

Broken AL rallies part of tradition

When power rules and democracy slips

THE space for practicing opposition politics continues to shrink as Bangladesh reaches another year. Although more than 31 years have passed since birth, we have not come to term with the various political life cycles. Now at the onset of maturity, we don't seem to have grasped some of the essentials of mature life styles and often behave as political juveniles. The recent incident when the police did its best to disrupt the rallies of the Opposition shows how lessons of the past remains unlearnt. Democracy for the other is still a distant thought.

The Awami League was denied permission to hold a rally at Paltan Maidan followed by its attempt to hold another at Osmany Uddyan. The government came down hard on it. But the police similarly terminated a much smaller rally that AL hurriedly organised in front of the Press Club. The comments to the BBC by the Law Minister that there were other places other than the Osmany Uddyan doesn't stand up to scrutiny because the Press Club option was also treated by the police in not exactly a cordial manner. It does seem that the government didn't want the Opposition to hold a rally comfortably anywhere.

So it seems more to be a matter of continuity and tradition. While departing from the office the AL seems to have handed over the baton of intolerance to its rival and who are now running at high speed with it. Thus the shrinking of the democratic space appears to be the most important reminder that politics is business as usual.

This attitude comes out of the idea that democracy doesn't need two sides to be practiced. In a very strange way, the once established one-party phase in our political life seems to have sent down deep roots. The result is the notion of the sole right to govern. To put it bluntly, there is never any Opposition in the mind of any Government party. And that is where the problem lies.

This also ensures the continuity of the crisis in our political and by extension other parts of life. But political notions seem increasingly governed by power seeking rather than governance seeking so the norms of democratic practice have become less relevant. We hope that the parties will understand that in the long run democracy will guarantee a longer life than the strong arms tactics that we see being displayed.

Indo-Bangla border understanding

Let's see follow-up and consolidation

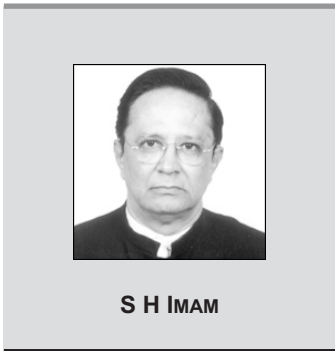
IT is heartening to note that the three-day border talks between the BSF and BDR chiefs hosted at the Bangladesh Rifles Headquarters in Dhaka ended on a successful note on Monday last. Major General Rezzakul Haider DG, BDR and his Indian counterpart Gurbachan Jagot have signed the Records of Discussion or the minutes of decisions arrived at the conference. Both sides have expressed a common resolve to work for the maintenance of peace and friendly atmosphere along their borders.

They have agreed to leave behind the untoward episode of April last year and work steadily towards fostering stable and tension-free ambience at the borders, in keeping with the good neighbourly spirit both the governments share. They will not allow themselves to be deflected by small incidents from their central concern to maintain border peace. Whenever the situation demands they will hold flag meetings at the shortest notice. They will try to institutionalise arrangements for joint patrol having due regard to narcotic trade and border smuggling.

Hopefully, the minutes of understanding signed by both sides will ensure an end to the unfortunate spate of fatalities along the border. Ninety-one people died during the last one year of whom a substantial number is Bangladeshi citizens. This must stop. And it is possible to cry a halt to this because most of the disputed spots have been demarcated by now. Let the latest border accord between the official delegations to Dhaka talks lead to the firming up arrangements for peaceful borders.

We welcome the very fact that the meet was held and would urge regular contacts be maintained between both sides to head off any trouble along the borders.

Unpopularity contests?



COMPARISONS are not necessarily odious. Sometimes these can be blissful. By comparison with several developing countries in Asia, Africa and America, Bangladesh enjoys a good democratic standing. As it happens, even this rating favourable to Bangladesh hasn't been quite our own finding; so glum have we been over our democratic culture and practices that we overlooked it. The US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca on a recent familiarization trip to Dhaka gave us high marks for democracy. She started many here by citing Bangladesh as a 'model of democracy', words of praise Bangladesh would obviously deserve in comparison with Pakistan. For, our first and foremost democratic credential is that we have been home to regular and credible elections during the last one decade.

There is an overpowering mystique about elections in Bangladesh, not quite the Pied Piper of Hamelin's enchanting note casting a spell on children to blindly follow him into a mountainous grave, the analogy being only meant to highlight attractions that elections held

for political parties in our country. Awami League never tired of expressing distrust in the conduct of October 1 elections ever since the party had formally relinquished its charge in mid-July; yet it never occurred to any one that the AL would boycott the elections. Why? First, instinctively, the party did not want to court political wilderness by keeping out of elections; and secondly, the 'you-never-know' chance factor with a vast electorate would entice a party to try its

ally bleak political scenario is election results led to formation of two successive governments that by and large also ran their full terms. Although the immediate reactions of vanquished parties to poll results in 1990 and 1996 had been uniformly negative, there was nonetheless a grudging acceptance of the popular verdict in the end. For instance, after their electoral defeat in 1996, the BNP decided to go to the 'new parliament' in tandem with what they

AL on a similar rhetorical note said that they did so 'as a mark of respect to voters' and because they would like to see 'continuation of constitutional and democratic process'.

