

Govt calls Opposition to talks

Both sides should seize every chance of settlement

THE Government has invited the Opposition to start talks to break the present deadlock. That is in itself good news. Given the present uncertain scenario, this is welcomed by all. The AL has however given certain conditions that have to be met before dialogue begins. It's a cloudy news but with a silver lining.

The AL has demanded that the act passed by the present Government on the portrait hanging of Bangabandhu should be repealed, the right to continue agitation kept and an end to persecution brought. The BNP is yet to respond to them but people in general are happy that both are talking instead of accusing. It appears to be the first positive move since elections. But will it hold?

In general terms, Sheikh Hasina has called the offer an insincere one and termed it as a political stunt. On the other hand, BNP's position is that the special legislation is not discriminatory and there is no political repression.

Politics is always a matter of demands and not ideologies in our country. In the end, it has to be a matter of negotiations and mutual respect as well. And in the national interest, whatever demands may be made by either party should not be so inflexible so as to become an obstacle to political peace.

It is critical that everyone accepts that political accommodation, political calm and freedom from repression and agitation are absolutely necessary for our survival. Our leaders seem unable to recognize that we are losing out on opportunities that the present is offering us. The conflict seems to have become purely focussed on the individuals concerned and many ask if this is a clash between two parties or two leaders.

By going by history, we can't be awfully optimistic. But such is the time that we can't even afford to be pessimistic. Our leaders have been served with a final notice. We realize this. We hope they do, too.

Stumbling parliamentary culture

Politicians must realise that they have a stake in the system

IN the last eleven years, the JS has proved to be more decorative than functional. Not only have the two parties that matter ignored the House but turned it into normal practice. When a past speaker says that we have achieved little in the ways of democracy, one may feel not just despondent but alarmed as well. There's danger of the parliament becoming redundant. One notes that the contest is essentially between the street and the House regarding the source of power. And the loyalty of the parliamentarians seems more towards the street.

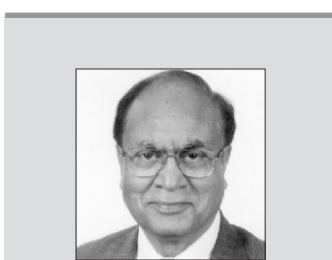
The history of parliaments have never been very positive in this land and almost all of them seem to have been used conveniently to achieve ends which run contrary to democratic values. Right from the parliament that endorsed BKSAL eroding the notion of multi-party democracy, we have had 'martial law' parliaments that never functioned as 'parliaments' but rubber stamps. These parliamentary redundancies later on became a major part of politicking and we saw the AL boycott and subsequently reject the BNP led 5th parliament. This was followed by the better-forgotten 6th parliament preceding a farcical election and this was dissolved in the face of street agitation. The Awami League led 7th parliament was again boycotted by the BNP and we are now into our 8th parliament to which the opposition has not just refused to join but already declared their intention to resign. Clearly, the parliamentary experiment in Bangladesh is very far from an unqualified success.

What however is more disconcerting is the lack of its impact on poll performance and in fact the boycotting party has done better in the last three polls. So the public rejection of the parliamentary culture is also obvious.

Thus, the parties apparently don't have much of a stake in the parliament and the elections have become a pathway to power and not a process in democratic governance. The elected members, the richest segment in society, also understand that this is a ticket to power and not a passport to uphold the democratic culture.

But the responsibility to ensure that is with the politicians and the parties. The street-based democracy must be replaced by the parliament representing the people. But for that to happen reforms are necessary. Those must be initiated.

Fiasco over hanging of portrait



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

THE Four-Party Alliance government led by the BNP repealed on 21 March the Preservation and Display of Portrait of the Father of the Nation Act 2001 passed by the previous Awami League government. The Act, which had been made into a law in a great hurry less than a year ago during the fag end of the Awami regime, obligated, under penal provisions, hanging of portrait of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in all government and semi-government offices as well as in all educational institutions and public places in the country.

