

BNP's self-defeating move

This attack on the President will weaken the Constitutional office

THE so-called Young Turks among BNP MPs have scaled new heights in impudence thereby leaving the nation bewildered and guessing about what they might be up to. At their parliamentary party meeting on Wednesday presided over by none else than Leader of the House and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, they demanded that President Badruddoza Chowdhury be impeached.

Why would they do that? Their line of reasoning sounds as preposterous as their demand itself is. Apparently going by the ear and knowing which strings to pull in their display of sycophantic pyrotechnics, they have chosen to blast the President for his 'attitude towards the party'; mind you, not attitude to his country, people, democracy, parliament or the Constitution. He is being accused of neutrality, the very quality of head and heart that not only befits his high constitutional position but also something that should endear him to the people. The fact that he is trying to measure up to the test of neutrality in spite of being a party nominee to the presidency some seven months ago, speaks highly of him. The ruling party itself should be a beneficiary of the reflected glory. For, what's enhanced thereby, in the ultimate analysis, is the prestige and credibility of the government of the day.

The seemingly worked up BNP MPs have no idea as to what parliamentary democracy is about, what is the role of a Constitutional President in it and even what is the right language in which to talk about the President of the country. The main burden of complaint against the incumbent President is two-fold; he failed to visit late President Ziaur Rahman's *mazar* (burial site) on the occasion of the latter's 21st death anniversary and that collaterally he forgot to mention the late President's contribution in the War of Liberation.

Neither of his so-called faults was a deliberate omission or commission on his part. Because, as President, he is primarily obliged to attend state functions as distinguished from party events. The moment one assumes the Presidency of the Republic one is required to both exercise neutrality as well as appear to be doing so. He has to live up to the full requirement of his exalted office which confers on him a very important symbolic character that must be regarded as an asset for the system of constitutionalism in the country. A person sitting on that chair is only expected to further the symbolism of his office. Since he represents no power, it is the ceremonial nature of his position that must supersede the demands of party oriented ceremonies.

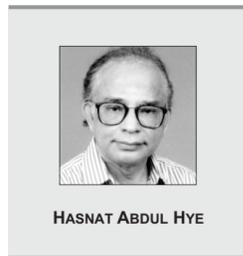
It is incomprehensible how in presence of the Prime Minister and his senior cabinet colleagues those BNP MPs at the parliamentary party meeting had the temerity to raise the demand for the President's impeachment at length even after their opening remarks had indicated where they were headed for. The PM could stop them on their tracks by stoutly upholding the President's position at the first opportunity and thereby signalling to all concerned that the PM and the President enjoyed each other's confidence in the fullest measure. What a gain to the system that would have been!

Implicit in the BNP MPs' call for impeachment is the message that association with the party overrides the fact of the assumption of a statutory office or the constitutional obligations that go with it. In the event of such a partisan coup, how do we ensure proprieties in the functioning of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the parliament?

Just as we need to separate the government from the party in a truly functioning democracy so also it is essential that a ruling party does not confuse institutions with individuals. The Presidency as an institution needs to be upheld in the best interest of the State.

(This editorial was written before yesterday's decision by BNP to ask the President to resign)

Reinventing the wheels?



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

OLD is not always gold, not in the case of cars, it seems. New car, being new, runs smoothly, old cars don't. The wear and tear on roads caused by the superannuated ones is more. The case for their disposal rests on this argument. So far, so reasonable. But who is to pay the cost for disposal? The question has given rise to an animated and acrimonious debate among politicians in the UK. The question whether car manufacturers or owners should pay to get rid of superannuated cars has revealed divergence in positions taken by parties. The Tories in a populist move have taken the side of the owners of old cars, the Labour government is backing the car manufacturers and the Liberal Democrats are cannily chugging along with a wheel in each lane.

