

Tafazzul Commission report

A ringing indictment on a deeper malaise

THE judicial probe committee report on the Shamsunnahar Hall incident has been completed and sent to the appropriate authorities and we await its public disclosure. The government deserves to be complimented for instituting a judicial inquiry and ensuring that the space required for carrying it out and completing the report was made available to Justice Tafazzul Islam. He has probed and brought out the facts in a reasonably quick time thereby earning a place in history through his solo efforts. Here again the government deserves to be complimented. But whatever the report says indicates how dismal the situation has become in the Dhaka University and the police administration.

Going by what media has stated, the report has squarely blamed the University administration and the politics that motivates its actions for the odious police raid. The remarks that they didn't 'act like guardians' which could have prevented the raid is the worst possible indictment. The DU administration, teachers and managers have come out looking more like reckless political activists than anything else. This is a sad day for the Dhaka University where partisan politics inside the campus led to a police raid into dorm resulting in injury, humiliation and arrests.

But if these politicking teachers have looked gray, the police can't escape being painted in even darker hues. Their own excuses for the raids contradicted statements given by the teachers and even each other. Their excuses fell apart under judicial scrutiny and clearly they acted against public interest. The crumbling image of the police has taken a dent that will not be so easy to repair. Police reform can't wait another day.

The probe body's assertion that the police didn't behave as a friend of the people is a polite way of saying they were on that night anti-people. A group did manage to manipulate them to the point of bringing the Dhaka University into absolute shame and the damage to the DU's image is serious. Between them, the politicking teachers of DU and the irresponsible police who have also been accused of mistreating the female students, they have managed to reduce the prestige and dignity of the DU as a place for nurturing education and moral values. The institution now lies under the question mark of whether with all its deeper malaise it's fit to teach and nurture the minds of the new generation. When top educational administrators and teachers are soiled, who is left clean?

Somebody did order male and female police to enter the dorm and beat up the girls there. It takes an extraordinary level of alienation from the people to decide to do this. It also shows where the state of Bangladesh now is in.

We congratulate the probe body for completing the report and hope actions will be taken. This is a test that is more significant than any other action.

Commonwealth for democracy, development, diversity

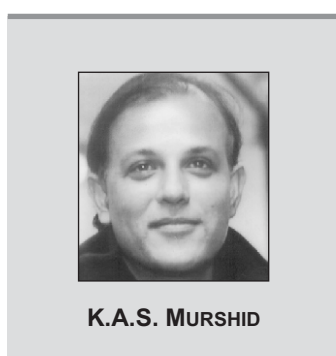
New times call for new role, new strategy

OVER the last couple of years or so, political developments in some countries have pushed the Commonwealth of Nations on to a path it has never treaded before. The military take-over by General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan and the blatant violation of fundamental human rights by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe have, in a way, exposed certain inadequacies of the forum and underscored the need for a reassessment of its strategy. Its professed dedication to democracy has been tested to the limits by problems that, although not unprecedented, have proved difficult to resolve.

The Commonwealth has tried everything at its disposal, exhortation to suspension of its membership; yet neither Musharraf nor Mugabe has budged. The double setback underscores the need for the forum to seriously do some strategic gap filling. The same is true for its role in socio-economic development of nations across the Commonwealth. Socio-economic development has assumed a new meaning in this era of globalisation and greater interconnectivity. That makes the forum's role even more crucial for some 30-odd least developed countries such as Bangladesh across the Commonwealth. The phenomenal spread of information technology has led to the creation of a knowledge divide alongside economic disparity. Therefore, the solution is not only poverty alleviation but also elevation of the underdeveloped countries up the knowledge ladder. This means the Commonwealth has to play a greater and more effective role towards making the poor countries economically solvent so as to fit into the greater design of globalisation and technologically sound to embrace and reap benefit out of information technology.

