

AL's movement to 'topple' the government

Stop this anti-democratic rhetoric

FOLLOWING Wednesday's police beating of several AL leaders, including two former ministers, the party acting President Abdus Samad Azad called upon the people to be prepared to launch a movement to 'topple' the government. We think it is a very undemocratic statement and one that will further alienate the party from the voters. We must remind the veteran AL leader that the days of 'toppling' governments have gone along with the days of military dictatorship. Under democracy we 'vote out' a government and not topple them, and that it is done by the voters and not by any political party. Yes, the AL can and should carry out activities to expose the inadequacies of the government and try to build public opinion against them so that the next time around the voters should 'vote out' Khaleda and her alliance government.

We would like to remind the AL leadership of the history of the last 11 years of our democracy. During this time both our major parties have had a chance to form a government and also be in the opposition. Both the BNP and the AL, while in opposition acted very irresponsibly and instead of joining the parliament preferred street agitation. Both launched their so-called movements to 'topple' the government. The fact is that both of them failed, and miserably so. Neither AL nor BNP were able to 'topple' the other from power. This has been the lesson of the last two terms of the two governments. There was another lesson. While these two parties tried to 'topple' each other the country, its economy and its people suffered.

We recall this immediate past history to remind the AL leaders that if you believe in democracy, in elections and in the people's right to choose their government through a Constitutional process then do not try the route that has failed both for you and for your opponent. Do not make the country suffer more and punish the people for exercising their democratic right of voting the party of their choice to power. If you go in the path of 'toppling' an elected government you will only harm the country through your so-called movement. You will be able to do nothing to the elected government as we saw from two previous experiences. Please desist from the path that leads nowhere but to public suffering. Please stop this anti-democratic rhetoric. This is both a plea and a warning.

Finance Minister demands better income tax collection

It's systemic flaw and not just inefficiency or corruption

THE directive by the Finance Minister that major tax evasion cases should be detected and a report finalized within two weeks is welcomed. One hopes that this will be part of major drive to rein in major defaulters who not only have accumulated most of the wealth but also have evaded most of the taxes. It has gone beyond the level of poor tax collection but become a matter of organized unfair practices.

The crisis has been spelt out by the fact that tax collection for the first half-year has fallen short by near 2.5 percent. This is obviously a matter of lax tax collection. The example of only three of the city's residential hotels paying 13 out of the 15 crores of tax collected means that most others aren't simply paying. As a supplier of visible commodities like accommodation this sector has been noticed but there are major evasion in many other sectors which also need scrutiny.

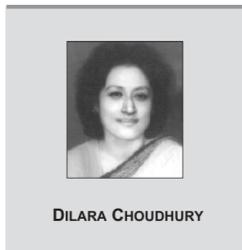
But let's squarely face the fact that the income tax department doesn't have a sterling image. Many people are scared of them because they can descend on any person and slap an assessment and then extra-official negotiations have to be started, even by the innocent. Many also are linked to the corrupt part of the business world and make a living by overlooking tax collection.

Meanwhile, there appears to be a great abhorrence to pay taxes in general. Partly because the transparency of governance is missing and partly because few feel inspired to pay for a government which generally delivers so little. The alienation between the people and the governments is acute.

However, these are systemic rather than individual flaws. One can't ignore the fact either that various governments at different moments of political need have used this department either to extract revenge or cower down political opponents. The IT department knows that it has value not only as a revenue collection office but political pressure applicator as well. This has to go.

Finally, the office itself has to be accountable to those who pay taxes and other citizens. It's essential to understand that this is also a state building activity and collection of tax revenue is critical to the functioning of others. This isn't about just the performance of one office but the corporate performance of all.