The above debate over the disposal of old cars would have been of trifling interest to us if it did not have an echo, however muffled, in Bangladesh. Among the contentious issues thrown up by the present budget has been the proposal to impose ban on import of reconditioned cars. Old cars and reconditioned ones are not always the same and hence drawing an analogy based on the former may appear far-fetched or at least a stretch. But the basic issue involved is essentially the same. It is one of public interest. Just as the underlying question in the debate going on in the UK is which class of people bears the cost similarly in Bangla-

desh the question is about the people who are going to be adversely affected. But here the similarity ends. The budget proposal in Bangladesh does not require the owners of reconditioned cars to dispose cars at their own cost. It seeks to impose ban on future imports of reconditioned cars. The target thus is not the present owners but future buyers. A plausible argument for ban would be hazardous pollution made by reconditioned cars. But so far no survey

experience of owners of reconditioned cars has so far been that reconditioned cars perform equally well as new cars of same horsepower and brand. Finally, it is a misconception that new cars require fewer spares and that too, much later. The policy of planned obsolescence ensures that the demand for spares is not few and far between.

The above analysis is just for argument's sake and obviously from the viewpoint of devil's advocate (no offence meant). The argument

hundred because none of the car dealers maintain a big staff. These are more or less run as family business. The servicing and repair works are done by the petrol pump stations and numerous repair shops which do not depend on reconditioned cars for their existence. These may suffer some loss but it will not be serious enough to throw them out of business. The ban on reconditioned cars, therefore, is not a great public interest issue as it is being made out to be.

little better than toy cars with very fragile body and finicky engines. For cars above 1000 cc. the prices will be beyond the reach of the middle class who are now able to buy reconditioned cars. By no method of permutation and combination it can therefore be shown that ban on reconditioned cars and import of new cars will promote "the greatest good of the greatest number".

Revenue budget can be a potent instrument to effect economic and social change. Its objective is not

eration of fear of resistance from vested interest or favour to privileged few. To begin with, a moratorium on import of all kinds of cars, old, new and reconditioned should be declared for the next 5 years. During this interregnum all incentives (fiscal and monetary) should be given for import of bus, micro bus and taxi cabs in large numbers. The advantage of this policy will be that without physical banning rickshaws will be priced out of the main thoroughfare in Dhaka and other metropolitan in the country. If the number of such vehicles increases significantly, as it should, and the quality of service improves, which would be ensured by competition even upper middle class will start using public transport. Clearing footpaths in busy areas like Matijheel will make this change even more feasible. The nouveau rich will still have their dinosaurs (Lexus, Mercedes, BMW etc.), most likely mothballed in their garage. To satiate their appetite for luxury cars and satisfy conspicuous consumption to which they have become accustomed import of new cars can be resumed after the period of ban is over. But they should be made to pay for their extravagant life-style with high tariff and other taxes. Simultaneously, the ban on import of reconditioned cars should also be withdrawn allowing the transport market to dictate through price and daily expenses about the ideal mode of transport for the users.

Reinventing the wheels? Not really. The wheels are already there. We have to make up our minds about which of them should turn and for whom should they be meant. For this no administrative fiat is required. The market, influenced by the budget and its instruments (fiscal and monetary policy) will take its own course which may not be in conflict with public interest.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

Revenue budget can be a potent instrument to effect economic and social change. Its objective is not only to raise revenue and spend. The transport sector is a case in point. It is almost languishing from a prolonged period of benign neglect much to the suffering of the general public. Transport policy since Pakistan period has been skewed in favour of the rich and the vested interest. The budgetary policy instruments have been used in the past to promote their interest.

has been made to affix culpability for this offense on the beleaguered reconditioned cars. If anything, the evidence to support this allegation is scanty. Another argument that could be given is the overcrowding of roads, particularly in Dhaka, facilitated by the uninterrupted import of reconditioned cars. But this, too, is untenable because everyone knows that for traffic jam and overcrowding rickshaws and auto-rickshaws are more to blame. But all these are beating about the bush. The main justification given for ban has been mentioned and it is the allegedly high recurring costs for spares required by reconditioned cars. But this argument, too, is not based on facts and figures. No comparative study has been made to show that reconditioned cars use more spare parts than do new cars and more frequently. In Bangladesh context, it is the condition of roads and the quality of driving that are more important factors in respect of demand for spare parts than the age of cars. Moreover, the general

