, so should Jayalalitha after being convicted, not just charged. (Admittedly, the EC's rules are contradictory, as the Balakrishna Pillai case shows, but that doesn't justify Ms Jayalalitha's swearing-in.) This issue will rankle despite legal hair-splitting.

The results warrant sobriety and introspection. The Congress has done better than it expected. But it shouldn't delude itself that the people again see it as the "natural" party of governance. It can't regain credibility without radically changing its policies, especially on the economy.

Equally deplorable is Congress-

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## Not quite cricket?



ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN

**U**S ambassador Mary Ann Peters would have made a great pace bowler.

This is not said in levity because firstly, cricket is a noble sport and one which I, together with about a billion fans worldwide, absolutely adore. And secondly, because pace bowlers are attackers. Some, though not all of them, rise above the ordinary by making the ball swing, often in the least expected direction.

And so was at the AmCham luncheon this month. Ambassador Peters bowled a couple of bouncers, at least one Yorker and even managed an away swinger. In the process, she annoyed many Bangladeshis. Well, pace attacks are bound to be irksome even when batsmen manage to duck, dig or hit the ball.

Analogy aside, the hurtful effect of the ambassador's speech has garnered centre stage, as it were, which is a pity. It is, of course, understandable. Little nations do not take too well to being lectured about their shortcomings, especially by the big boys. And this is The Big Boy. America is more than a powerful country. It is bread, butter and the odd helping of jam for lesser mortals around this globe. The very fact that a diplomat of her stature, (she is not, after all, the ambassador of Rwanda Burundi) should stand up at a more or less public event and tick off a laundry list of dos and don'ts for a minnow like Bangladesh to adhere to, is disconcerting in the extreme.

But first, let's get past her bowling

action. America is a Shoaib Akther, not a Saqlain Mushtaq. That is as obvious a fact of life as Tendulkar is a batting genius. Next, let's get beyond the venue. If she had to say it, was she wrong to say it where she did? Was she wrong to pick this turf? Should the ambassador have voiced her concerns and suggestions in a different setting, somewhere more selective so that only the top brass of this country would be privy to the American viewpoint?

Most ordinary people like myself have questions about the pros and cons of gas export. Not as many, but by comparison more vocal individuals, who believe they already have

at the same time, is has adopted an open-door policy towards exploration companies. Obviously, these companies are looking for a straightforward, commercially viable export market to sell their product. Is that the only option for this country? What are the other options?

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I say no. Not on your life. Indeed, I believe that the public airing of the ambassador's views has had two significant consequences. First, it has spelled out, in succinct terms exactly how America currently perceives its interests in Bangladesh. For some, this might have been obvious but for the larger audience, i.e. that (tiny?) factor called The People, it is out in the open.

By stating America's case clearly and publicly, this issue has been given the airing it desperately deserves. We now know, without a shadow of a doubt, that America would like to see political parties adopt the promise (or threat?) of gas export as an election pledge and implement that policy within 100 days of taking office.

What is wrong with that knowledge? If anything, it provides a perfect window of opportunity to debate or oppose the American perspective. If this is where the USA stands on gas or any other issue, why should The People be prevented from learning about it straight from the horse's mouth?

The argument that 'sensitive' issues such as raised by Ambassador Peters ought to have been discussed in selective parleys, is

sador ought to be hidden from The People would be singularly funny, if it were not dangerous. Let us not mask rigidity and fear under the guise of national security. Sure, security concerns such as the defence of the realm, (though not the purchase of a couple of handy MIGs or frigates, I might add!) must remain a closely guarded secret. But let us recognise and discard colonial attitudes that imbue sacrosanct halos around government and relegate the 'natives' to being mere bystanders to history.

The People have a right to know.

Better still, they have a right to respond.

And this is the second point of significance that I believe ambassador Peters' public airing has illuminated. Her suggestion that political parties adopt gas export as an election pledge is somewhat daft, in my view, because it ignores the reality that there has been no consensus building on this and many other issues. But that is an interesting point, is it not? Why has there been such a gap in such critical areas?

Ambassador Peters has indirectly highlighted the absence of

consensual dialogue in this country on matters of national consequence. By dialogue one does not refer only to the repeated seminars that have made CPD and BIS and heaven alone knows how many other salutary bodies a household name in intellectual circles, but the kind of dialogue that mature nations, as they come of age, encourage

between The People and the state—the former, represented by the media, opinion polls, discussions

Telephones will remain as elusive as water for the Afghan refugees. And gas, who knows how this country will end up using its energy resources or if it will ultimately be able to use them, in any way, at all?

The pity is not that Ambassador Peters has touched on truths. But that Bangladesh has responded by ducking her bouncer. If a diplomat speaks so boldly, a country can respond equally boldly. Some of her suggestions can be termed foolish, daft or even plain rubbish. One can argue against gas exports. One can ask why the US thought it fit last October to drop Bangladesh from its list of preferred nations for tariff exemptions. One can ask how far the US is prepared to go to support Bangladesh negotiate with the WTO.

This country can close its eyes to the rest of the world, like Myanmar, and hope for the best. Or, it can embrace the information age and open its eyes, even as it has always opened its doors, to the outside world. It can pick at petty breaches of diplomatic 'conduct' or it can clear out the cobwebs from its colonial mind.

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It can learn from this episode. When batsmen time their shots, they can hit fast bowlers out of the stadium. But standing tall against pace is possible only when one has built up the confidence to wield the willow. And that takes practice. It takes maturity.

It takes admitting that the bouncer that just whizzed by and knocked one on the helmet, really hurt. The eyes smart in humiliation and the arms shake in anger. But the ultimate effect of the bouncer must be to reinforce one's desire to improve one's own game. This is the only lesson to be learned. It is the only one worth learning. And that, in the end, is quite cricket.