The Awami League, as apprehended, strongly condemned the action of repeal and termed it as a deliberate act to defile the name and demean stature of the Father of the Nation. Most of the Awami legislators were present in the Parliament, though not attending the session, during the passage of the Bill. In the absence of their leader, Sheikh Hasina, they wore black badges as a mark of protest, paraded the corridors of the Parliament building and shouted full-throated slogans like in street demonstrations. During the last hours of the passage of the Bill, Awami League leaders approached BNP counterparts through intermediaries and later directly in order to stall the legislation and hold a dialogue. Some of them, in fact, met on the premises of the Parliament, but it was too late. The Bill was due to be voted at that

very time. Why was not dialogue initiated during several weeks following tabling of the Bill itself? Unfortunately, our past experiences witnessed many such incidents wherein a major political issue could be resolved, but for the requisite action being too little and taken too late.

It may be recalled that the BNP had always been in favour of entering dialogue with the Awami League right from the election on 1 October

and hold dialogue in the Parliament. Some unofficial indications were also aired at that time to the effect that, in future, consideration could be given for hanging portraits of some other leaders alongside Sheikh Mujib's. BNP's policy and action on this issue and eagerness to hold a dialogue were, therefore, crystal clear.

However, Dhaka city Awami League chief Mayor Hanif tried to raise a sizable manifestation on the

ing hopes of a repressed and radarless people. Zia's declaration through Kalurghat radio transmitter was heard loud and clear by many people, who are still living and are able to vouch for its veracity.

Begum Zia's proposal consisted of hanging of portraits of both these two leaders, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, beside the portrait of the elected head of government, in public places. Such an action will not demean the status

the country on this issue. Right from our independence, it was the portrait of only Head of State which used to adorn the walls of public places. I believe it was a matter of convention than legal obligation that gave rise to that practice. The decision was also viewed in line with the practice followed in most countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan etc. During the first tenure of Begum Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister the

has been trying hard to look for an issue over which a public movement can be generated leading to the downfall of the new government. First, they tried the allegation of a totally rigged election. Having failed to draw people's interest, they attempted to raise the spectre of willful and systematic repression of the minorities by the government. With the success of government measures not to allow undue violent repercussions in Bangladesh over the recent communal riots in India, wind went out of that sail of the Awami League's arguments. Now, serious attempts are being made to make the portrait issue as the core one. But people are now well aware of the demagoguery of our political leaders and do not consider this to be an issue worthy of generating a strong national movement.

The Awami League should not be oblivious of the fact that respect for a national leader comes spontaneously out of his or her own deeds recognized as such by people and can not be imposed forcibly by legislation on people to obey....In India, no obligation has been imposed and people, offices and organizations hang Mahatma Gandhi's portrait at their free will. Many others enjoy their right and decide not to hang Gandhi's portrait at all. In our case, why should there be a need for legislation on the subject? Was it that significant? If it were that important, why was it not incorporated in Awami League's Election Manifesto, pledging to enact legislation to that effect? Again, if it were that significant, why did the Awami government idle away and waited for over four years and enacted the legislation only a few months before handing over power? It, therefore, appears clear that the Awami League government did not really consider this issue to be either important or significant calling for urgent action.. The matter, therefore, boils down to the fact that, following the shattering defeat in the general election, the Awami League

