

## Is anybody in charge of Dhaka traffic ?

Congestion heightens during Ramadan to expose weaknesses

**D**HAKA'S spectacular traffic mess becomes even more incredible around Eid time. There is a lot more movement during this festival season as people go to shops more often and the load increases on the road. But the situation is compounded many times over by the digging spree that seems to grip the road construction workers. Most of the thoroughfares with major two-way junctions are suddenly overtaken by improvement frenzies turning traffic movement in the city into bigger nightmares than the ones we live with throughout the year. One wants to scream and ask if anybody is in charge of Dhaka traffic or not.

The matter isn't simply that of going about to different parts of the city. Eid is the time when more purchases take place than in any other time of the year. It's a big shot in the arms of the generally moribund retail trade. The shop level expenditure keeps the consumer market floating. In these times with recession haunting the economy, this may make all the difference between staying alive or expiring. The Eid shopping season is a major economic part of the national life.

The traffic's role is therefore that of a facilitator to ensure better and higher purchasing levels. However, the traffic management seems to be committed to achieve the opposite. In some ways, they seem to be meant to harass the consumer. We aren't going to say that they are attacking the economy but we will certainly say that they aren't helping at all.

The problem seems to lie in planning or lack of it. The road digging belongs to one department while traffic management to another. This has always been the excuse. We are rather tired of hearing the same orchestra of incompetence. Surely someone must be in charge? Surely that someone must have heard of co-ordination? Sadly evidence points the other way but we in a dogged manner will remain optimistic and hope that management sense will prevail and shoppers, sellers and plain passengers will not have to run an extra mile of suffering just because the festival season is here.

## Good augury for campus peace

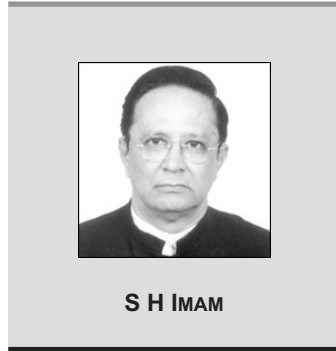
The understanding between JCD-BCL at DU should be replicated elsewhere

**I**T is heartening to note that the leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) have sued for peace through co-existence. They have agreed to 'rehabilitate' 57 BCL students in their halls of residence from which they were ousted earlier on by JCD activists. The DU authorities were present when they signed up to the deal indicating that the new Vice Chancellor's initiative to bring the youngsters together on the issue has worked. Dr. Anwarullah's first taste of success on this persuasion mission with the students should induce him to go for more till the rival student bodies come to terms with each other.

Instead of keeping the driven-out students permanently at bay their once implacable foes are welcoming them back to their dormitories. This should signal no more ousting of rival students by JCD elements from the residential halls. It is important that the agreement holds in the first place so that it becomes an example for rivaling student bodies in other educational institutions to follow. Obviously, some conscious efforts would need to be made by their authorities to set the ball rolling in that direction. We urge them to do just that as the respective JCD and BCL units warm up to the prospects for early peace at the campus throughout the country.

During most of the last five years the BCL as the then ruling party AL's student wing had quietly taken control of the halls driving the JCD out of picture. This has been avenged for lately as the JCD walked into the halls to establish their suzerainty. The latest understanding between both sides marks the breaking of that cycle. This indeed is a good augury.

# Stuck with only the form of democracy, its substance eluding us



**B**EGUM Zia has a massive electoral mandate to fulfil. The expectation is she will use it to the maximum benefit of the country. How does she do it, especially when it doesn't look like being a bed of roses laid out before her?

It won't be long before we know whether she has a kitchen cabinet. But at this point in time it is clear that she has some trusted lieutenants around her, among senior cabinet colleagues. The technocratic, administrative and developmental inputs are to come through the clutch of officials at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Then there are some cabinet committees to assist the Prime Minister in decision-making matters.

Needless to say, the equations that develop between the advising and executing apparatuses around the PM will be of crucial importance in shaping the end-results. There is every reason to believe they will

avoid working, even unwittingly, at cross-purposes. This is an elected political government. Its decisions ought to be the command for the bureaucracy. While that equation is pretty much set out, and is a well-accepted norm, what perhaps needs to be stressed here is that policies and decisions must not be taken on political considerations. In this context it is important that the government has listening posts in apolitical think-tanks and inde-

agriculture. This can be seen as a private sector association with the political economy or the development process going beyond the conventional role of the private enterprise.

