

BNP must act immediately on many fronts

Violence, economic doldrums and an active parliament are priorities

AS BNP takes over from the caretaker government, it has little time for self-congratulation. Problems of all sorts have piled up and more are on the way. Academics and business leaders have already expressed deep concern for the economy and it needs immediate management. The law and order situation has nose dived as well and unless tackled may deliver crippling body blows to the republic. And at the apex is the often ignored task of establishing a parliamentary culture on which rests the platform of all other deeds.

Bangladesh's economic health has moved from the frail and fragile to the desperately ailing. The fall out from the September 11 will certainly hit Bangladesh as noted by experts and this comes when the almost solitary export sector - ready made garments - is facing serious decline. The possible failure of aman crop this year will be a huge additional burden and international aid will certainly look for more strategically placed locations than Bangladesh. None should be surprised if GDP declines by as much as 1 per cent this annum. The BNP government can't do business as usual if they are to manage the economy adequately.

The swiftness with which BNP hoodlums have slipped into terrorist shoes has shocked all. In a few days they have become a serious source of embarrassment for BNP. The bashing of journalists was the most brazen display of intolerance and the attack on the minorities, was a negation of national values. The manner in which a section of the new ruling party MPs broke and entered into the rooms of the MP hostel has greatly shocked us.

On the issue of attack on the minorities, the new government must take a very serious position. Denying connections with the thugs will do little to improve its profile. It should set up an Inquiry Commission at once to identify and punish the guilty. If these acts were carried out to embarrass BNP, as some of its leaders are saying, then evidence should be presented. But whoever the culprits are must have the book thrown at them. Whoever wishes to rule Bangladesh must reject violence or face public rejection.

But the crux of it all will be the management of the parliament. The BNP boycotted the 7th parliament and ultimately left it to walk on the streets rather than the corridors of elected governance. They felt the AL-led parliament didn't give them a chance to play their legitimate role. The BNP now has an opportunity to repair what they had complained about.

The first act would be to offer the Deputy Speakership to the Opposition. In fact, Awami League had made this offer to the BNP in the last parliament but it was refused. This initiative has to be revived and we know that this idea has strong endorsement within the BNP itself. To be an effective body the legislative process must be more conciliatory and not confrontational as has often been in the past.

The idea of giving the opposition 75 per cent of the total PM Question Hour time may be considered as a measure of giving them a bigger role to play. Unless the Opposition feels that they have an effective role to play in this body, they will have no stake. Unless the Opposition has a stronger visibility, presence and impact, this parliament will go the way of the two previous ones. The last parliament was crippled. This one with an overwhelming majority is actually more vulnerable to political irrelevance if the Treasury Bench has only itself to talk to.

And finally, the Opposition leader has to be treated with the respect and honour she deserves. The present leader represents over 40 per cent of the voting public, the highest harvest of votes by one single party in this election. If anything, the status must be enhanced to reflect the role the people expect from the parliament and its august members, the Government and the Opposition.

Winning an election by forming an alliance showed the BNP's capacity to adjust and compromise. That is often easy with political friends. To do the same with one's political opponent is the real test of statesmanship. And that is the test that the BNP must pass. Neither BNP nor Bangladesh can afford failure as we move into the most difficult period of recent global history.

MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

THERE is a proverb that a cannon is being used to kill a mosquito. This is what the US and the UK have started doing now in Afghanistan. The world's most modern and sophisticated war machine is in action to destroy the most obsolete war equipment left in Afghanistan by the former Soviets. It's an irony of fate that the only superpower on earth has cobbled together a large coalition mostly of friendly nations plus two interested local parties, Pakistan and India to attack the poorest of the poor country which was already reduced to rubble by three decades of war starting with the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviets. So far the US and British attacks were reportedly on specific targets of war interest. But the Kabul government said about 20-30 civilian deaths have already taken place. The waves of attack are now going on. The exact damages (BDA) are yet to be announced.