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CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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last. Four distinguished Ambassadors and High Commissioners representing all American and European Heads of Mission in Dhaka took the noble initiative of helping to facilitate the on-going process of democracy by trying to induce the opposition Parliamentarians of the Awami League to take oath of office and join the Parliament. They took an errand from top Awami League leaders, endorsed by their Chief, with a 5-point proposal as conditions for their compliance. Four clandestine meetings were held on each side by the envoys with top leaders of the two parties from 3 to 18 October 2001. One of these five points related to the condition of hanging of portrait of Sheikh Mujib. The envoys were categorically told to transmit to the Awami leaders that Sheikh Mujib's portraits were not to be taken down and status quo would be maintained without consultation with the Awami League leaders, hoping that the Opposition would subsequently join

very first day of the repeal of the Act, but it was foiled and resisted by the police. The Awami League later staged demonstrations by holding fast in Osmani Udayan on 24 March, ignoring the police ban. Though small skirmishes took place with the police, but no serious injury was reported. The next programme of the Awami League is to call a country-wide hartal on 6 April.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia came out with an alternative proposal immediately on repealing the original Act. She said she had never undermined the great role and immense contribution of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the liberation war, not to speak of debasing his name. On the other hand, Awami League leaders not only derided the founder-President of the BNP, Ziaur Rahman, but denied his unique contribution of making declaration of independence, thereby consolidating the heterogeneous groups of people which later formed the core of the liberation force and engender-

of Sheikh Mujib but will also simultaneously accord due recognition to Zia's contribution and role in the war of liberation. Begum Zia called upon the nation to forget the past and look forward to a new and better future by resolving this vexed issue, in a spirit of understanding and accommodation, once and for all.

The Awami League, again, rejected the proposal. Sheikh Hasina described it the very next day at Bagerhat as another move to hoodwink the people. She was, however, ambiguous about the nature of her allegation. It was not clear whether she cast any doubt on Prime Minister's sincerity to honour her commitment. She wondered why the Prime Minister did not amend the provision of the original Act to provide for hanging of portraits of Ziaur Rahman and elected Head of Government side by side with Sheikh Mujib's. She smelled some foul play in the proposal but stopped short of clarifying it.

Let us go back to the history of

practice of hanging the portrait of elected Head of Government was introduced. Unfortunately, our two major political parties appear keen to outdo what was done by the other earlier.

Why did the Awami League decide to promulgate an Act to hang portrait of Sheikh Mujib as Father of the Nation? Was it that important? Was it that significant? If it were that important, why was it not incorporated in Awami League's Election Manifesto, pledging to enact legislation to that effect? Again, if it were that significant, why did the Awami government idle away and waited for over four years and enacted the legislation only a few months before handing over power? It, therefore, appears clear that the Awami League government did not really consider this issue to be either important or significant calling for urgent action.. The matter, therefore, boils down to the fact that, following the shattering defeat in the general election, the Awami League

Israel is not a democracy like America

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

WHENEVER an Israeli spokesman or an American Israeli agent masquerading as a journalist pops up on American television, they are certain to parrot two of their favourite mantras. The first one is the self-serving fawning over everything America does, and the second one is to remind everyone that like America, Israel is "a democracy, the only one in the Middle East." These days, 83-year-old evangelist preacher Reverend Billy Graham is apologizing repeatedly for agreeing with President Richard Nixon in 1972 that Jews had a stranglehold over the American media. (The information surfaced 30-years after the incident because of the freedom of information act.) Interestingly, Reverend Billy Graham's son and heir apparent, Franklin Graham, recently called Islam a "wicked and evil religion" and never apologized! What Reverend Billy Graham said about the Jewish control of the American media is absolutely true, but that in itself does not warrant criticism. However, Americans get all their information from the media. When the media selectively feeds the Americans information that are favourable to Israel to the detriment of American interests, that is when such control becomes unacceptable. One such lie the media has successfully propagated is that the American support for Israel has nothing to do with Sept. 11 terrorist acts.

Responding to Bush Administration's recent proposal to protect Israel, even by nuking Arab countries if necessary, an Israeli journalist commented, "we democracies have to protect each other!" Asked to comment about the finding of an American journalist touring Arab nations that the number one reason for Arab hostility towards America is America's unconditional support for Israel's repressive policies, the Israeli Consul General in New York replied recently that that was not true. "The only reason the Arabs hate Israel is because we are a democracy like America. We think and act like you," the Consul Gen-

eral said.