Cry, my country, cry: Simi Banu and Women in Development in Bangladesh



DILARA CHOUDHURY

RECENTLY, the front pages of newspapers were splashed with the picture of an attractive face of a young Bangladeshi woman. It was a pretty face, adorned with a red 'tip' on the forehead, and eyes that reminded one of 'Natorer Bonolata Sen.' There were no signs of accusations in those eyes, no pain, no disappointments. There were only expressions of a zest for life and an indomitable spirit that would allow her to choose a life of her own and a destiny that she herself would shape. This was the picture of an aspiring first year student of Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Bangladesh Fine Arts Institute in Narayanganj. Her talents as a Fine Arts student were widely acclaimed by her teachers and classmates and she had a promising career ahead of her. Yet, she took her own life on December 23, 2001. Her crime? It was because of her refusal to conform to the stereotyped sex roles as commanded by our patriarchal state, community and society. Her crime was that she returned home late due to the nature of work she had undertaken and the difficulties she faced in commuting between Khilgaon, Dhaka, where she lived with her family, and Narayanganj.

The tragic and terrifying death of Simi was the result of the repression emanating from the psychic-social behaviour of men that women in Bangladesh face on daily basis -- behavioral pattern rooted in patriarchy allowing men to do whatever to control women. One may not agree but this is as real as it can be. It has only been graphically epitomized by a group of young men who verbally abused and intimidated Simi, in which even the local sub-inspector Basher joined, for months for her 'life-style.' Her family desperately sought justice from the state and the community leaders but failed. She left a hastily written note before she took the lethal poison accusing SI Basher and others in the area for her death. She wrote that the harassment she had undergone felt like 'worse than rape,' and she hoped that her death would symbol-

ize her protests against harassment of women, and that she was choosing death so that other women would not have to experience what she had. As I read her story (The Daily Star, Jan. 3, 2002), suddenly in my own soul there was a feeling of constraint. I felt poor in my spirit. Suddenly, there was a chill down my spine. Suddenly I was scared. "They" have been successful in breaking Simi's spirit. Now what about mine and thousands of other women who are seeking autonomy both in public and private spheres in

Let us now have a critical look at Bangladesh's endeavour in women in development. First and foremost, it calls for the clarifications of the notion of 'autonomy' concepts as its acceptability by the Government varies from country to country. However, four dimensions derived from autonomy concepts (economic, physical, political and socio-cultural autonomy) have been accepted and are deemed to be translated into development cooperation practice in Bangladesh, and in the backdrop of these purview

any country if women's physical autonomy is not ensured. Admitted that it is a gargantuan task to ensure such security for Bangladeshi women in the midst of existing prevalent socio-cultural practices but steps must be taken in order to alleviate the situation.

What are the socio-cultural norms like? Accepted norms are highly lop-sided male-female power relations and that women are subordinate to men. As a result, there are widespread discriminatory behav-

needed to be discerned, which most men refuse to accept, is that such harassment of women by men are highly effective mechanism in eroding women's sense of self and concept of physical liberty and integrity. It is also to be discerned that above mentioned activities can drive, and in many cases have driven, women to commit suicide. The fact that only in year 2000 alone Bureau of Human Rights of Bangladesh (BHRB) recorded 1,120 incidents of suicide, most of being the repressed women, confirm this

tion of Eve-Teasing Act of 1984. However, legislation alone cannot alleviate or protect women from harassment fully. Along with legislation there should be full-scale advocacy by the media, NGOs, and government. There should be studies, investigation and evaluation to find out how much inroad the women in our country have made in educational and cultural activities. How much influence do they have in shaping the primary and secondary school curricula? So far women's concerns are part of the curricula at the higher level only i.e. the university level. Even that is not very sufficient. Only Dhaka University has a full-fledged Women's Studies Department and others only have one or two courses on it at the undergraduate level. No doubt these developments are encouraging. But such education must begin from the primary level as well as in the family, which should be educated through advocacy and other mechanism. We must have also to find out as to what extent do the women have the opportunities to influence the negative and gender stereotyped image of women as propagated by patriarchy and misinterpreted religious strictures? How much capacity have the women built to interpret the teachings of Islam, which is a powerful force in shaping the gender ideology even in a moderate Moslem country like Bangladesh? These are very, very important but contentious issues that need to be tackled if we are serious about WID in Bangladesh.