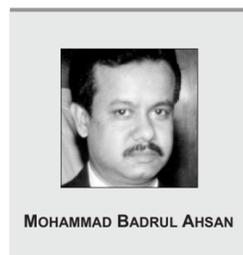
formulated misses the main point at issue i.e. public interest. To refresh the memory, a policy that promotes the greatest good of the greatest number is in the public interest. Where does the ban on reconditioned cars stand by this light?

The importers of reconditioned cars have been crying hoarse that the ban shall deprive a large number of people from buying cheap but reliable cars. At the average price of 4 to 5 lakhs plus tax it is the upper middle class, having annual income of more than 6 lakhs, who can afford to buy reconditioned cars. The middle and lower middle class with annual incomes ranging from 2 to 3 lakhs can only dream of becoming an owner of reconditioned cars. So the protest made on behalf of a large number of buyers is not well founded. The importers of reconditioned cars have also claimed that thousands of employees will become unemployed as a result of the ban. There is no doubt that some people will lose their jobs but their number will not be more than a few

The above argument is relevant but still not to the point i.e. it skirts around the issue of promotion of public interest. It is one thing to say that public interest will not be affected adversely to any significant extent and completely another to contend that the policy to ban will promote it. According to elementary welfare economics if loss of welfare of a few promotes welfare of many then it is a positive gain overall. A policy that achieves this goal is welfare enhancing. The ban on reconditioned cars may affect a few thousand thereby cancelling out the loss in almost equal measure. But the losers and the gainers belong to different Kettles of fish. This is because of the circumstances and socio-economic conditions in which new cars will be imported. However much the importers or local agents of new cars may assure that new cars can be bought at as low a price as Tk 4 lakhs this will hardly be the case except for cars with 600 or 800 cc. Needless to say that these are

only to raise revenue and spend. The transport sector is a case in point. It is almost languishing from a prolonged period of benign neglect much to the suffering of the general public. Transport policy since Pakistan period has been skewed in favour of the rich and the vested interest. The budgetary policy instruments have been used in the past to promote their interest. As a result public transport has been limping along widening the gap between demand and supply. At present very few, if any, of the upper middle class and the rich use buses or mini busses. Thanks to the generous policy of importing cars continued over the years the number of owners have increased in the category of upper income earners. The poor either walk or ride buses when they can afford. The middle class rides rickshaws and auto rickshaws risking their lives. It is time to change this unexceptionable state of affairs by adopting a people oriented transport policy. For this budget should be used without any consid-

Quintessence of dust



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HER life ended just about when it was meant to begin. She wanted to become an engineer, earn a Ph.D. degree, become a teacher, marry the man of her choice and visit Calcutta within sometime. She had plans for the future, her eyes anointed with dreams that one day her life was going to turn into a fairy, which would grant her every wish. And just when everything started to fall in places, it came to a sudden end. The rude hands of death erased the glimmer of hope, which danced in her eyes like the reflection of moon in ruffled streams.

She died like a busted bubble, the expanding contour of her dream pricked by an awful tragedy. She died young and fresh, unsmudged by time and its havoc and undiminished by her struggles. She grew up in privation, many givens of life postponed for the future until she could afford them with her own earnings. She died just about the time she had started to live. Her

beginning marked her end.

But then she died more than just a human being; she was the repository of her parents' dreams. They invested their lives in hers, sacrificing their own comforts and cravings so that she could grow up to be a successful woman. She died about the time her family was ready to move from a two-bedroom apartment to a three-bedroom apartment. She died about the time her father was going to buy her the first

one disappearance annihilated a paroxysm of hopes.