As for throwing open channels of communication with the Opposition the Ramadan respite in agitational politics is nearly at its halfway point and yet no sign is in sight that it will be put to use anytime soon. Ifar parties between senior political

various international monitoring groups evincing a keen interest in the process have produced a parliament that does not practically work. It goes though the motions, can pass laws, ratify ordinances and even amend the Constitution with the ruling alliance having a two-thirds majority but it is not still a parliament the people had voted for. Yes, any or all of these things can happen even if the opposition attends parliament but that obvi-

ously with the important distinction that the people who had voted for them -- and there is a good 40 per cent of them of the electorate -- would have known that their voice has been heard in the Jatiya Sangsad. If the opposition does not join the parliament it forfeits the right to call the Jatiya Sangsad partisan and one-sided, because they have made it so by refusing to sit in the parliament in the first place.

To some extent, the government of the day might hazard being insulated, self-protective and 'partisan' in the face of continuing opposi-

tion non-cooperation. This is something that a boycotting opposition turns a blind eye to until elected to power to get the taste of its own medicine. The suggestion is not that lack of neutrality in administration is condonable under any circumstances but that's what might have been provoked by any incurable opposition stand-off.

So, we have had the caretaker government, free and fair elections, huge voter turn-out, especially among women, the changing of the guard, a potentially vibrant parliament and an experienced bureaucracy; but to what avail? The parliament can be non-functioning in the strict sense of the term, the administration apprehensive of problems and business in a stupor amidst a recession-hit economy that can ill-afford any further body-blow from harkals.

It won't be an exaggeration to say, therefore, that the election results risk being put to waste insofar as strengthening the institutions of democracy goes. With all that our people have done for democracy, don't we deserve to be set apart from a handful of infamous countries where election results were foiled by undemocratic forces? Stuck with the form of democracy after the elections are successfully held sadly we are yet to discover the inner beauty, strength and creative potential of its substance.

History has ordained Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina to be our leaders. They are vastly experienced through stints in opposition and government but their experience has been to the exclusion of minimum mutual cooperation, which is indispensable for democracy to function meaningfully.

## JUST ANOTHER VIEW

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pendent media to get the necessary political, economic and social feedback. Politically unaffiliated think-tanks can provide her with professional advice devoid of any vested interest. Grameen Bank chief Professor Yunus, eminent economist Prof. Waheeduddin Mahmud and Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed, Managing Director, Palli Karma Sangsthan Foundation (PKSF) have lately advanced the idea of expert committees to the Prime Minister in the areas of technology, IT, telecommunications, commerce, industry, power and

leaders on both sides could open a window or two on paving the opposition participation at the standing committee meetings or joining the parliament on which they seem keen.

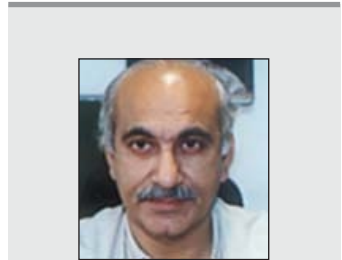
We have two unique distinctions in the democratic world that we occasionally pride ourselves on: one, an interim non-party caretaker government conducts the national elections every five years; and two, both the government and opposition leaders in our country are women.

The October 1 elections held under the caretaker system with the global attention focused on us and

among women, the changing of the guard, a potentially vibrant parliament and an experienced bureaucracy; but to what avail? The parliament can be non-functioning in the strict sense of the term, the administration apprehensive of problems and business in a stupor amidst a recession-hit economy that can ill-afford any further body-blow from harkals.

It won't be an exaggeration to say, therefore, that the election results risk being put to waste insofar as strengthening the institutions of democracy goes. With all that our people have done for

## BJP sends out an SOS



M.J. AKBAR

**W**HY did the BJP make Maneka Gandhi a minister? Numbers was a primary concern, a crucial determinant of value in a coalition government. Numbers were the reason why ministers eventually found less than competent were first given their jobs and then retained. Maneka Gandhi represents no one but herself.

An individual star then? With that ability which some politicians have to sway audiences with their oratory from Kerala to Bihar to Punjab to Mumbai. The Prime Minister, for instance: when Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee is in the mood he can pick up any audience and play with it as a child might play with a doll whose only response is "Mama...Mama". (These days the Prime Minister reserves such skills for either NRI gatherings in Washington or BJP gatherings in Amritsar.) But Maneka Gandhi is not, repeat not, an orator. The only leader in the Nehru-Gandhi family who was a true orator was Jawaharlal Nehru: he could speak on his feet because he would think all the time and read when he could. Indira Gandhi could never manage to distill the aroma of flowers into her phrases, although she more than made up with her confidence what she lacked in her language. No one could hammer a political theme, encapsulated in a few sentences, better than her. She had the power of a blacksmith rather than a goldsmith. The most evocative two-liner in the history of Indian democracy surely has to be the

Indira staple of the 1971 general election: "Woh kehke hain Indira hatao. Main kehke hoon garibi hatao. (They say remove Indira: I say remove poverty!)" Touché. Which land would not side after that?