Tragically, however, our mindset and thinking capacity seem to be in a state of paralysis and we seem to have chosen a path not to go deep into the problem that contributed to Simi's loss of a promising life and not realizing that if the prevailing socio-cultural norms continue to guide women's lives, the future of 'women in development' is not very bright and it would be painstakingly slow. It is heart breaking and a pity that we as a nation have been hesitant in sharing the burden of Simi's protests (there have neither been any large scale protests nor the cause has been taken up by the majority women's organizations and political parties) that she was taking her life to make us aware that not only women go through what she had to. Such being the prevalent situation, what else can be done but to cry our hearts out not only for Simi but for ourselves as well.

Dilara Choudhury is Professor, Govt and Politics, Jahangirnagar University.

PANORAMA

Tragically, however, our mindset and thinking capacity seem to be in a state of paralysis and we seem to have chosen a path not to go deep into the problem that contributed to Simi's loss of a promising life and not realizing that if the prevailing socio-cultural norms continue to guide women's lives, the future of 'women in development' is not very bright and it would be painstakingly slow.

order not only to free themselves from thousands of years of customary subjugation by men but also due to the fact that they want to participate in the national and state-level processes, as free and independent agents, without whose inputs Bangladesh's dream and vision to emerge as a vibrant modern state in world stage by year 2025 would forever remain an illusion. This brings us to the vital question of the strategies and policies undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh with regards to women's overall empowerment.

Before we get into that discussion, let us hope, that the policymakers are aware that 21st century has been termed as women's century not because suddenly the men have comprehended that it is unfair and unjust to have an unequal and viciously lopsided male-female power relations or that the prick of conscious has been so acute that there is an unweildy urge to do the justice but simply because of the realization that without having women as equal partners the very survivability of our planet is at stake. Today, more than ever the world system is under severe strains due to crisis in resources and overpopulation, the questions arising out of cultural priorities, institutional rules and standards, issues of discriminations, personality and role conflict and unacceptability of men's 'natural' behaviour (Giele:1978). And just like the restructuring of the class system following the industrial revolution, the restructuring of the sex-roles has become an imperative that forms the bedrock of women in development in any given country.

WID strategies and policies are being adopted.

In the context of these strategies and policies, it is to be noted, that though Bangladeshi women have made some strides in advancing their position, especially with regard to access and participation in economic resources, their autonomous status as far as the control over their bodies and physical integrity and their presence in the political/power structure have remained a far cry. This has happened, as the sociologists point out that although a set of complex factors determine women's political, economic and social lives in the society, it is the societal values and gender ideology that are crucial in determining women's role in national development process. Unfortunately, however, our societal values are still heavily influenced by patriarchal beliefs and institutions and there is a lot of confusion about gender ideology. As such, until and unless the socio-cultural norms are transformed to create an environment conducive to women's physical integrity and security, WID policies relating other dimensions of autonomy concepts, especially in the arena of political empowerment, would be simply like some kind of eye wash by the Government of Bangladesh deemed to have been adopted to please the donors only. Pleasing donors is one thing whereas commitment is another. If the Government of Bangladesh is sincere about WID it must be uppermost in the minds of the policy makers that as the consolidation of democracy is an uphill task without a democratic culture and environment so are the difficulties in making WID programmes a success in