According to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, measuring either of two related quantities, as position and momentum or energy and time, produces uncertainty in the measurement of the other. No matter how we look at her death and try to measure the loss, it makes life such a chancy thing! She died on the way to her dormitory, one version says she was almost near the

talented life!

Perhaps that is what we think, but is that how her parents see it? For them it is a loss of a dream they had cherished for twenty some years, a denial of the future which justified all their sacrifices and sufferings in the past. For them it is the loss of a loved one who was growing up in the image of their aspirations, who looked so close to the finishing line of vindicating everything they ever wanted in life. For them it is a col-

others who were fond of her? How are they going to fill up this sudden void left by her untimely death? What about the man she loved and hoped to marry someday? How is he going to bear this loss? Where would he ever find this girl, who disappeared when the confluence of their lives was assuredly in sight?

Thus one death has diminished so many lives with the dislocating effect of an earthquake. Each of these lives has been shattered and

flesh into a figment from their dissipated past. And perhaps some of them will recall the famous speech of Hamlet, that what a piece of art is man, that although he is noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form and moving, that although the beauty of the world- the paragon of animals, yet what is this quintessence of dust!

It is said that one of the key elements of tragedy is the contradiction that man is at once the wonder of the world and the plaything of fate. Why else would a young woman, so generously gifted with talents for success, be momentarily swept away from this concourse of life? Pity and terror, Aristotle says, are the passions aroused in us by the contemplation of tragedy. We feel sorry for her, and we feel sorry for ourselves as tragedies like this are repeated too often.

Tragedies, when repeated, imprecate horror, and she has died like a role model of that horror. Her death makes us feel vulnerable, and we shudder inside us at the realization that the end can come in such a deplorable way, that promising lives can perish because trigger-happy minds cannot sort out their differences without firing deadly weapons.

While her parents mourn her loss, we, as a society, need to concentrate on the quintessence of dust. Let her death not be a complete waste, and at least remind us of that.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Tragedies, when repeated, imprecate horror, and she has died like a role model of that horror. Her death makes us feel vulnerable, and we shudder inside us at the realization that the end can come in such a deplorable way, that promising lives can perish because trigger-happy minds cannot sort out their differences without firing deadly weapons.

computer of her life.

She died in suspended animation, her life terminated in the midst of so many things happening. She died as if an orchestra stopped playing at the height of its performance. With her perished a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a friend, a lover, a student, a future engineer, a potential teacher, a prospective wife and a would-be mother. The elimination of a single body has erased so many dimensions of a soul! As a matter of fact with one person vanished a cluster of personalities, one death demolished a cornucopia of dreams, and

entrance of the dormitory when she was hit by a bullet. Fatalists and believers say it was her destiny to die there, that the bullet was marked with her name for that particular time at that particular place, and that she would have died no matter what.

But that is true anywhere on any day in any age for anyone. Then why has her death sent shock waves throughout this country? Why do we feel angry and frustrated at the definitive onslaught of what is so unavoidable and rigid? It is the way she died that bothers us. There was something awkward about her death. It was such a waste of a

sal loss of two generations: for the parents who wished to live through their daughter and the daughter who died before her parents. The parents took lots of pain for their daughter in the excitement of building a resplendent future for her. How are they going to cope with the pain if it comes back in the bleak days of mourning, which lie ahead of them?

What about her grandmother, who wished to live until she got wed? What will be her consolation for the loss of the lively throbbing granddaughter who was close to her heart? What about her brother, friends, teachers, neighbors and

left to wobble in the foundation for days to come, haunted by the specter of death in every turning of life. Perhaps some of them will forget her eventually, and others will become numbed in their pain. Perhaps all of them will get used to this loss, except a twist of pain rising like a wisp of smoke every now and then, reminded of her by places, events or sheer voids of time.