Perhaps as part of the caretaker system or electoral law reform that's on the card anyway, we should formally insist on the participating political parties to make an acceptance speech after the poll results are officially announced in line with traditions established in

Even the outcome of the US presidential elections remained a mystery for several weeks after the November polls -- thanks to the neck-to-neck vote counting contention between the Democrats and the Republicans. And the prospect of a full-scale constitutional crisis in the USA could be headed off through the three-month time-lag between the presidential polls and the inauguration.

Military take-overs are a different ball game and Bangladesh has

functional or toppling it. From this standpoint, it would appear that the opposition has been the villain of the piece.

But since power alternates between the two major political parties -- BNP and AL it will be in their interest to have a bilateral code of ethics to let each other function in their respective roles as ordained by popular verdict except for the exigency of a no-confidence motion moved and passed against the party in power. What has been happening during the last decade is the exaction of vendetta by the ruling parties on the opposition and blaming of each other for bringing the country to a standstill, as though hartal was not the handiwork of the opposition and exercise of opposition rights not a constitutional requirement. And albeit in a zero-sum game, the entire national discourse revolves around the recital of follies of both sides with the result that crimes are slipping through fingers and getting untreated as crimes. An offence is an offence in the current sense of the term.

Everywhere in the democratic world an elected opposition starts believing that since the people have spoken they must try to win the hearts of the electorate back, practically going beyond their vote-bank to come good in the next general election. The government party on the other hand is expected to be only eager to endear itself to the people by performance in order that they can win a second term. But it seems both the parties have engaged themselves in unpopularity contests.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

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luck even in somewhat unpredictable circumstances.

Incidentally, this mystique of elections seems to be wearing thin with the Awami League. The party in an incurable post-electoral huff chose not to participate in bye-elections even to the seats vacated by AL winners, let alone the BNP-held ones put on the dice. Furthermore, the AL has announced its boycott of mayoral elections basically reflecting lack of self-confidence and trust in the voters.

The second democratic feature we can draw some satisfaction from is the utilisation of poll results. The saving grace amidst a gener-

termed 'legal steps as regards rigging and other irregularities in June 12 elections'. In its own words, the party opted 'to perform its duties for the sake of maintaining democratic and constitutional process in the country and implementing their pledge to the people'. But then the BNP eventually took to boycotting the parliament with a token walk-out on the very first sitting of parliament.

Now the tit-for-tat: in the sequel to the October 1 elections, the MPs-elect of the Awami League took oath on October 24 in contrast to BNP MPs' taking of oath earlier on October 9. On taking oath, the

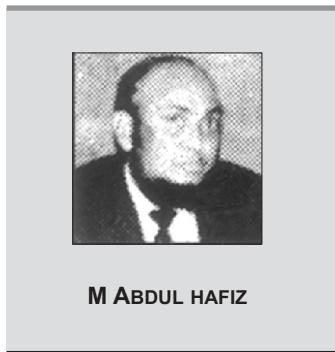
most democracies of the world.

For wrong or right reasons, election results have remained unutilized or were foiled in some countries. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had won local and regional elections in 1990 by capitalising on pro-Iraq sentiments after the Gulf War. But their victory resulting in a civil war led to the outlawing of the fundamentalist FIS in 1992. Against a diametrically opposite background, in 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi's League for Democracy won the national elections in Myanmar, but the poll results remain unutilized even to this day.

had a smack of it in her chequered history. But the point is, whilst our election results have by and large been put to use, as induction of elected governments has proved from time to time, this has not correspondingly led to the strengthening of the substance of democracy.

So, the tragedy typical of Bangladesh is whilst we have had elections at regular intervals leading to peaceful succession of democratically elected governments, the opposition from day one tended to pursue a line of action seemingly aimed at either making the government of the day dys-

A dangerous course of brinkmanship



INDIA has been on a warpath since December 13 terrorist attack on its federal parliament. In less than twenty-four hours of the reprehensible incident Jaswant Singh, India's external affairs minister, identified the perpetrators of the crime claiming that Pakistan-based Lashkare Toiba bore the responsibility for it. India, in a demarche delivered on 14 December to Pakistan High Commission in Delhi demanded that Pakistan should crackdown on the LeT, arrest its leadership and cut off its source of funding. If the demand was not complied with, Singh hinted that India's next option would be to implement the cabinet resolution framed on the previous day calling for the liquidation of the "terrorists and their sponsors wherever they are and whoever they are", the aim of the explicit ultimatum seemed to exploit the mood of post September war against terrorism. The underlying idea was to force the Americans to apply pressure on Pakistan so that it reined in the militant groups supposed to be operating in Kashmir from their bases in Pakistan.