The most important key player Pakistan appears to be in turmoil as serious and violent demonstrations have been taking place in many cities of Pakistan against the US attack on Afghanistan. Pakistan's President General Musharraf said it's going to be a short, sharp and targeted attack whereas the US said it is going to be a long, comprehensive and relentless war. Whatever may be the understanding among the partners of the alliance the entire war exercise today seems to be a fruitless one though the US was undoubtedly gravely hit by the monstrous terrorist attack. This sort of war is unlikely to take the US and its allies to the desired goal.

However, the purpose of building up the war machine all around have already brought some results. May be the first wave of attacks on the specific targets to disable the Talebans' war capability has also served the basic purpose. There is already very high tension in many of the Muslim countries though it is generally understood that this war is not against Islam; it's against terrorists and their network. But this general understanding cannot be transmitted to every ordinary people in the street. And with the death of civilians this understanding would be further eroded and it would be very difficult to contain the agitation in so many places. It's very likely that many countries would face serious destabilization in the days ahead. Keeping in view all these dangerous consequences, the US may think in terms of halting the

strikes, at least for some time, as initial purpose has already been served.

America can undoubtedly flatten Afghanistan's hills and mountains and kill all living beings there and even 'disturb' the eternal sleep of the 'dead' of 21 years of Afghan war; it has that military capability. But it may be extremely difficult to find Osama bin Laden in the maze of hills and mountains and countless land mines in between. In any case, the material cost will be certainly too high which even America would find it difficult to bear. The hope of getting over the present 'recession' may disappear and it is likely to be a long and deep recession and the entire world will be badly affected.

If America wants to "smoke out"

day...It is, by its very nature, something that cannot be dealt with by some sort of massive attack or invasion...This is not something that begins with significant event or ends with a significant event. It is something that will involve a sustained effort over a good period of time." So there is no hurry. The US may halt the bombing operation to give the negotiations a chance. In any case, anything done in a hurry because of public pressure or support may destroy the chances of achieving the main goal.

The basic purpose has probably been served. There is already a panic among the Talebans and this is why they released the British woman journalist who entered Afghanistan without valid docu-

ments. She came out and told the reporters in Pakistan that she "was treated well and with respect..." She was also dressed in an Afghan way with full head cover. She looked pretty dignified in that dress. Taleban earlier appeared ready to release the aid workers too but the bombings have stopped the process. They also said that they were prepared to discuss about the fate of Osama bin Laden if credible evidence could be put forward. Taleban said they would try him if such evidence could indict Osama bin Laden in the court of law as put by Pakistan. If bringing Osama to justice is really the goal, then there should be a halt in the bombing and negotiations be given a chance.

A halt may subside the present volatile situations in different countries. Even the US Embassies and Consulates are under attacks. A pause may stabilize the situation and that would be good for the US and the UK. May be, through proper contacts and negotiations, Taleban would agree to hand over Osama to a third country including a Nordic country which would be acceptable to both sides and the trial could commence to bring him to justice. Two of the Muslim countries Saudi Arabia and UAE have severed their diplomatic ties with Afghanistan. This leaves Taleban practically alone in the world. Pakistan may continue to have some link to keep the door open to talk to Taleban so

to Afghan people. They have also dropped thousand of food packets in the villages of Afghanistan. Let these not turn out to be a good meal to Afghan people before they are bombed and killed. So continued military action is no option at all to eliminate terrorism. This will only radicalize others who are now supporting actions against terrorism and thus there would be possible bursting out of the present cocoons of terrorists' operations spreading terrorism all over which would be almost impossible to control.

The protests against war have been taking place in many places around the world including some of the campuses in the USA. Any further bombing, of however precision these may be, would certainly involve more civilian deaths. And the death of Osama bin Laden will make him the martyr and this will enrage many Muslim communities who support Osama... Pakistan will certainly be the worst hit country. The present wide support of the Americans to President Bush's handling of the situation including his programme of military strikes is also likely to dwindle fairly quickly when the Americans would start receiving the coffins which cannot be ruled out in any ground fight. These stark realities will have to be understood and borne in mind before continuing the military strikes against Afghanistan. Any ground

offensive is likely to be very long and deadly one. If the history of Afghan peoples' resilience and the type of war they fight are any guide, then any war at this stage, however strong the alliance might be, could be even worse than that of Vietnam.