Maneka Gandhi is more representative of the generation into which she married. Brevity is useful for this generation, because they do not have too much to say unless it is written down for them. Sanjay Gandhi's campaign speeches sounded like instructions from the

the Youth Congress during the Emergency and the Janata raj, but in middle age Maneka has become a maverick with a cause. Make that plural. A single cause would be insufficient for her energy levels. Such qualities would make her an excellent chief executive of a Norwegian-funded NGO. What are such passions doing in politics?

She is not in politics because she has deep ideological convictions, either Marxist or saffron. She is not in politics because her community

plane he could not control while still in his thirties. Rajiv was brutally assassinated in his prime, when he still had so much left to offer his country. In between Indira Gandhi gave her life for India. As long as Rajiv was alive, there was no question of the political inheritance going to anyone else, whatever Maneka Gandhi may have thought of his political abilities. But the moment he died, she was in business.

She was helped by the fact that Sonia Gandhi opted for seven years

Maneka was the National Democratic Alliance's very own Nehru-Gandhi. And if she was, in her combustible way, vituperative about Sonia Gandhi, why bother? She was not hurting the BJP by hurting Sonia.

So what happened? Why did the Prime Minister suddenly draw a sharp line last week and punished Maneka Gandhi by removing the culture ministry from her portfolio when Maneka wanted to nudge Sonia out of one of the government-

understand the *volte face* of Samajwadi Party leader Amar Singh, the man who stopped Sonia Gandhi from being sworn in as Prime Minister when she claimed that she had the support of 272 MPs after the defeat of the Vajpayee government on the floor of the House. The same Amar Singh, who could not stand the thought of an Italian-born Prime Minister of India is now publicly asserting that this is a non-issue, and that he has himself killed the bill he brought in Parliament to prevent any such possibility. That *volte face* is the call of Uttar Pradesh, where his party will probably need the support of Sonia Gandhi's Congress to form the government in Lucknow. But the BJP can have no such understanding with Sonia Gandhi. Surely not.

The only rational explanation is that the BJP continues to believe that the presence of Sonia Gandhi as leader of the Opposition is the best guarantee it has that its coalition will survive any crisis. The thought of Sonia Gandhi as their potential Prime Minister, in other words, will keep the present BJP flock from wandering towards other pastures. The BJP knows that another wobble can be expected after the results of the Uttar Pradesh elections. The BJP will lose in Uttar Pradesh, and Lucknow always casts a shadow on Delhi.

Destiny, in the meantime, has a habit these days of pushing Maneka Gandhi towards the winning side of an election. She would have campaigned for the losing side if she had not been touched; now she will do the rounds of UP, but urge for a vote against the BJP government. The BJP would have lost in any case, but there is no harm in claiming some of the credit.

A drowning BJP has sent out a desperate SOS signal. For the BJP, of course, SOS can only stand for Save Our Sonia.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age

## BYLINE

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legal guardian. Do this, do that. Vote for my five points. Sat Sri Akal. Jai Hind. Whatever.

Rajiv Gandhi had no flourish, and depended almost till the end on speechwriters of dubious value, and, on occasion, counterproductive worth ("Naani yaad dila denge" etc etc). Speechwriters tend to have one peculiar characteristic. They cannot resist making fun of their patrons behind their backs. Some of Rajiv Gandhi's penmen would, partly to display their intellectual superiority and partly to advertise their proximity, leak out details like the exact number of minutes a particular speech would take. Reporters with an inside track would then time the arrival and departure of phrases in a speech at any rally from the safety of the press box, with much subdued hilarity on the sidelines. No man is a hero to his speechwriter.

Brevity comes naturally to Maneka Gandhi for more than one reason: she has so many other things to do. I have no idea how she meshed into the earnest-schoolboy, part-crusader, part-bully culture of

wants her there, in the manner that Laloo Yadav or Mulayam Singh Yadav or Ram Bilas Paswan have built their base. If asked to identify her manifesto she would be a bit lost after she had gone beyond saving animals and forests. She belongs to no political party, and lives in a personal woodshed, in political terms. She cannot sway the electorate from Kerala to Kashmir. Of course she could turn around and say that everything in this paragraph applies to almost anyone you would meet in Parliament, but Atal Behari Vajpayee does not make almost anyone you would meet in Parliament a minister in his government. So why her?