Yet the erasure of her life will not be complete for as long as these people are alive. She will continue to live in their memories, laughter, tears, dreams, sighs, fears and anguish, gradually reduced from her

OPINION

World cup syndrome: Fanatic zealots and impartial fan

OMAR KHASRU

WORLD cup, the greatest show on earth, held in four-year intervals, is not merely a sporting event, it is a phenomenon, and a momentous event. The power of a soccer game to sway the emotions of hundreds of millions of fans in much of the world is quite incredible and unprecedented. No other sporting event, including the Olympics and cricket world cup, has such magical, mystical and mesmerizing hold on so many.

The chances of Bangladesh ever playing in the World Cup Football tournament in our lifetime or that of vast majority of living Bangladeshis ranges between prohibitively remote to non-existent. And yet the interest in the games is incessant and unbelievable. There are significant groups of supporters for popular teams. The natural and long simmering rivalry between neighbouring Brazil and Argentina, two largest South American countries and quintessential football powerhouses, is matched by the boisterous and acrimonious discord and arguments between the Bangladeshi fans of the two teams. The competing sentiments are manifested in colourful flags, festoons, posters and even processions in support of these teams. The elimination of Argentina in the first round put a

real damper and a bumner on its faithful and staunch backers. It brought equal amount of rapture and contentment to the large contingents of Brazilian supporters. Overnight, like a magic trick, all the Argentinian flags of different sizes and shapes disappeared and the number of Brazilian flags was replenished. Air was heavy with the heartache, pain, suffering and tears of Argentinians fans. The helium gas seems to have gone out of their festive, optimistic and colourful high aloft balloon. Two young women even tried to commit suicide. This sort of impetuous behaviour one expects from whimsical and reckless Americans or obsessive and hara-kiri mentality Japanese. I suppose, Bangladesh, a bridge between the East and the West, is now replicating the impulsive and pigheaded conduct of the two.

When you look at it dispassionately, sensibly and realistically, this after all is only a game. It has no bearing in the life or the living of most Bangladeshis. A sport is, at best a metaphor for life, not a matter of life and death. But a typical fan does not care about good sense, objectivity, reasonable behaviour or attitude. All s/he cares about is the victory of the preferred team and/or the defeat of the despised side. The word 'fan' is a short form of the word 'fanatic.' Frenzied zeal and maniacal bias, devoid of

logic or reasoning is the trademark of fanatical behaviour. We may not excel in any sport, but the Bangladeshi fans are at par with rabid fans elsewhere. Our teams may not qualify for most competitions but the Bangladeshi fans make up for this 'minor' shortcoming by latching onto foreign alien teams. The location of the countries of the teams or the name of the capital, sometime even the continent, hemisphere or the bearing they may well be totally unaware of or ignorant about.

This World Cup will be remembered for the unexpected outcome and unanticipated upsets. The departure of France, Portugal and Argentina in the first round and the scintillating and spirited victory of unknown or non-established teams like Senegal and the US bear testimony to this. In addition to Argentina, fans of other favourites were heartbroken, too. On the other hand, we had a sudden and joyful surge in the fan base of Senegal. A few organised Senegal fan clubs have sprung up overnight. There is no such pouring of intense support for the US. Political dislike, intense and visceral antipathy towards the US foreign policy and, let's face it, deep rooted envy for the country have all translated into total indifference, lack of enthusiasm and even a bit of outrage at the success of the Ameri-

can soccer team. I am yet to see a single US flag fluttering anywhere. That is a sure-fire indicator of popular disdain for the team. It is unbelievable that the team beat hot favourites and teams in great form like Portugal and Mexico decisively and comprehensively. It is amazing that the US team has been able to overturn so many prominent and reputable apple carts.