Therefore, instead of taking a plunge into a long and risky war, it would be advisable to go by what President Bush said, "... whether we bring terrorists to justice or justice to terrorists; justice will be done." Justice can never be done through war; war is always an unjust and dangerous tool to deal with any world problem. Have patience and close in the Talebans through diplomatic means (military threat is already there) and deal with them in a way that will force them to ult-

Again quoting what President Bush said, "... whether we bring terrorists to justice or justice to terrorists; justice will be done." President Bush was committed to justice. My interpretation of the statement is that if the first part i.e. bringing terrorists to justice does not work he would try the next i.e. bringing justice to terrorists. If my understanding is correct he would engage in removing the causes which led them to terrorism. Indeed, this would be the best option.

Various reports show that Osama bin Laden being the son of a multi-millionaire opted for Jihad as he put it, though for others it is terrorism, for various injustices for which he held the US responsible. The main and indeed the most important ones are his own area the Middle East and the problems are (1) Israel's occupation of Arab land, (2) unduly long sanction against Iraq that led to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children, (3) stationing of US military in the holy land. If the US could solve these problems which are within its control, the causes of terrorism would stand greatly removed and obviously there would possibly be no reason for Osama to continue his Jihad. At least he would get no outside support for his actions if he wanted to pursue it at all.

President Bush has already endorsed the earlier US vision of a Palestinian State as long as Israel's existence is respected. His Administration should now work without any Israeli bias and ask Israel to vacate the land occupied in 1967 war. This will remove one of the main causes of the present violence in the Middle East. The other ones can also be solved if there is a genuine resolve on the part of the present Administration. Time has come for the US to move ahead with its own agenda that is of interest to American people. It is the general belief that the Americans are suffering for unduly supporting and protecting Israel's selfish interest against the legitimate rights of the Arabs. Let the US act without any Israeli bias and that will hopefully bring peace in the Middle East and in that event the US would not have to station any of its forces in the holy land or any places around the Middle East. The US knows very well that Israel has to abide by and will abide by what America will desire for its own interest and also for the greater interest of the world.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary, Ambassador and founder-president of North South University

The military strike will undoubtedly kill innocent people of Afghanistan who have been suffering for the last 21 years. The US has rightly provided \$ 320M as food aid to Afghan people. They have also dropped thousand of food packets in the villages of Afghanistan. Let these not turn out to be a good meal to Afghan people before they are bombed and killed. ... Continued military action is no option at all to eliminate terrorism.

Osama bin Laden including his Taleban associates from hiding, it may even have to resort to nuclear and chemical and biological weapons, but that will destroy all people in countries around Afghanistan. That's not an option either that America can use. America has also to remember that "Afghanistan is a grave yard of invaders." The recent one was the sad departure of the defunct Soviet Union from Afghanistan after having suffered heavy losses in men and materials. One does not know whether behind the scene there is an attempt to make America suffer the similar fate.

In any case, continued military action will result in the deaths of huge number of innocent civilians apart from displacement of even a greater number causing humanitarian disaster. This will certainly evoke further protests all over the world and particularly in the Muslim states and in that event, in all probability, the coalition which has been built so painstakingly may falter and thus destroy the chances of the greater and wider fight against terrorism. Thus a continued military strike does not seem to be a good option at all. The better option might be to tame the Taleban into accepting the reality instead of "smoking" them out.

