

Sony's death and student politics

Political parties and student bodies must rethink the issue

ARMS dependent campus politics has already destroyed many other educational institutions. Now it is destroying BUET. Please Madam do something." Dilara Begum and Habibur Rahman, mother and father of Sabequn Nahar Sony, who was killed in a cross fire between two factions of BNP's student wing, the JCD, made this appeal to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. They and some other family members met the PM on Sunday at the latter's invitation, who wanted to share her grief at the tragic death of this brilliant BUET student. The PM replied that she would soon take some realistic but stern measures about student politics after talking to all concerned.

It is this assurance by the PM that prompts us to write our leader. Sony's death has brought out into the open some soul-searching questions about the state of our student politics. There is no question that it has a long and glorious tradition. Starting from our Language Movement in 1952 to our Liberation War in 1971, and all the democratic movements that took place in between, students have always played a significant role in all those important stages in our nation's history. Just as all this is true, so also is the fact that there has been a significant decay in our student politics in the recent past. One of the negative spillover effects of our armed struggle was the reaching of firearms into the hands of ordinary students. Most of them surrendered their arms after independence but many did not. Instead of encouraging them to give up these lethal weapons, self-serving politicians and succeeding military and political regimes used them to serve their narrow ends. A latter day offshoot of this was the frightening development of armed cadres within the students' wing of the major political parties, each of which was patronised and nurtured by corrupt politicians who used gangsters to enhance their own personal hold in politics and within their respective parties.

We may recall here the repeated public pronouncements of the former President Justice Shahabuddin who urged all political parties to leave the students out of their nefarious politics. We had suggested then to consider either banning student politics altogether or putting a moratorium on it for several years.

We agree with the PM when she underscores the need to build a broad consensus before deciding on a course of action. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself said many times that she would support banning student politics from campuses if all major political parties would do the same. We suggest that the government immediately launches a series of dialogue with the civic society, teachers, parents and of course the students. Let the genuine students and ordinary parents have their voices heard. We in the media, especially ourselves, will be happy to be a part of consensus building process. Time is now, and we should not shy away from taking decisive steps to save our students from the curse of present day brand of student politics.

An answer to garbage and power problems

Heartened by the prospect of the project's revival

ONE wonders why such a good project had been set aside for the last four years, a time-period especially marked by garbage heaps and power scarcities that made Dhaka City nearly unlivable. We are talking of the waste-to-power plant project which seems to have come alive -- courtesy the ADB and Commonwealth Sectt -- after being in hibernation since 1998. In that year, six companies, five of them foreign, evinced a keen interest in it by actually submitting proposals in this behalf.

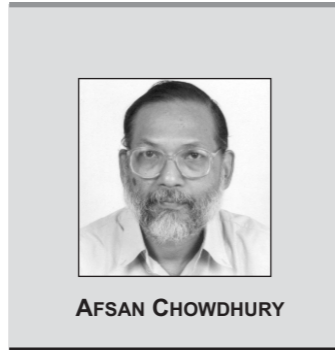
The project had got stuck in the very preliminaries when consultancy work itself could not be undertaken owing to shortage of funds. But now the Asian Development Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat have agreed to finance consultancy for the plant.

And why not? The project, a brain-child of the power cell of the energy ministry and envisaged in the private sector, promises multiple benefits. Broadly speaking, it will use up all the waste of Dhaka city -- some 3000 MT everyday -- to generate 60 MW of power. It offers a simple but highly efficient alternative to waste dumping in a city hard-put to find any new site for the purpose. The decade-old Matuail dump is spilling on all sides. So, basically we are looking at the prospect of a cleaner Dhaka in the first place. Secondly, the cost of power to be generated through the project will be lower than that produced by oil-based barge mounted power plants. Last but not least, the sorting out of wastes to feed the power plant will help recycling industries such as aluminium, steel and glass a good deal.

We want the consultancy work finished at the earliest. Since the implementation time is barely two years it is a nearer time-frame we are looking at for satisfactory solutions to both the garbage as well as power shortage problems of the city.

Are AL and BNP the same party?

We deserve what we voted for



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

WE have just had another *hartal*. Politicians say that it seems to be a way of protesting. But is it so? Do we really know why *hartals* are held? The way the date was shuffled this time shows how casually they are planned. If there is anything that provides evidence of the poverty of political imagination of our politicians, it's *hartal*. But if we don't like *hartals*, why do we vote for the political parties with such enthusiasm which call *hartals*? Is it because we too are part of this system and by voting for parties who are in favour of *hartals* encourage and cheer them and ultimately claim *hartals* as our own?