Is Israel really a democracy like America? Do the Israelis really think and act like the Americans do? Let us see. America was not founded by expelling the natives from their homes, as Israel was by driving the Palestinians from their homes. Huge chunks of American land belong to Native Americans, in some states as much as 27 per cent. America does not raid Native American reservations; those are autonomous regions. Israel was not content with expelling Palestinians from their homes, they grabbed more Palestinian lands in the West Bank and the Gaza and built illegal Jewish settlements on them. In its found-

democracy, which is for all its citizens.

Does American democracy occupy the land that belongs to its neighbours, Canada and Mexico, and on the choicest Mexican and Canadian lands does America build settlements for American citizens? Over the last thirty years, Israel's so-called democracy has built hundreds of illegal settlements by stealing Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as on Syria's Golan Heights. Let us remind ourselves that Israel's current Prime Minister Mr. Ariel Sharon was the architect of Israel's settlement policy. According to the UN, all these settlements are "illeg-

phant entry into the Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock compound on that infamous day, September 28, 2000, triggered the current Intifada, shamelessly the so-called Israeli democracy routinely blames the uprising on the democratically-elected Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. I have actually heard Israeli representatives mock the Palestinians on television: "try some democracy." Palestinian are a people under occupation and seizure. This is like the Nazis invading and occupying Czechoslovakia in 1938, and accusing the Czechs under occupation of not practicing democracy!

the power of the self-serving, convoluted logic!

Even with overwhelming military power, Israeli manhood cannot tolerate 50 tons of weapons for the Palestinians; they want the Palestinians completely unarmed, so that the Israeli soldiers and settlers can take pot shots at the Palestinian civilians. The writer has always condemned suicide bombings. But, what other recourse do the Palestinians have to defend themselves against an enemy armed to its teeth? On the television programme suave Netanyahu expounded what he called "The Netanyahu Doctrine," of fighting terrorism. "You have to go to the

brutal Israeli force will neither intimidate, nor dishearten the Palestinians. With nothing to live for, it will only swell the ranks of the suicide bombers. Palestinians, as the world has witnessed, are quite capable of paying Israel back in kind. At the moment, Israel needs American envoy General Zinni's intervention more than the Palestinians do. Instead of demonizing the Palestinians, Arabs and the Muslims, and encouraging Sharon to annihilate/expel the Palestinians, the Israeli-controlled American media would do Israel a favour by asking Sharon to accept the Saudi peace plan, which requires Israel to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 border (Israel can retain the Jewish holy sites in East Jerusalem) and live peacefully within secure borders alongside a sovereign Palestinian state, with Arab recognition for Israel.

Can the Prime Minister of a truly democratic state publicly say that he should have killed an adversary twenty years ago, and not apologize? Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did exactly that a few weeks ago, saying he should have killed Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat when he had his chance during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Does the Prime Minister of a truly democratic state publicly say that he wants to inflict maximum casualty on the civilian population of an adversary and not apologize? Ariel Sharon said and did exactly that to the Palestinian civilians of the West Bank and Gaza in the last few weeks.

Does anyone still see any resemblance between America's ideal of democracy and Israel's "Jews first and Jews last" theocratic democracy? If democracy is the magic word, unlike Israel why isn't billions of dollars of American money pumped into Bangladesh, a secular democracy? Unfortunately, no one can stop any nation from calling itself a democracy. The UN has not defined what constitutes a true "democracy." If it did, Israel would, as is its wont, be the first to violate it! The only democracy that Israel resembles is "plural democracy," racist South Africa's euphemism for apartheid!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

By now it must be clear to every Israeli, and Israel's supporter in America that the application of brutal Israeli force will neither intimidate, nor dishearten the Palestinians. With nothing to live for, it will only swell the ranks of the suicide bombers. Palestinians, as the world has witnessed, are quite capable of paying Israel back in kind.

ing, Israel's history is nowhere near like America's.