It may, however, take time. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said that, "There is not going to be a D-

riding roughshod on democratic practices, freedom, human rights and rule of law, dignity and honour. In actions, legislative measures and utterances the leadership echoed L'e'tat ces moi (I am the state) meaning accountability to none, voiced by Loise XI4, the Bourbon monarch of France before the storming of Bastille by Parisian mob. Like a Shakespearian tragic hero, Awami League suffered a reversal of fortune in the election on account of a flaw in its character. The conceited megalomania caused by arrogance of power and authoritarian paternal and personal style of rule by the leadership of Awami League was the tragic flaw and central to its decline and fall. How else can one explain the strident and sweeping legislations such as Public Safety Act, ostensibly to curb terrorists but in essence to persecute the Opposition, and the Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act unprecedented and unheard of anywhere in the world, providing for an elaborate security force for protection of Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana at a huge expense of public exchequer? The occupation of Ganabhaban, the official residence of the prime minister even after she left the office of prime minister on the plea that it was decided by her cabinet was the last straw on the camel's back. There was widespread revulsion and anger in the mind of ordinary people at this brazen impropriety.

The rest, including the abysmal decline of law and order perpetrated and patronised by some Awami League law makers and their sons and party workers, politicisation of every layer and sinew of administration and institution at the expense of merit and quality, pervasive corruption and misappropriation of properties, nepotism, promotion ad nauseum of the glorification of personality and family cult and lastly, intolerance to the Opposition, naturally followed. Sadly, the nation was arbitrarily split down the middle into pro and anti liberation forces, pro and anti Awami League camp follower, creating a dangerous climate of adversaries in the country. There was no room for the vast multitude of apolitical, the non-partisan or the neutral. The beneficiaries of government blessings were the Awami League sympathisers and workers. Even the opportunities for much talked about Arsayan, old age pension for farmers and Karma Shanshan Bank projects for poverty alleviation were not accessible to persons without Awami League credentials.

The system introduced was reminiscent of a totalitarian regimentation of society depicted in the allegorical novel *The Animal Farm* by George Orwell. In such a system every body including teachers, students, officials, businessmen, farmers and common man suffered exclusion and alienation. The circumstances bred seething discontent. People felt terrified, helpless and suffo-

cated. The election offered the much needed breather.

Yet, Awami League once was a grassroots organization. It is a pity it lost touch with people. Its leaders and workers remained busy in sharing the spoils of power. The interest and concerns of people and the constituency receded from their attention and consideration and was relegated to obscurity. It is significant to note that the leadership of Awami League seldom visited the countryside to listen to the problems and grievances of rural people who did not fail to notice her frequent visits abroad. The distanced voters felt ignored, neglected and betrayed. They waited for the day of reckoning on 1 October. The party suffered credibility loss of its image. How else do you explain the defeat of at least two ministers with perfect credentials? They were the casualties of the tarnished image of Awami League. The promiscuous electoral alliance of strange bed fellows might have a peripheral effect on the election result, it certainly does not explain the overwhelming support for win of the BNP.

It must be noted that the press, without exception, played a vital role in mobilising obverse public opinion against the many injustices and abuse of authority by the Awami League establishment. The screaming headlines in newspaper reports and graphic news photos of gruesome atrocities and murder suffered by innocent people and duty-bound journalists in the hands

of Awami goons in Dhaka, Feni and Laxmipur and elsewhere must have rankled in the mind of people while voting. The stark news photo of indignity and dishonour suffered by a demonstrating BNP woman activist in the street of Dhaka by police invoking the miserable image of disrobing of Draupadi in the palace of Durjodhana in Mahabharata must have cost Awami League tens of thousands or many more votes than it can imagine. Sadly, not only the authorities turned a blind eye to the reports but what was dreadful, the leadership often cynically defended what was most indefensible. Impervious to reaction of people, its leadership failed to read the writings in the wall. No wonder, living in a world of make belief, surrounded by sycophant courtiers, it was caught unawares by its stunning election defeat.

People have not rejected the election result as the leadership of Awami League would have us believe. On the contrary, people have rejected Awami League for its callous performance in office. Sooner the leadership realises this, the better for the organisation. It is time the party reviewed its mistakes and failings of its past so that it can pick up pieces to rebuild a new Awami League for the future. They alone are the cause of their downfall and should accept the election result in good grace eschewing its beaten track of rabble rousing. Shifting the blame to the caretaker government or the Election

Commission for implementing what they describe "the blue print of a conspiracy" to bring victory to BNP is an aberration and exercise in futility. Goebbels must be turning in his grave at this propaganda invective. The reverse is the true. The caretaker government successfully disrobing of Draupadi at the field level with Awami League sympathisers put in place on the eve of election.