DURING one of the agitation phases when BNP was in power, I was covering politics for the BBC. I honestly dislike reporting politics because I do believe that ultimately one ends up as an accomplice to politics itself because of the very nature of the job. But it was a job I did. When one dispatch of mine angered the Leader of the Opposition, the entire BBC team was summoned by her. Apparently my comment that the donors were probably not going to go along with her proposal of agri-subsidy angered the whole bit.

"I was trying to send an election message and you added a comment. You are against my party. I know everything that is going on." She went on accusing me while Richard and I tried to defend my dispatch. Richard mentioned that unless I mentioned the bit about the

donors in a country that was so donor dependent, it would be incomplete.

Fortunately, after some time when the leaders and hangers on were gone, she became more relaxed.

"What can I do? What else is there to do except give *hartals*. That is the only way to put pressure on the government. I don't like *hartals* but I am helpless. Tell me, what else can I do?" She went on trashing the

livid. It criticised AL and said that this was a "conspiracy against democracy" It also said other things to the party and the leader, which would generally be called rude and vulgar. But then we like that stuff. We call it politics. I called up a Minister and set an interview.

"WHEN you were out of power you called *hartals* but now that the Opposition is doing it you are criticising? Why?"

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

OF course there has to be hartals or else how will we be kept busy? And live a difficult life and hope that the differences between the two will sink and we shall have peace? Meanwhile the leaders buy another ranch in the USA or Singapore, send their children to study in a foreign University and go to the roof of their Gulshan residence on a hartal day and wonder why can't the city be so free of pollution throughout the year.

hartal as she sat through a day that was on *hartal*.

The fact that the Leader of the Opposition was asking a group of journalists for a way out from *hartals* and still depending on *hartals* to exert pressure is an admission of systemic political failure. It's not just the politicians who have failed but politics itself.

DURING the period when Ershad was in power, BNP launched a furious movement, which included every form of agitation. I was close to the leader on that day near the Secretariat when she broke through the tear gas, *lathi* charge and police and established the "might of the street". Street agitation received anointment of legitimacy that was greater than any parliamentary practice. I think on that day the parliament and the street became one in the process of protesting against martial law. All the state forces including the military and the civil politicians assassinated parliamentary democracy through that period and it has never been able to get a chance to stand upright again.

When Awami League was agitating against the BNP when it gained power soon after, BNP was in turn

"There is absolutely no comparison between the two. We are criticising because we were agitating against Ershad who had overthrown an elected government. So it was our responsibility to observe *hartals* on behalf of the people. But we have been again elected as a legitimate government so *hartals* against us are also illegitimate."

"So *hartals* are legitimate and illegitimate both."

"You could say that. When it's against us, it's not legitimate because we represent the real interest of the people. Because they are agitating against us, the real representatives, their *hartals* are anti-people."

The circular argument went on.

I never watch BTB but the World Cup matches have drawn many to the station and I hear the official propaganda as well. There is the expected one on Hasina and *hartals*. It shows her promising that she would never ever call *hartals*, even if she were in the opposition. A foreign friend in town can't understand how this can be. I can't make him understand that promises have nothing to do with politics. Hasina knows it doesn't matter in Bangla-

desh if she breaks her word.

"The need of the people is greater than the words of a politician and the country needs her and so in the interest of the people she must break her promise. This in fact is a patriotic act."

When the friend who supports the AL tells me this on phone while discussing the chances of Brazil in the World cup I have no answer.

In fact, I don't know if we dislike it or like it or whatever. Nobody ever

kept. Promises are just part of politics.

ARE we surprised that the scene is like this? If we are, then we are genuine fools. What we have not been able to understand is a very simple fact that is stated below.

The Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party are two wings of the same party. Barring minor differences there is nothing to show any difference. Those who

capitalism at the higher levels.

- Both patronise *mastans* and *santrashis* and know that people have no power to resist them.

- Both use *mastans* to cow down people if they protest. Both allow crime as a system to pay *mastans* for political acts-- drugs or tenders-- so that criminals recognise the value of loyalty to political parties and the system and support this politics in return.

- Both parties have large number of loan-defaulters -- *rin santrashis* -- and people with criminal records are allowed membership.

- Both have family members as part of the ruling party leadership.