As expected a series of tough punitive measures against Pakistan followed, India started massing hundreds of thousands of her troops both along the line of control

in Kashmir and international border with Pakistan. She banned the flight of the Pakistani planes over her territory, suspended Delhi-Lahore-Delhi bus and train services and withdrew her envoy from Islamabad calling the actions only 'minimal'. Later the strength of the diplomatic staff of Pakistan High Commission was reduced to half and the movements of its members restricted to Delhi's municipal limit. While the war of words between the two neighbours went on the

demned the blatant act of terrorism on Indian Parliament, offered for a joint investigation and asked New Delhi to provide concrete evidence of the involvement of those it held responsible for December 13 attack. India for whom it was more of a brinkmanship, however, paid no need to the suggestions and upped its ante by putting up more demands for Pakistan's compliance. President Musharaf's attempt, apparently under international pressure, to placate India's

speech, the Americans especially seemed willing to buy Musharaf's reform package contained in his speech as a substantive evidence of his 'honourable intention'. Even the Indian government itself welcomed the speech, although in a guarded manner.

Once Pakistan took its hands off Kashmir by denying its soil as a base for cross border terrorist operation and in absence of any hard evidence of the involvement of Pakistan-based militants in 13

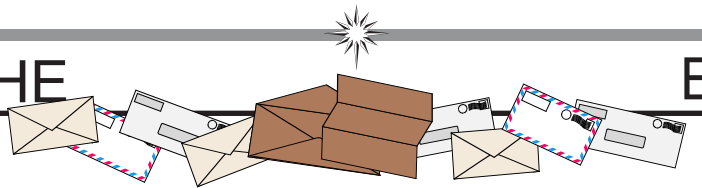
could be held only after Pakistan curbed cross border terrorism and took action on the list of 20 alleged criminals. India also took an exception to Musharaf's strong defence of the groups engaged in the freedom struggle in Kashmir. Speaking early last month in Muzaffarabad on the occasion of 'Kashmir Day' President Musharaf reiterated the Pakistani position that Kashmiri struggle was legitimate and had the support of Pakistani people. Infuriated by Musharaf's statement

Nevertheless, the tone and tenor of the speeches and comments of Indian leaders as well as Pakistan's failure to demonstrate instant result on curbing terrorism constitute a grave situation. The two nuclear powers continuing to confront each other eyeball to eyeball is not a welcome proposition. Although most observers agree that the current military build up which is viewed by president as 'brinkmanship at its most dangerous' form will not lead to an outbreak of war, even a slight accident could embroil them in what would be a disastrous Armageddon. It is not difficult to imagine the suffering that will be inflicted upon the people in areas coming within its terrible sweep. There are fears in important capitals that the current tense situation could spiral out of control and take on a deadly logic of its own. In a testimony before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee George Tenet, the CIA director said last week that the chance of war between India and Pakistan was at its highest point since 1971. Any largescale conventional war between the two, he said, would escalate into nuclear war.

The Kashmir conflict, left unresolved for over five decades, can always develop its own dynamics over which neither India nor Pakistan will be able to exercise control. Pakistan also cannot show instant or guaranteed result in combating extremist elements nourished by a culture of unfettered militancy. The hasty and rash crackdown on the extremists can be accompanied by serious backlash. But India wants both instant and guaranteed result which Musharaf may not be able to provide in spite of his best intention. Will then the region be held at ransom to a looming disaster?

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISIS.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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"The horrifying night of Mar 25"

You have mentioned in your report "The horrifying night of Mar 25" that "In the wake of the military crackdown, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the majority party in the then Pakistan National Assembly, declared independence of Bangladesh and called upon the people to launch an armed struggle. He was arrested and taken to the then West Pakistan."

My comment: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman never declared on that day the independence of Bangladesh and called upon the people to launch an armed struggle. Do you have any proof? It was the other AL leaders and Major Zia, who called upon the people to launch an armed struggle. Please do not try to change facts.

F. Majumder, on e-mail

31 years old

We are celebrating the 31st year of our independence. It should be a time of reflection and our political and national immaturity.

Just to contrast, three decades

after the American Revolution, the United States had gained independence and created a more perfect union than ever seen before in human history or since. Based on the respect of law, private property and radically democratic for the time, the United States was on its way to becoming the most powerful and prosperous country ever.

On the other hand, Haiti, which had been richer than the 13 Colonies (and Canada), had also defeated the French and the British and gained their independence. However, Haiti had already embarked on its long journey to penury, violence and death, and amazingly it's still sliding downwards.