The answer is family: the family Maneka Gandhi married into. The BJP, or at least the Prime Minister, was using her to give added credibility to the coalition he had built. Maneka Gandhi brought with her a surname from Sanjay Gandhi, son of Indira, brother of Rajiv and grandson of Jawaharlal.

There were two brothers in the family, and therefore two daughters in law. Both the brothers met tragic, even savage ends. One died in a

of cloister. But her very presence prevented Maneka Gandhi from joining the Congress. This was her Achilles heel. For the Nehru-Gandhi inheritance to work it must be routed through the Congress. That is non-negotiable.

On the other hand, Maneka Gandhi did create some space for herself in the non-Congress, non-BJP region. It was not ideal, but it was significantly better than nothing, particularly at a time when the Congress was looking frayed from every angle: age, vision, clarity, trust, relevance. When Sonia Gandhi formally entered politics, the family acquired a presence in both camps.

For the BJP it made eminent sense to elevate Maneka Gandhi to ministerial status: she, along with others like the old socialists, helped dilute the extremism that the party had become synonymous with during the Ayodhya movement and its cataclysmic climax. The BJP wanted to reposition itself as the "natural" magnet of a moderate coalition, and such associates certainly helped it to govern from the centre both literally and politically.

funded institutions that Sonia has, well, inherited?

Let us take the best reason possible. Simple, old-fashioned respect across party lines, in the finest traditions of a democratic polity. If this is true, then it is most welcome. Since he became Prime Minister, Mr Vajpayee has certainly gone out of his way to ensure that all the privileges of office, like a bungalow and top grade security, are kept with Sonia Gandhi and her daughter Priyanka even while home minister L.K. Advani has whittled away the privileges of former officebearers, including an ex Prime Minister like Chandra Shekhar.

If this is the real reason, then the BJP is a different party than it was when Rajiv Gandhi was alive. No abuse, including personal abuse, was too harsh for Rajiv Gandhi. The kind of atmosphere that was created against Rajiv Gandhi was unprecedented in democratic politics. Sonia Gandhi herself was fattened for the kill when, during the last general elections she seemed, briefly, as if she might offer a serious contest. Why has the ruling alliance gone soft on Sonia Gandhi now? One can

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### The arrest of Shahriar Kabir

It is quite shocking to learn that the authorities have arrested Shahriar Kabir for "anti-state activities." The actions of the authorities reveal their Stalinist mentality and imbecility. The notion that a journalist who interviews people who have fled to a neighbouring country should be charged with "anti-state activity" is completely devoid of any merit. It is very important for journalist and all citizens to have the right to free speech and to openly investigate matters of importance.

Visiting a neighbouring country or interviewing victims of communal violence cannot be either "anti-state activities" or "a heinous bid to tarnish the image of Bangladesh and its government." If anything those who incite communal violence, those who arrest journalist for writing about crimes, and those who label others as agents of foreign governments (without providing an iota of evidence) do much more harm to the country and assault democracy and freedom. I call upon the government to immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Shahriar Kabir.

The provisions of Special Power Act are particularly repulsive because it provides the authorities

enormous leverage of abusing this act in arbitrarily arresting and detaining those who are regarded by the men and women in power as their ideological and political opponents. It and other such laws are being widely abused by the governments in the past and this notorious tradition continues till date. It is high time that we scrapped such laws and remove all opportunities for the vindictive abuse of state power.

**Tanweer Akram**  
Alexandria

### Delivering text books in time

A distinguished graduate of the Presidency College, Calcutta and the head of a corporate body, in a seminar meeting made a startling comment. This friend of mine stated bluntly, "Management does not exist in Bangladesh. None of the management principles that you are discussing here can succeed in this country, in the face of monumental inefficiency, rampant corruption and widespread nepotism".

A news item in *The Daily Star* (November 12, page 12 column) reported inter alia, that the printing of the primary and secondary school text books has started and the headline of the news item stated, "NCTB taking steps to meet the

deadline", of first of January. Over a decade now the NCTB is always in a crisis and has failed to make the delivery of school textbook in time. The studies of the students have suffered for months. The National Curriculum and Text Book Board is staffed by very senior people and is also housed in an imposing building in the Motijheel Commercial Area. It has failed in its single objective, for myriad reasons, none of which is actually acceptable.

Students used to get their books in time, when there was no NCTB. In our school days, a few decades ago, there was no need to change the syllabus every year. A book could be used for several years without sacrificing the quality of education.