In the US - Mexico second round game, siesta, fiesta, burrito and Taco Bell seems to have lost out to veritable assiduity, nourishment, holdog and McDonald, home of the brave and land of not quite free burgers, speaking with tongue firmly placed in the cheek. The US is safely onto the quarterfinals. Frankly, it has been great fun and joy to support the US team in gatherings at home, work or elsewhere when I am pretty much the only supporter of the team surrounded by a sea of US bashers and visceral US haters. The motto of the rest of the crowd seems to be ABUS, an acronym for 'Anybody but US'. My final words on the matter is, it does not matter what the rest of you think, the Yankees have landed and they aim to snare the greatest prize in the sporting world. Watch out Brazil! And I consider myself a moderate, sensible, enlightened and prudent observer of the World Cup syndrome, unlike the fanatical zealots like most of you!

MAHMOOD ELAHI
writes from Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

AS the Palestinian suicide bombers and Israeli tanks take their tolls of both Israeli and Palestinian civilians, it is obvious that hard-liners on both sides are looking for a military solution to what is clearly a political problem. Palestinian suicide bombers and Israeli helicopter gunships and endless procession of faces -- both Israelis and Palestinians -- distorted by anguish and fear appear to bring fresh reasons for despair. Each seems to blame the other side without ever mentioning their own share in the tragedy.

It also seems that there is a design in this apparent madness. For Palestinian hardliners, it seems to be the final salvo in a long war to dislodge the state of Israel. These hardliners must be thinking that if the bombing and violent Intefada can be continued, it can break the will of Israeli people.

Many Israeli hardliners may be thinking in the similar fashion. A few years ago, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (then a general) declared that a Palestinian state exists and its name was Jordan. He later said he

changed his mind, without convincing anyone of his sincerity. However, many Israeli hardliners may have come to the conclusion that they could progressively take over West Bank, if the Palestinians can be persuaded to leave through the pressures of new Israeli settlements and military action.

Each side may have underestimated the other, perhaps by thinking that the momentum is on their side. The Palestinians underestimated the Israeli resolve. Most Israelis know how their parents and grandparents suffered in the Holocaust and this has bred a rare stoicism in them. Most Jewish people know that Israel is only place they can call their own and their own survival will depend on the survival of that state.

The Israeli hardliners, on the other hand, may have underestimated the resolve of the Palestinian people. Already a Diaspora in the Arab world, they know that they will become another stateless people if they lose footholds in West Bank and Gaza. Without a state of their own, they will become permanent refugees just as the Jewish people were before Israel was establis-

hed. Paradoxically, this mutually antagonistic positions may actually help the Palestinians and the Israelis come together after the current wave of bloodletting. Once they realize that they cannot break the will of the other, they may seek accommodation. Whatever statements by Palestinian leaders may be making, most hardeners did not accept Israel's right to exist.

Now they will have to make way for the moderates by ceasing all suicide attacks on the Israeli population. Israel, on the other hand, will have to start withdrawing from all occupied territories in exchange. A simultaneous statement by Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon, that all suicide bombing will stop if Israel starts pulling out from West Bank may pave the way for any meaningful negotiation to bring peace in the region.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who tried to bring peace, can only help if two sides agree on this most fundamental issue. Negotiation cannot start if the suicide bombers and Israeli tanks continue to take their tolls. The Bush administration came to power with a

justified reluctance to indulge in the Middle Eastern grandstanding which was the hallmark of the earlier administration.

President Bill Clinton tried to use the region in order to enhance his place in history. Mr. Clinton, suffering from the Monica Lewinsky scandal, tried to present himself as a world statesman by pushing the Israelis and the Palestinians to come to an agreement without addressing the main cause of their antagonism.

Without ending the cycle of violence, no real agreement is possible. Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian leader, recently wrote in *The Progressive* magazine: "As Palestinians, albeit the victims, we too have to admit our share of blame and ask ourselves those questions that have remained silent or whispered in the privacy of closed-door discussions.... Why and when we allow a few from our midst to interpret Israeli military attacks on innocent Palestinian lives as a licence to do the same to their civilians?"

When the majority of Palestinians ask themselves this question, the stage can be set for peace.