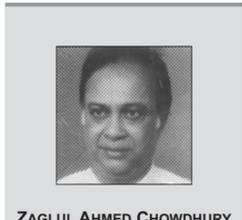
our patterns that make women psychologically damaged for life. On top of that the creation of highly rigid and differentiated 'public' and 'private' domains accentuate their experience of psychological trauma. The culture of discrimination, thus, restricts women's mobility and movement by assigning her the traditional and stereotyped role. The strict differentiation between the public and private, which does not allow women to propagate that the private is also political, is reinforced by misinterpreted religious beliefs. Women are often thought to be the embodiment of destruction, *filna*, living symbols of disorders with their sexuality and its disruptive potentials. It is believed that they have to be controlled and regulated. Society expects them to follow the norms by keeping their movement within the parameters of rules and regulations that have been created by men without women's input in it. If they do not follow them and get into trouble it is their fault. And women who do not conform such societal behavior are subjected to various forms of violence ranging from rape to acid throwing. However, most subtle form of such intimidation to make the recalcitrant ones toe the line is the sexual harassment the working women face at their mixed-gender environment and while commuting to and fro between work and home. They are subjected to sexual harassment ranging from 'sexist language and practices in the work places that women describe as degrading, demeaning, humiliating and sometimes infuriating (Thomas and Kitzinger: 1997)' to character assassination and physical actions like touching and grabbing. What is

chilling reality. Simi Banu obviously has now joined that rank and file. Her refusal to operate within the male-dominated and patriarchal norms that call for women's inferior status and affirmation of male control over women has cost her and her family very dearly. Yet, she was only trying to take advantages of the opportunities that have been supposedly to be opened for the women due to our Government's WID strategies and policies.

Question is why on earth women in Bangladesh, as epitomized by Simi's sacrifices, continue to pay such heavy prices for pursuing the path that has been very much an integral part of the notion of women's autonomy concepts as set by Government's agenda? The answer lies with the fact that years' of WID strategies have been unsuccessful in creating an environment conducive to women's autonomy in socio-cultural arenas. As a result, women's opportunities to have equal access to economic, political and other sectors have been severely hampered. This point is poignantly and painfully highlighted as we review the women's representation in our national parliament (further clarifications are not needed in this regard).

Actually, Simi's death should make us aware that if we want WID's success in Bangladesh, a lot needs to be done and strategies developed in order to have the women more space in socio-cultural arenas in order to curtail male dominance, particularly societal approval in allowing men to have control over women. We need to ensure that eve teasing or intimidating women is punishable by law like India has, namely, the Prohibi-

South Asia came across a tumultuous and eventful year



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

FOR the South Asian region, the year 2001 has been a period of big occurrences, both eventful and tumultuous in nature. Only seldom in the recent times, a year in this region was so much cycnosed of all eyes. The new year carries the hang-over of the preceding one in matters of tensions and alarms, which pose a big threat to peace and stability here in the coming days. All the four major regional countries barring the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and tiny Indian Ocean island state of Maldives witnessed events of international interest or importance during the year that we have just come across. The issue that will remain to be seen in the 2002 is whether the new year would also be a phase of curiosity and matter of discussions for the South Asia either in positive and negative perspective. But one thing is certain -- the region would continue as an international flashpoint at least for some time to come.

MATTERS AROUND US

Certainly, South Asia hogged headlines in the international media several times during the 2001, particularly in the last half of the year because of a variety of reasons. These reasons were both positive and negative in nature but fact remains that the region was very much at the focal point of international attention...The region will continue to be a focus of interest in the new year, too.

Obviously, the Afghan crisis triggered by the massive terrorist attack in the United States shifted global attention in South Asia and its neighbourhood as the world's only superpower led an 'anti-terrorism' coalition which toppled the Taliban regime in the embattled Afghanistan and sent its leader Mullah Omar into hiding. But far more important is the main suspect of the terrorism Osama Bin Laden, the Saudi dissident, sheltered by the Taliban, whose whereabouts remain shrouded in mystery after his men along with the Taliban have almost been reduced to ground by the mighty United States in collaboration the anti-Taliban Afghan forces. The whole thing began after September 11 and the subsequent tough but anticipated American response made Afghanistan and its surroundings the area of attention for the world. Then came the Indo-Pakistan tensions leading to a near-war situation which has put the whole world in a state of fear and anxiety because both the South Asian rivals are equipped with dangerous atomic weapons and the consequences of

possible use of such arms are well known. True, the belligerence between these two countries is not anything new but this time the tensions have acquired alarming proportions because they are atomic powers. And not surprisingly, the Indo-Pakistan acrimony this time has come in a way as a fallout of the Afghan tangle. For, India and Pakistan were not unrelated with the developments in Afghanistan as both countries have big stakes in the situation because of geographical proximity and other factors.