- Both parties allow party-line crossing during elections or later or earlier and at all levels so that powerful are not thrown outside the system.

- Senior politicians of both sides have common business interests and know that corruption charges can never be prosecuted to the full because of systemic inefficiency and so they are always safe.

OF course there has to be hartals or else how will we be kept busy? And live a difficult life and hope that the differences between the two will sink and we shall have peace? Meanwhile the leaders buy another ranch in the USA or Singapore, send their children to study in a foreign University and go to the roof of their Gulshan residence on a hartal day and wonder why can't the city be so free of pollution throughout the year.

AND we still keep on arguing about AL and BNP and even shed blood and tears arguing who is better. When many people lost a lot of money in the share scam and blamed a particular business house for it, his chief told another, " Why should we be blamed? Why did the people buy our shares? We never asked them."

You voted for them so you got them. You will get them next time too.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Building on the thaw: Seize the moment now!

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

WITH General Pervez Musharraf's commitment to "permanently" stop infiltration of *jehadi* militants into Kashmir, and New Delhi's tiny reciprocity steps, the threat of a sub-continental war has receded somewhat.

This is the first significant thaw since September 11 in badly vitiated India-Pakistan relations. India must seize the moment. To do so, it must disabuse itself of a few half-truths.

Three of these are important. First, a "determined" India made Pakistan blink; "coercive diplomacy" worked because it was backed by 700,000 troops.

Second, New Delhi called Islamabad's "nuclear bluff". Moreover, it has broken out of the "mental block" of nuclear deterrence.

Third, India should act in Kashmir as it likes, unfettered by "cross-border terrorism".

The reality is more complex. Pakistan has indeed executed a major shift. It agreed to permanently cease supporting cross-border infiltration--without conditions. This happened more through US mediation than through Islamabad's capitulation before India's military might.

This mediation has been visible. US officials took turns to talk to Mr Vajpayee and Gen Musharraf and shuttled between their capitals.

Gen Musharraf blinked--not to

New Delhi's stares, but to Wash-

ington's.

At the end of May, a desperate Islamabad brandished the nuclear sword. Senior diplomat Munir Akram said: "India should not have the licence to kill with conventional weapons while Pakistan's hands are tied..." This lost Pakistan all global sympathy.

India's show of military strength admittedly played a role. But the role was minor. International opinion favoured India not because it was impressed by India's might, but

because it saw it as the "aggrieved party" terrorism's victim.

It is because India produced evidence of Pakistan's general involvement in infiltration--and invited the US to verify this--that Washington intensely pressured Islamabad.

It is open to question if India could have achieved this with non-military means, including approaching the United Nations Security Council.

But it is beyond question that India and Pakistan practised rickmanship--to frighten everyone with war in "the world's most dan-

gerous place". Pakistani statements and the peculiarity of the sub-continent's military balance convinced many that war, once it broke out, would escalate to the nuclear level.

Nuclear war is *everybody's* business. That's why the US intervened and defused the situation. This is "deterrence at a distance", working even more fallibly than Cold War-style Superpower deterrence.

This only highlights the crucial importance of the nuclear factor in the subcontinent. It is ludicrous to

India must evolve a well-considered Kashmir policy: to halt repression, demilitarise daily life, and rebuild popular trust. For the 30 years of the Shimla agreement, New Delhi has failed to hold a serious dialogue on Kashmir--including the 18 years when "cross-border" militants didn't exist...If India doesn't get its Kashmir act together, today's gains will be quickly lost.

claim that India successfully "called Pakistan's nuclear bluff". Pakistan was *not* bluffing. Its nuclear doctrine, and strategic asymmetry vis-a-vis India, predisposes it towards a nuclear first-strike. Each wargaming exercise by strategic think-tanks concludes with a nuclear exchange.

Many South Asians have become insensitive to this danger--because they are unaware of just how destructive nuclear weapons are. Many recall that India and Pakistan fought a conventional conflict at Kargil, but nuclear war didn't break out. Ergo, it won't hap-

pen now.

This reasoning misreads both history and the deterrence doctrine. Wars are premised not upon high probabilities, but possibilities. States annually spend billions on defence not because wars happen every year.

Besides, we know that Kargil cannot close to the nuclear precipice. Pakistan had indeed prepared a nuclear attack.

Nuclear deterrence is flawed. At best, it works unreliably. Deterrence can fail--with potentially disastrous

consequences--because miscalculation, accident, or divergent perceptions of how much damage combatants can inflict/bear.