Independence alone will not prevent us from taking the same road as Haiti and I would argue that we are already on it.

Just look at the masthead of the Independence Day supplement issued by the Ministry of Information. Fine, I accept that Bangabandhu was not our Founding Father, but BNP should have had the maturity and common decency to have his picture on the

masthead along with that of President Zia. Bastiat Dhaka

The Independence Day

I am one of the young Bangladeshis who dream for tomorrow and who take great pride in our Independence War. I am one of those who is willing carry out the dreams of the freedom fighters.

I invite the present young generation of Bangladesh to carry out the dreams of our young and fallen freedom fighters and forget the divisions laid by different political parties. The national interest is greater than the party interest. May Allah help our motherland.

Sabir Abdus Samee Sumit London, UK

Should our sons come back?

We would like to respond to Mr. Shamsher Chowdhury's letter "Should I ask my son to come back?" (March 25). We too have two

of our sons in the US. Despite the tragedy and turmoil of September 11, we believe things are much better in the US than in Bangladesh where safety and peace of mind and body is always uncertain.

In the US their education and talents have been rewarded. Their achievement is totally based on their talent and performance. Is it so in Bangladesh? Here any achievement needs not only some talent but also a large slice of contacts, influences, *tadbir* etc.

Let our children live in peace and happiness in the US, and not in uncertainty in Bangladesh. The answer to Mr. Shamsher's eight questions also is a big NO. So why should they come back? Our children are not burden rather valuable and recognised contributors to society.

Sure we miss them, but we should wish them all the best.

Saleha & Shakil Mansoor Gulshan, Dhaka

I have read with interest the letter by Mr. Shamsher Chowdhury. Like Mr. Shamsher there are thousands of parents who face the same dilemma

regarding their children.

There was a time when parents felt proud when their children went abroad for higher education keeping in mind that these children will come back and contribute their newly gained expertise to the nation and society. Those days are over.

This brain drain started in early '80s and multiplied as the years went by thanks to the politicians and their sycophants, military juntas and bureaucrats who have dampened our hopes and aspirations and torn apart the once closely knitted society in Bangladesh.

My two sons were employed in multinational companies in Dhaka. They got postings abroad and left Bangladesh with desires never to return. My sons were well paid and had no reasons to leave but the state of affairs in the country forced them to. One may say those parents are lucky whose children have gone away but this is no solace to the affected parents. Families are meant to be close knitted.

Further, Mr. Shamsher's worries for the change in scenario for Muslims in the US after the infamous 11 September incident vis-a-vis his

son's job in the US is no doubt a cause for anxiety. What else can you do? Ask your son to come back from frying pan to fire? I think what is happening in the US and the West is a temporary phase and the good will prevail over evil. After all the US and the West need highly skilled workers from abroad to take their countries forward. I firmly believe that despite discriminations our children will accomplish good living and prosperity abroad.

After living for such a long period in the US, Mr. Shamsher's son may not be able to adjust to the state of affairs here. Therefore, Mr. Shamsher should leave the matter to his son to take the decision whether to come back to Bangladesh or not.

Ziauddin Ahmed Gulshan, Dhaka

Highway deaths and Rabindra Sangeet

This is in reply to Anwar Babar's letter ("Highway deaths vs Rabindra Sangeet", March 25). My dear Mr Anwar, we live in a country where Gaffur Bhuiyan MP's deshi style

sword of Damocles is hanging over your head, where the only choices are between the idolatry wicked witch of the East or the pompadour coiffure wicked witch of the West.

It's refreshing to keep harassing Bannya until she snaps and admits her error.

Dorji Dhaka

Myanmar-- a distant neighbour?

Thanks to Mr M Anwarul Haq for the column "Should Myanmar remain our distant neighbour?" He rightly pointed out the importance of good relation between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Our policy makers are always thinking India as the only neighbour and keeping Myanmar away from us. They are depriving the country from the possible trade and commerce with the other neighbour that is Myanmar. There is a billion-dollar trade gap between Bangladesh and India. So our policies are made aiming to balance the gap.

But at the same time we should also take some effective measures

to widen the trade relation with Myanmar. The military rule in Myanmar should not be considered as an obstacle in this regard. We should also set up good relations with Sri Lanka, Nepal and other countries in the region. The columnist rightly pointed out that internal conditions of a country should not prevent others from trading or dealing with that nation on the economic plane.

Jabed Nayasarak, Sylhet

Call for cleanliness

I appreciate the Prime Minister's recent call for cleanliness and social movement. Although the step is quite encouraging, the whole concept can go in vain due to lack of proper implementation. Therefore, I urge not only the government but the whole community to back up the PM's initiative. Introduction of strict laws can make this movement as successful as Monem Khan's call during the Green Revolution.

Azreen Karim North South University