Islamabad has greater stakes being an immediate neighbour of the country which is embroiled in a kind of bloody war involving its own people ever since the former Soviet Union sent troops there in 1979. The Soviets had to leave after a decade but Afghan factions squabbled and one chapter of this scenario is now over with the fall of Taliban who were in the helm for last five years. India and Pakistan, both kept a close watch on the developing situation and their bitter ties sunk to a new low following a daring attack on the Indian parliament about

which two countries have different accounts. This infuriated New Delhi and the consequent outcome is simply an explosive condition along their borders with both countries taking all preparedness for a full-blown conflict. This situation is bound to spill over in the coming days as no sign is discernible for a thaw despite the holding of a much delayed seven-nation regional summit in Nepal where leaders of the two countries were present and met informally without having any substantial talks. This means the stand-off continues even though the gathering in Kathmandu has given the impression that tensions may come down as a result of the summit that called for peace in the area in addition to the meetings of leaders of India and Pakistan, howsoever informal, short or only exchanges of courtesies these were.

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had their governments changed in the last year through general elections and the line up to the polls in both the countries was quite violent claiming many lives. However, in Colombo, president Chandrika

Kumaratunga remains in the helm despite the defeat of her party-led alliance because of the presidential system of government that constitutionally allows the powerful president to remain in the office till the term is over regardless of the outcome of the parliamentary polls. In Bangladesh it is simply a massive victory for the opposition leading to a two third majority in the house while the party that was in power alleges that the polls were a part of a "blue-print" ensuring its large defeat. In Nepal, something of unbelievable magnitude happened as the mainstream royal family was wiped out in a palace massacre. India has not witnessed anything major domestically but the war-like situation with Pakistan has kept the largest country of the region in a state of alert and high tension over the last about two months.

Certainly, South Asia hogged headlines in the international media several times during the 2001, particularly in the last half of the year because of a variety of reasons. These reasons were both positive and negative in nature but

fact remains that the region was very much at the focal point of international attention. On one hand, healthy political and other developments occurred and on the other, spectre of war is persisting while we have just seen the unfortunate happenings in the Afghanistan. Although this country is placed in central Asia, its developments impact South Asia more heavily. How would South Asia look like in the new year? Fears of a war between India and Pakistan have not reduced as the two neighbours continue to toe their respective lines in their known disputes. The region may remain volatile in the future for a considerable period of time. A change of government in Sri Lanka has brightened the prospects of resolution of the long drawn civil war with the Tamil militants although the task is very difficult. Nepal is fighting with Maoist insurgency for which a state of emergency was declared not too long ago. Pakistan is supposed to have general elections by year-end as promised by the current military government but the plan may run into uncertainty. Other countries may not witness anything very serious internally but may be without incidents and events. The region will continue to be a focus of interest in the new year, too.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

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

Hail Shahabuddin Ahmed

Our former President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed at last has come forward to defend himself from the harsh criticism he has been gone through since the defeat of Awami League in October 1 election. More regrettable is that even some so-called intellectuals are not refraining themselves from being politically biased. We are grateful to Almighty Allah that Shahabuddin Ahmed enacted as per our Constitution and his conscience, and did not give in to any sort of pressure or alluring trap from any quarter.

We hope that every President and other elite personalities as well will follow this glorious example set by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

Shahidul Islam Chowdhury
Raozan, Chittagong

Former President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in his written statement of January 5th (which appeared in all dailies) firmly and with clarity stated his own position vis-a-vis, the 1st October 2001 elections. The column of Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury ("The portrait of a Traitor") was the unkindest cut of all.

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed came in as the acting Executive President (1990-1991) in a crucial period of the country's history. He steered the country with great distinction and wise statesmanship. He was brave enough to retire two service chiefs, when the situation demanded it; then again he forced the BNP government of the day to revert back to the parliamentary form of government.