"Never mind. I am not an Awami League basher nor do I hold any brief for any party. As perceived by me, this is a dispassionate analysis and appraisal of the causes of the defeat of Awami League in the election and has a lesson for all those who practise politics. I was a press officer of Syed Nazrul Islam for over three years and I had the opportunity to watch Awami League from close distance. But the present generation of Awami League leadership is no Bangabandhu, Syed Nazrul Islam or Tajuddin Ahmed. What is wanting is sacrifice, commitment and vision.

The election result has an implicit warning to BNP which emerged out victorious in the anti-Awami League wave. It must be careful to avoid the mistakes and excesses of the previous government and try to craft and foster a decent, responsible and accountable government dedicated to compassion and service to the people.

Abdul Hannan is a former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh UN Mission in New York.

Awesome majesty of people's power

ABDUL HANNAN

THE voters in the election of 1 October 2001 have made it once again decisively. They made it in 1954 and accomplished what was unbelievable by routing the Muslim League riding at the crest of power both at the centre and the province. They again made it in 1970 in the wake of a devastating cyclone in East Pakistan by a massive mandate in favour of Awami League for asserting the rightful share of East Pakistan as a majority province in the administration of Pakistan to right the wrongs and injustices suffered by East Pakistan in the hands of Pakistani rulers. This time around, by inflicting a crushing defeat on the Awami League and crowning BNP with victory, they sent out an unmistakable message about the awesome majesty of the power of the people who cannot be fooled by rhetorics, who never make mistake in taking the right decision and would brook no non-sense from the politicians in whom they reposed their trust. They paid back the politicians in their own coin. The election proved that people cannot be won over by money or muscle power.

After 21 years in wilderness, the Awami League came to power asking forgiveness of people for their past mistakes and pledging an agenda of work for the good and in the interest of people. But once restored to power, it made a short shrift of its promises and its leadership behaved more like a monarch than a much professed democrat

riding roughshod on democratic practices, freedom, human rights and rule of law, dignity and honour. In actions, legislative measures and utterances the leadership echoed L'e'tat ces moi (I am the state) meaning accountability to none, voiced by Loise XI4, the Bourbon monarch of France before the storming of Bastille by Parisian mob. Like a Shakespearian tragic hero, Awami League suffered a reversal of fortune in the election on account of a flaw in its character. The conceited megalomania caused by arrogance of power and authoritarian paternal and personal style of rule by the leadership of Awami League was the tragic flaw and central to its decline and fall. How else can one explain the strident and sweeping legislations such as Public Safety Act, ostensibly to curb terrorists but in essence to persecute the Opposition, and the Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act unprecedented and unheard of anywhere in the world, providing for an elaborate security force for protection of Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana at a huge expense of public exchequer? The occupation of Ganabhaban, the official residence of the prime minister even after she left the office of prime minister on the plea that it was decided by her cabinet was the last straw on the camel's back. There was widespread revulsion and anger in the mind of ordinary people at this brazen impropriety.

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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.



Save our city

From a bird's-eye view of the capital city Dhaka, it becomes clear how densely the city is growing ignoring the safety and security of the dwellers. Nearly 80 per cent of structures in Dhaka are vulnerable to shocks. The metropolis has already been branded as the most densely populated and polluted city in the world and if we don't take action now the day is not far away when Dhaka would be declared an inhabitable.

STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Father of the Nation

The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam's commentary "Recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation" (October 7) has drawn my attention. I am a regular reader of this paper and so far the news, articles and editorials written and published by you have attracted appreciation of many readers and I personally never found anything to disagree with you. I observed you relentlessly tried to motivate the political top most leaders with good counsel and opinions. However, in the present situation I differ with your opinion where you appeal to the BNP chief Khaleda Zia to recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the nation.

I fully condemn the reaction expressed by the leader of Awami League Sheikh Hasina immediately after the unofficial declaration of 8th Parliamentary Election result which will encourage further terrorism and loss of many more lives. This leader when in power posed to be the believer of democracy but after defeat in the election she totally changed her stand.