Person of any nationality or religion can come to the US and become an American citizen. Any Jew anywhere in the world who had never before set foot on Israeli soil can become an instant Israeli citizen because of his Jewish faith, whereas the Palestinians, Muslims and Christians alike, who had lived within the current border of Israel for thousands of years and were expelled in 1948, can never go back. One of the reasons put forward for the Israeli refusal to grant the Palestinians their right of return is that demographically the Jewishness of Israel has to be maintained. So, Israel is a democracy as long as its Jewishness is preserved. Does America forbid Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists from immigrating to America for fear of losing its Christian plurality? Unlike America, where democracy is for everybody, therefore, in Israel democracy is for the Jews. The practice of democracy in Israel (democracy for Jews) is nowhere near the pure American ideal of

gal." Israel's so-called democracy is the number one violator of UN resolutions! It is as though, once Israel has unilaterally declared itself a "democracy," all its illegal acts are beyond criticism or scrutiny by any world body, including the UN.

According to the Oslo Accord that has already been signed, 40 per cent of West Bank and Gaza should be under Palestinian sovereignty. Yet, Israel's so-called democracy invaded and violated the sovereignty of all those areas earlier this month, which even made the staunchly pro-Israel American President George Bush wince and call Sharon's actions "not helpful," the diplomatic jargon for "unacceptable." Under the pretense of negotiating peace under Oslo, Israel's so-called democracy increased the illegal settlement population from 96, 000 in 1993 to over 230,000 in 2001. Make no mistake, Israeli rationale behind settlement building is to permanently annex the West Bank and Gaza by changing "facts on the ground," according to former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Although Sharon's trium-

The best exponent of "we are like Americans", Benjamin Netanyahu, is a piece of work. Raised in America, Netanyahu is media savvy. With timely winks, nods and sarcasm Netanyahu is an expert on the nuances of television appearance. The other day he was justifying the disproportionate number of Palestinians killed by the Israelis in the recent Israeli operations. Five times more Palestinians killed do not mean that Israel is in the wrong, argued Netanyahu. Because America killed more Afghans than the number of Americans killed on September 11 does not mean America is wrong, continued the master of the sound bites. More Germans were killed during WWII than the Allies; that does not mean that the Allies were the guilty party, Netanyahu dished out for American consumption. So, Israel expels Palestinians from their homes, and then attacks Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps they fled to, with American F-16 fighters, American Apache helicopters, and yet the Israelis compare the Palestinians, not themselves, with the Nazis. Oh,

source of the terror and eliminate it (meaning Arafat and the Palestinian Authority)," said Israel's former and future Prime Minister. If Netanyahu is honest, and he is not, he should take his own advice, go to the source of Middle East terrorism, and eliminate the most terrorist nation on earth, Israel!

It is almost embarrassing to see Israeli diplomats, politicians and American Israeli agents invoke America's name, in everything they say, for the sole purpose of using America. Although most of the Israelis are olive-coloured like the Palestinians, Israel sends the most peachy, blond-looking Ashkenazi (European origin) Israeli to America, to prove "we are like Americans." Although 25 per cent of the Americans (African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans) are nonwhites, Israelis like to ape the white Americans because they know that real political and economic power lies with the white Americans.

By now it must be clear to every Israeli, and Israel's supporter in America that the application of

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

RMG exempt from hartal

My heartfelt gratitude to Sheikh Hasina for allowing me the freedom to work and not hold me hostage like she does the rickshawpullers and the day labourers when hartal is on.

But just one question, when should I explain to my buyers that Bangladesh can be trusted to ship out orders on time and that there is no risk of cancellations due to political disturbances? In the Sonargaon lobby, because they are too scared to venture from behind all the riot police at the gate or after I explain that the BNP is repressing minorities and using torture and intimidation to crush democracy?