At the Bangabhaban the former

President led a simple and austere life and fully accounted for all the state money spent by him to the last penny. He set up a standard and norm for others, which a few can excel or equal. During his second term (1996-2001), at all times he expressed his opinions in all sincerity, and acted as the conscience of the nation. He was held in great esteem by his fellow men and women. After the 1st October 2001 elections venomous utterances were made ceaselessly against him, the Chief Adviser and the Chief Election Commissioner, and this was unfortunate.

No person and no party can make a man small and mean whom god as blessed, to be of service to his fellow countrymen. Let us also make no mistake, that the judgement of the common man is uncommon. This has been so in 1970, 1996 and in October 2001.

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Gulshan, Dhaka

Kibria's semantics

The Ex-Finance Minister Kibria, in his letter of January 8 on AL stance tries his best to portray Shahabuddin's ready utterance of "Bangladesh Zindabad" as a "dark side" of his character. This springs from semantic prejudice.

Let us face the fact: "Joy Bangla", a borrowed shibboleth from West Bengal, has acquired such pejorative connotation over the years through its misuse or overuse in our country by a coterie of selfish people that think they, and not anybody else, are the only saviours of Bangladesh, that people who believe in democracy want to eschew use of this term.

It may be mentioned that language is dynamic and when a term gets associated with bad breath, however pristine and beautiful it

might have been at the outset, becomes hackneyed and musty and gets replaced by one that is tingling fresh. There is in fact no real difference between the two terms. The economist in Mr Kibria may better know that "planned economy" and "totalitarian bureaucratic regimentation" mean the same thing. Only prejudices may mean these differently to different people.

Eklmur Raza
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Little learning is dangerous...especially for Arabs

This is in response to Mr Ashraf's letter "Bangladeshis not fit to be Muslims?"

(January 9). First of all I simply do not understand how Mr Ashraf's

Middle Eastern origin has to do anything with his being surprised at our purdah debate. Surely he did not mean that his Middle Eastern origin endowed him a higher authority to judge our religious discussion?

I have to say that Mr Ashraf did not do his homework well when he wrote the letter. Clearly he got the history wrong. According to him "Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have no knowledge of the roots of Arabic and the intrinsic glory of the culture from which Islam has sprung".

Insolent as it is the remark also lacks credibility. Is the culture of Arabia really glorious before Islam spread? I am afraid not. Can I just inform Mr Ashraf that Islam came to that part of the world at a time when it was the age of 'Ahlilyama Zaheliyat'. Pre-historic Arabia speaks of barbarism, war, idolatry,

infanticide, vulgarity and injustice.

I hope Mr Ashraf will not consider that glorious. Mr Ashraf's ancestors were tribal people; many of them lived a nomadic life. Because of their petty tribal jealousies, they constantly fought each other. Islam brought all these fighting factions together. It is Islam that reconciled their differences, gave them a sense of unity and led them to form a nation. It is Islam that changed the history of Arabia not the other way round.

The arguments in favour of *hijab* are quite fair and simple. It protects a woman's sanctity. The citations from Quran were used to strengthen that. It does not require the Arabic background or its culture to understand that. repression against women is a universal issue. The Middle East is not out of it either. Mr Ashraf must certainly have heard about 'Honor Killing'.

But he pointed his finger only to India and linked us to them.

I assume Mr Ashraf has studied the Quran in its entirety. Then he must know for sure that all Muslims are brothers. That means my brothers who are part of that strange herd that he referred to are his brothers too. Ironic isn't it!

Muksitil Islam
Dhaka

Careless mistake?

Allow me to follow Oscar Wilde and suggest that, if what normally pass for music reviews in *The Daily Star* is tragic, the one that appeared on January 8 ("Music. A triptych"), planting Shanti Niketon firmly in Kolkata, and invoking (twice) Kanika "Muhkopadhaya", is careless.

Mahfuzur Rahman
New York, USA