During her five years regime Sheikh Hasina and her followers always undermined the image of the late president Ziaur Rahman. They were also not ready to accept the historical facts and contributions of Ziaur Rahman during the liberation war. Sheikh Hasina and her followers also made the image

of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman controversial. Making capital out of the image of Bangabandhu they have ruined the image of this great leader. The government of Awami League declared Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Father of the Nation unilaterally. If the AL's real intention was to establish Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation then they should have tried to keep him above politics and wouldn't have used his image as a political instrument.

In the recent election Awami League used the photograph of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in their posters for their election campaign. If Bangabandhu was really the Father of the Nation then why would only a particular party be using his image and consider him as their sole property?

Father of the Nation does not fall within the definition of a sovereign state. There are many countries without Father of the Nation. I therefore opine that for their contribution for the freedom of Bangladesh 1) Shere-e-Bangla Fazlul Hoque 2) Moulana Bhashani 3) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 4) Ziaur Rahman be declared as national leaders.

For permanent settlement of the issue and to make it uncontroversial, a referendum should be held to decide whether Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be

declared as the Father of the Nation. A.K.M.Ziaul Huda Uttara, Dhaka

Election 2001: A silent revolution

A silent revolution has occurred in the country on the 1st October. Once again it was proved that if given congenial atmosphere, people would never fail to give correct verdict to determine the destiny of the country.

From Teknaf to Tetulia whoever was interviewed by the press, everyone spoke in one voice against prevalent terrorism in the country and their ardent desire for an environment where they could live in peace with dignity and honour.

The misdeeds of the political cadres of the erstwhile ruling party knew no bounds. The ministers, MPs, their sons and relations considered the country as their personal property and behaved as such. The leader of the then ruling party did not take any action against them and even came out with open support for the top most terror of the country who declared himself as the unofficial ruler of a district, which, in fact, ultimately put the last nail on the coffin of the former ruling party's popularity.

People, comprising the silent majority, waited with patience for the poll day and gave a befitting reply by ballot rejecting the perpe-

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

trators of terrorism of the country.

However, the incumbent ruling party should not be complacent for its landslide victory. Actually people cast their vote against terrorism and lawlessness. It was not that the people liked one party or the other.

But they certainly voted against terrorism patronised and institutionalised by the state and the message was very clear. Now it is up to the victorious party to show their will and action in eradicating this evil from the society. Like the former ruling party, there are also such evil elements in their political cadres and student wing as well. The incumbent prime minister of the country will have to be tough in dealing with them on this issue, so that such evil cannot dare raise its head any more. Otherwise, it will also meet the same fate sooner or later.

The voters have done their duty and now it is the politicians' turn to lead the country to prosperity. In this connection we would like to thank Justice Latifur Rahman and CEC M A Syeed and their entire team for making such a wonderful arrangement for the voters which enabled them to cast their votes freely and without fear. The banning of mobile phone and vehicular traffic during the polling was a unique measure and acted like magic in containing violence at the polling centres. We also salute our Armed Forces, BDR, Police

Force, Ansars and members of VDP for superb discharge of their duties. Their presence and excellent support helped in holding the historic election peacefully.

MA Haque, Eskaton, Dhaka

Exam markings

Now that the grading system has been introduced, why cannot full marks be given to a student of SSC or HSC? If there is no mistake and the answer is written correctly then why should an examiner give B or B+ instead of A?

Despite the fact that much importance is given to 'good handwriting' students often do not receive proper recognition for good penmanship. Rather scrutiny at the Education Boards takes place and the notice of the Head Examiner is sometimes drawn as if to prove that an examiner has committed a crime by creating good handwriting.

Then there are those students who write a paragraph and do not leave enough space after the 'margin' but still get good grades. The same (margin) happens in writing letters or in answering questions.

Shouldn't the Education Boards instruct all schools and colleges to teach the students how to write a paragraph or answer a question properly?

Mujibul Haque Sobhanbag, Dhaka