Deterrence tells us that not only our generals, but *theirs* too, will always think rationally. I have interviewed Pakistani officers who think their country can "absorb" one, two, ten Hiroshimas, and survive!

As Salman Rushdie put it: "India and Pakistan are... rolling ever closer to the edge [of a cliff]... These old pathetic fighters must be pulled apart..."

That's what happened. Rather than claim triumph for our "coercive

diplomacy", we must thank our stars that war didn't break out. The next time around, we could be reduced to radioactive dust.

To prevent this, India must build upon the new thaw with Pakistan. It should rapidly de-escalate the border build-up, and fully restore diplomatic relations and communication links. It must not seem to be dragging its feet.

Two issues have now become critical: who verifies that there is no cross-border infiltration, and what stand India takes on Kashmir,

especially if there is a dialogue with Pakistan.

India can't be both the complainant and the judge as regards infiltration's cessation. This calls for neutral, external verification. Here lies the crunch. India is proposing joint patrolling with Pakistan, but Islamabad sees that as a prelude to making the LoC a permanent boundary, thus cheating it of a Kashmir deal. It rejected that idea 30 years ago.

Pakistan wants the UN Military Observer Group, now reduced to a token existence, to be expanded into a verification agency. New Delhi

sees that as a bid to "internationalise the Kashmir issue", something it vehemently opposes.

Perhaps the best compromise would be a multilateral body, composed of a number of states and non-governmental organisations, like Verification Technology Information Council and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

This *does* involve some external involvement. But only ostriches can pretend that Kashmir remains purely bilateral. Unlike in the past, India's position on Kashmir is no longer viewed with universal suspicion.

India must evolve a well-considered Kashmir policy: to halt repression, demilitarise daily life, and rebuild popular trust.

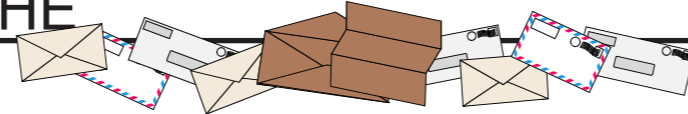
For the 30 years of the Shimla agreement, New Delhi has failed to hold a serious dialogue on Kashmir--including the 18 years when "cross-border" militants didn't exist.

The government must not play games to thwart free and fair elections in which *all* currents of opinion take part. The indications so far are largely negative--witness Syed Ali Shah Geelani's arrest, and the toughening official posture against a dialogue with the Hurriyat.

If India doesn't get its Kashmir act together, today's gains will be quickly lost.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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



"Nation awaits PM's lead"

I refer to the editorial 'Nation awaits PM's lead: Directionless cabinet desperately needs a reshuffle and reinvigoration' (June 15).

It is so true that most people are thinking the same thing, 'what is the government doing?' During the absence of the Prime Minister, the country's law and order situation went from bad to worse. Everybody kept their fingers crossed and looked forward to a major reshuffle in the cabinet after the PM's return and thus a change in the overall situation. But it seems that everything has been 'managed', there will be no changes whatsoever and we will go on paying heavily for voting BNP to power.

Anjali Akbar
Azimpur Road, Dhaka

An appropriate budget

The Finance Minister has proposed an appropriate budget for 2002-2003 financial year. He has imposed tax on English medium schools that are established mostly for business purposes. There are about 100

English medium schools in the city. The well-reputed schools have their own transports, and for this the students are compelled to pay huge conveyance cost. Moreover, they make their students buy study materials like exercise books, diary, pencil etc. from recommended stationary shops at a high price.

Above all, what they teach their students is totally different from our social and geographical context. For instance, the geography book of class VII mostly covers the geography of India! I think the Education Board of Bangladesh should take necessary steps to monitor the activities of English medium schools.

An anxious guardian
Dhaka

Budget 2002-2003

In the 2002-2003 budget which was placed in the JS recently three things caught my eyes. 7.5 per cent tax was imposed on the computer to control smuggling. Ban of reconditioned cars and tax imposed on English medium schools.

Mr Finance Minister do you think that by imposing tax on computers smuggling can be stopped? You

know very well who the smugglers are and who are directly or indirectly involved in it. So withdraw the tax and take stern actions against the smugglers.

As the price of brand new cars is much more than the reconditioned cars so the people from middle and lower middle class will not be able to buy cars. So who will be benefited from it? Either lift the ban or make arrangements to purchase brand new cars on instalment basis.