Such a dialogue would be worth aspiring to, not only in any country on this globe, but also, and most particularly, in Bangladesh. Ambassador Peters' comments ought to reinforce that point, hurtful though it might be.

Indeed, the fact that Bangladesh might be shown 'the way' by an American alien hurts, does it not? Well, it ought to hurt. Because the fact of the matter is, only a house that is in terrible disorder can be scrutinised so severely and found wanting.

If one could go beyond the form, i.e. the style and location of the US ambassador's speech, and arrive at the substance, one could undoubtedly argue against her suggestions, but one would be hard pressed to find flaws in her choice of content.

Chittagong Port is a mess. The garments sector is not gearing up to deal with the crisis that will hit this country, as surely as a Kal Baisakhi will this month. The 'systems' loss in the power sector can only get worse.

Bangladesh has prospered in many fields, but the anti-liberation forces and a vested quarter are always at work to disrupt further prosperity.

However, we would like to remind the ruling party that it is their duty to fight the anti-liberation forces and ensure peace and prosperity in the country. Have they been able to fulfil their duties?

Crimes of all sorts have become almost routine and it is general people who suffer most. It is the civilians, the voters who are being murdered, hijacked, and violated, not the high-ups, the privileged section of the society. The mayhem continues to go on unabated and we keep on wondering, is this the progress the ruling party always boasts about?

**Mujibul Haque**  
Sobhanbag, Dhaka

**Thanks Daily Star**

I would like to thank Kumar (May 18) for his appreciation about Bengali press, especially *The Daily Star*.

I myself also read a lot of newspapers including a few Indian, but I couldn't see any letter from any Bangladeshi in those newspapers regarding the border clash. I once wrote a letter about the recent border incidents, but it was never published.

I greatly admire the generosity *The Daily Star* is showing. Despite being a Bangladeshi daily, it has the courage to publish even an adverse comment (letter from the 'True Indian' is a classic example).

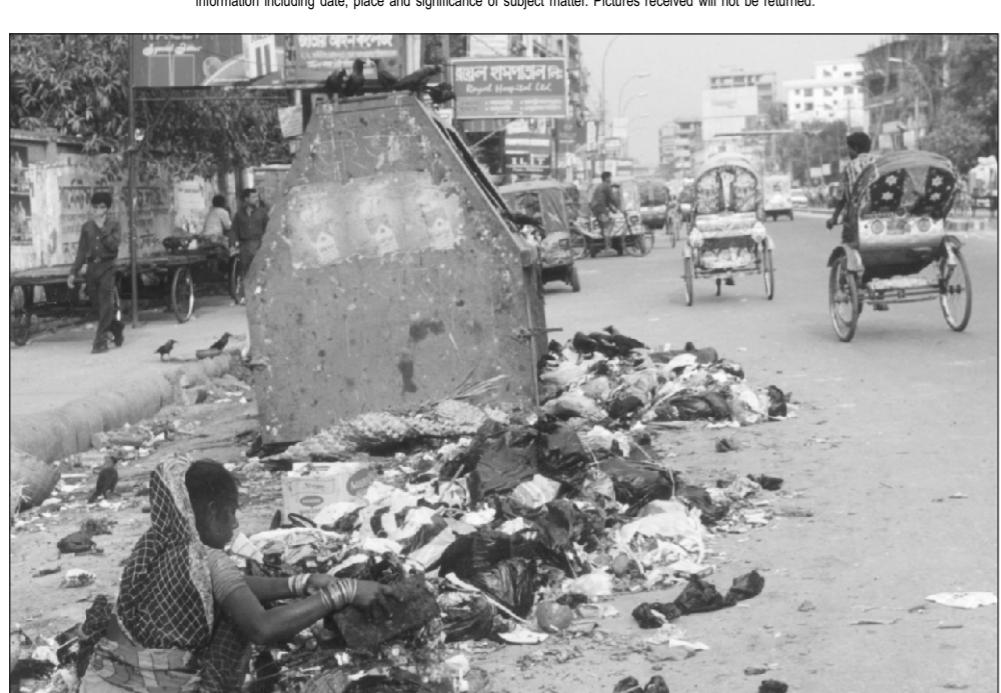
**Alamgir**  
Melbourne, Australia, on e-mail

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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## 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: AMRAN HOSSAIN

**Beautify Dhaka**  
The promise of 'Tilottama Dhaka' has literally gone to the dogs. This street, at Bangla Motor, is typical of many in the capital: garbage scattered all around, a terrible stench, pedestrians hurrying past covering their nose and a deprived person scavenging for something useful inside the refuse. When will the city fathers take dustbin clean-

## Connection to '71 genocide

Recently, I read a book "The Trial of Henry Kissinger" by Christopher Hitchens. The author has solid evidence to link Kissinger to genocide in Indo-China, Bangladesh (1971 Liberation War), East Timor, killing of Sheikh Mujib, planned assassinations in Santiago, Nicosia, Washington DC and so on.

I propose that *The Daily Star* prints the Bangladesh chapter titled "One Genocide, One Coup And One Assassination" with the publisher's authorisation. It has tremendous historic value as well as impact on our current affair. Our long held suspicion that the officers in 1975 coup did not act alone will be proven through this revelation.

**N. Karim**

TX, USA, on e-mail

## Putting on a freak show!

I am writing in reference to the news item "Project Litigon comes under fire" (May 11). Our esteemed zoo authorities seem to have decided to crossbreed an Indian lion with an Indian tiger to produce a litigon, a "show animal", for visitors to come and gape at the sight of its deformed, distorted features. This sad attempt to create a sensation at the zoo is a gross violation of animal rights of any kind, moral, ethical, or logical.