The Leader of the Opposition blandly declares a forced shutdown of the commerce of our nation while

the attendant BGMEA members speak of the Sub Saharan Development Act and the global slowdown as the reasons for loosing our orders!

Dorji
Dhaka

Should our sons come back?

I generally try not to get into arguments with people like Mr Shamsheer Chowdhury and the two respondents, for fear of offending everyone. But since when did that stop me?

As someone who studied abroad from class 10 onwards to my MBA, I appreciate some of their concerns. Not a day goes by that I do not curse this stinking, filthy, caught up in bureaucratic red tape and corruption, ruled by terrorists

and demagogues, country.

But it is still my country and will remain so. In Bangladesh, in an infinitesimal way, you matter and you can make a difference. You can better the lives of some people; still make a significant amount of money and all that without selling your soul.

Living in a dreary suburban house in Dingle Berry, New Jersey with the ABCD kids, the air freighted *deshi* wife (met her for three days in Dhaka over summer/Christmas holidays) and the almost certain prospect of being downsized at 50 does not appeal to me.

Nor do I appreciate the fact that parents remit thousands of dollars both legally and otherwise to pay for their kids' education. Money earned in Bangladesh. Just when these kids are about to cease to be parasites and contribute to our econ-

omy, they grab that \$40 K job and stay back in the *ish*-states.

The culprits include the INS for permitting the use of the I20 as a *de facto* immigrant visa. But then again, why shouldn't they? Through no investment on its part, the US is getting educated willing workers. Must save a ton on their public school system.

However, if your son has a list of demands/conditions for his country to meet before he does his duty and returns, then please ask him to take that 7 eleven job and stay there.

MA
Dhaka

I read the questions and understood the dilemma that Mr. Chowdhury is facing. I should ask him to talk to his son first. As a

nation, we are emotionally unbalanced. Your son and I are living better, safer back in the USA than we will do back in Bangladesh. I don't know about you, but my parents lived a very strict honest life, and spent all their savings to make their four sons and a daughter educated with their beliefs. Since they are not that so-called influential people and are not going to provide me any sort of help (which I don't seek either), it will be hard my brother and me to live in Bangladesh with honesty, which is a rare commodity in my country.

Here in USA, we don't have to lie to anyone. Most of the people in USA do not care whether you are a Muslim or from other religion. They honour your hard work and talent and your contribution to society. Here, I can practice my religion better than that I could back in

Bangladesh.

Only one thing we are missing here is our family. But other than that, we are safe and fine here. USA is the best country for the minorities to live. After September 11, though we felt unsafe temporarily, but the positive leadership of this government made us feel safer. Our neighbours, our colleagues came to us to protect us from any incidents. They were more concerned for us than we could be for ourselves. Most of the people here in USA feel for their country, and they are very patriots but they don't bring out procession or does not go for harming anyone. Since this is a secular country, and definitely civilised, they try to follow the law most of the time. They believe in their government and if they feel that the government is not doing their job properly, they will vote against them during the voting

season. Everyone is accountable for their deeds.

I don't know what more to say to you to make you feel comfortable. The tension and agony that you are going through, my parents are going through the same. They still worry about my brothers, sisters and their grand kids, and me day and night. I think, at this age, that's their job.

So, I will ask you to talk to your son, rather than asking for some opinion from other people (though nothing wrong with that). We all know what the politicians are doing for Bangladesh. What's the law and order situation in Bangladesh. So it is better to live with a civilised people and nation than...

Saaneer Abrar
USA

Religious education

Religious education in school was introduced after the independence of Bangladesh. During Pakistan days there was no such subject as religious education.

It should be for the parents to teach their children tenets of their own religion at home, if they so desire. Education should not blind our eyes. Children should be taught in school the gist of all religions along with the information that there are people who are atheists, agnostic etc. Such teaching would help the children to grow up as liberal and tolerant human being which may in the long run, bring an end to fanaticism, fundamentalism and terrorism.

Ahmed Shah
Dhanmondi, Dhaka