For the books to reach the students on the first of January the NCTB has to plan the whole operation at least twelve months in advance. Each segment of the operation has to be well targeted, and there should be a timetable, which has to be strictly observed. Failure of persons concerned at any operational stage has to be dealt with firmly. Transparency is required at every stage--storage and onward distribution in the chain of operation will require sound facilities at various points, which has to be planned and organised well in advance. For good and efficient management,

there must be discipline and accountability at every level.

**Shahabuddin Mahtab Siddheswari, Dhaka**

### "Brokers rule passport office"

In addition to the services of the brokers at Agargaon as your article (November 28) have mentioned, I can vouch for a few more from my personal experience.

They can also arrange false passports, second passports, passports with other names/dates of birth etc.

Since our passports do not have the bar codes, now standard all over the world, these false passports are just as valid for travel, visas etc. Very useful for aspiring terrorists and absconding criminals.

**Miran Ali, one e-mail**

### "Harrowing tales of depravity"

I offer my sincerest appreciation for your courageous decision to send your Star Rowing Team to Bhola to do the on the spot enquiry. I hope your courageous actions like this will uplift the standard of journalism.

**Waheed Nabi**  
Wales, Sheffield, England  
**Please look back**  
Benazir Bhutto has urged both the

US and India to put pressure on Pakistan for the return of democracy. We also want that democracy must be restored not only in Pakistan but also in other Muslim countries.

Benazir Bhutto, please look back for a moment. In the 1970 general elections Awami League became the largest majority party of the country by securing 160 out of 300 seats in the Parliament. But your father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did not want that Pakistan should be ruled by the Bangalees. He said that he would never accept Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a Prime Minister of Pakistan. He also said that there would be two Prime Ministers (?) in the country! He even played an important part in the century's worst genocide committed by the Pakistani army in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh in 1971.

At that time there was democracy, Ms Bhutto?  
**Iqbal Ahmed**  
Dhaka

### "I am ashamed"

I have been going through the letters published in your esteemed daily on the captioned letter (30 October) by Mr. Kamal Haq, with keenest of interest. I very strongly feel that the issue of tendering public apology by those who had collaborated with the Pakistan Army

during our Liberation War is of paramount importance to the nation.

My simple question is, do they still think and believe that whatever they did in 1971 was right? If not, why aren't they apologising to the nation? It is better late than never!

**Abdur Rahman, on e-mail**

### Washing dirty linen in public

As an elder citizen, I find the discretion of some political leaders disconcerting, as far as washing dirty linen in public is concerned. The political culture and ethics are simply not improving.

A case in point is what to tell the foreigners about our internal weaknesses, and how to be critical before the local audience (or in the JS). There should be some difference between these two environments. The aggrieved cannot maintain their balance, and spill out everything before everybody, throwing discretion to the dogs.

Such leaders should not be voted into power as the representatives of the people. This rejection has been clearly defined during the October general elections, but the crooked and the misguided are not learning from the cue. As far misuse of power is concerned, we are getting the reactions; the PG Hospi-

tal is back to its old name from that of a medical university obviously enforced by a former regime. The overdose of naming institutions is now (obviously) passing through the reaction stage. Why these avoidable moral excesses?

It is strange (and embarrassing) that an ordinary, nameless citizen has to upbraid the truant leaders on such basic issue of rules of conduct. We are a leaderless nation, hostage to the terrorists of the vested groups. When the leader cannot lead, the led are misguided by opportunists. This age-old law still works efficiently!

**Abul M Ahmad**  
Dhaka

### Hats off to The Daily Star

Since I discovered the Internet edition of *The Daily Star* almost a year ago it has become my daily ritual to visit this site. It has become my main source of information of what's happening in Bangladesh. I am impressed at your quality of journalism, objectivity, and above all your courage to address controversial (but important) issues facing our nation. In the midst of the chaos, corruption, disarray, and hopelessness that seem to pervade every facet of life in Bangladesh, *The Daily*

*Star* gives me the hope that all may not be lost yet. My hats off to you.

I had left Bangladesh almost three decades ago, while I was quite young. During this time my connections with Bangladesh had deteriorated almost to the point of indifference. It is amazing how *The Daily Star* has rekindled my interest for what is happening in Bangladesh. Thank you *Daily Star* for making this possible.

**A. Zaman**  
Minnesota, USA

### US double standards

Recently, the US government has released a video about the atrocities committed by the Taliban government. We are appalled by this story. To make it clear, it is nothing new as all of us are aware of philosophical convictions of the Taliban.

However, the US government is totally silent about the enormity of crimes and atrocities committed by the Israeli government against Palestinians. Unless the US government changes its double standard, it will gradually lose its position as a champion of human rights. As a Muslim I strongly believe that truth will prevail at the end of the day.

**Jubair Ahmad**  
Sharjah, UAE