Every year English medium schools increase the fees according to their will. If tax is imposed on these schools then the fees will be increased much higher than expected. So the children of the middle and lower middle class will not be able to study in the English medium schools.

Think about it.
Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka

Football fan

My brother Steven Mann (27, Southbourne) is the ultimate England fan. After the Argentina game he decided he would put a St George's cross on top of his and his friends bungalow. So he got on the

roof and fixed it to the chimney but when getting down fell off and broke his elbow and pushed the ball joint at the top of his leg through the socket and broke it in 4 places which means he won't be able to walk for three months. Now that's what I call a football fan.

Robert Mann
One e-mail

Listen to Aristotle

Bangladesh should heed Aristotle and change leaders regularly. Aristotle once remarked that all forms of government--democracy, oligarchy, monarchy, tyranny--are inherently unstable, that all political regimes are inherently transitional, that the stability of all regimes is "corrupted by the corrosive power of time." To prolong the viability of democratic institutions, his advice had been rapid turnover of leaderships--"constant changing of guards before rot creeps in."

Aristotle believed that only through constant change, democracy can renew itself. What was true in the Periclean democracy in ancient Greece remains germane in the world today. There is a tendency for political leaders to try to prolong

their rules at the expense of change and renewal. In most developing countries, democratically elected leaders tend to think that they have right to govern as long as they could. They even try to create dynastic rules as sons and daughters and even wives of erstwhile popular leaders. Even in a long-standing democracy like India, there is an attempt to create a dynastic rule as we have seen in the dominance of Nehru-Gandhi family and old leaders like Atal Behari Vajpayee continue to dominate the political scene at the expense of new leaders. In Pakistan, now deposed Benazir Bhutto has been trying to govern mostly because of the popularity of her father.

Even in Canada, a mature and highly advanced democracy, Prime Minister Jean Chretien, after a decade of rule, refuses to give up, although 70 per cent of Canadians want him to leave. Instead, he has fired the most popular political leader in the country, Finance Minister Paul Martin, because of his leadership ambitions.

Bangladesh is no exception to the trend. Two politicians, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina seem to

have become a permanent fixture in the political landscape. But it is clear that the country needs a new generation of leaders. Present Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina should listen to the great sage of antiquity and pass the torch to new leaders in the next election.

Mahmood Elahi
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Tejgaon Airport

This is in regards to Siddiqui's letter defending the use of Tejgaon Airport for military flights.

He mentions that building a dedicated airfield for the air force is wasteful and expensive and shutting down Tejgaon would push that traffic to already congested Zia. He is absolutely correct were it not for the fact that the only planes that land in Tejgaon are one C-130 Transport and Cessna. I am sure Zia can handle one heavy air craft and several light trainers without undue trouble.

The only other air traffic into Tejgaon is helicopters of various makes. These don't need a runway and transferring them to Savar Cantonment wouldn't cost anything

extra.

I wholly agree that turning part of the runway into the Parade Square was idiotic. It completely destroyed the tarmac and I have no idea who thought that one up. It was just fine in Manik Mia Avenue.

Imagine turning the entire area of the Old Airport into a huge park in the lines of Central Park in NY. Won't that be so much a better use of that land rather than keeping it blocked off?

T.Ali
Dhaka

Male dominated society

This refers to your news of June 4 where a husband beats his wife to death allegedly for not carrying out his order.

We leave in a barbaric society where men treat their wives like beasts and not as human beings. This is not something that could be taken lightly.

Domestic violence has increased at an alarming rate. Torture against women has become very common in our society. Surprisingly, many women consider

such mistreatment as a part of life. Interestingly, our social arrangements are designed in such a way that it serves only the vested quarters. Our urgent exhort to the civil society-- academics, community leaders, bureaucrats and journalists -- to come forward for increasing awareness among the inmate. The NGOs have worked for gender development. We urge them to orchestrate a campaign against domestic violence and duly urge the authorities concerned to bring the culprits to justice.

Mamunur Rahman
Department of Women's Studies, DU

"From Cannes, with films"

Allow me to extend my congratulations to Mr. Hasnat Abdul Hye for the article "From Cannes, with films" I enjoyed reading it very much.

May I request Mr. Hye to write more on evolution of modern films and the various movements that have shaken and shaped it?

Rashed Uz Zaman
Uttara, Dhaka