These are changing times and the Commonwealth must as well alter its strategy to deal effectively with the changing needs of the nations, especially the poor ones, under its wings. Democracy is and should be pivotal to all developmental considerations. As Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told visiting Commonwealth Secretary General Donald McKinnon during a meeting on Monday, "democracy and development go together and one strengthens the other". As democracy is tested across the world, Mr McKinnon, we are sure, knows all too well that a new vision is needed to keep the Commonwealth tapestry intact on the threads of democracy, development and diversity.

The right price



K.A.S. MURSHID

THE market is a peculiar animal -- it hates being pushed around. Now let's take the case of the interest rate, which in principle can be set at whatever level that banks and financial institutions want. Now should it surprise anyone that it is as high as it is today -- even after the sharp warnings and threat of dire consequences by none other than the Finance Minister? Did it help to reduce those rates? No, it didn't. In fact the sharp talk had NO impact, forcing our outspoken FM to beat a quiet retreat! The question is how can we get those rates down to reasonable levels? Before that we must ask what is reasonable?

One way of looking at it is to look at bank borrowing and lending rates (or wholesale and retail rates). When the spread between the two is as high as 6 or 7 percent, it is reasonable to raise eyebrows. Where in the world do you have such spreads? Can this be justified by the cost of retailing money to borrowers? And why on earth

doesn't the market correct itself? After all, we have had a veritable explosion in the number of new banks that have been set up in recent years -- all desperately competing for a market that is far from expanding exponentially. Elementary economic theory suggests that such intense competition should have led to lower interest rates and hugely reduced spreads. No such luck. The answer lies in the

est rates that the NCBs charge. Just think for a moment what would happen if the private banks actually listened to the FM and drastically lowered their interest rates. First, there would be a mad scramble with everyone trying to get hold of the cheap loans. One could predict that only members of the Privilege Club (and their in-laws) would be able to get anywhere near the relevant bank managers. Inci-

impact would be to create additional rent-seeking opportunities for some of us. The only way to get the interest rate down is to end the monopoly of the NCBs in the market. As long as they dominate it, they control it -- and all others only need to follow. And in this particular case, our private banks are delighted to be thus led. So if you happen to have a couple of crores stashed away somewhere, you would be strongly advised to get

days it was this ridiculous attempt to control it -- obviously with every good intention at heart. The message that we seem to forget time and again is that the market is more efficient than government departments or corporations, and any attempt to try and control it directly, usually spells certain disaster. Thus, the moment that the sector was 'liberalised' (deregulated) and the private sector was allowed in,

come down dramatically. However, we still remain one of the more expensive places in the developing world for mobile connections and charges. Whoever has heard of the concept of GP-GP outside Bangladesh? Another indigenous innovation here to make us proud! One suspects that the mobile phone market remains insufficiently competitive even today.

Let me end with the current debate about the 'baby-taxis'. First of all let me congratulate the government for taking such a bold and decisive step to rid us of these little devils. I for one shall literally breathe more easily as a result! But what astonishes me is the contingency plan that has evolved. In particular one would dearly like to know why only one company has been given the privilege of importing CNG baby taxis? Are we going to see a repeat performance of the cell phone story here? At a time when the most logical move would be to completely liberalise the import of CNG baby taxis this effort at regulation appears well, curious (excuse the understatement -- that's what happens to me when I get really upset). That these machines are reportedly being sold at a scarcity premium should come as no surprise. After all, that's what life is all about here in Bangladesh -- generating and appropriating a 'premium'. In the meantime, the transport market is likely to take us for a ride!

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

You don't fool around with the market as it has a way of exacting its revenge often in unexpected ways. On the flip side, if you are nice to it, you could reap some rich rewards sometimes. Now take the case of BADC. Remember BADC and the virtual monopoly it had once enjoyed over irrigation equipment imports, fertiliser distribution and seeds? If there was one thing that held our agriculture back in those days it was this ridiculous attempt to control it -- obviously with every good intention at heart...The moment that the sector was 'liberalised' (deregulated) and the private sector was allowed in, there was a dramatic rise in irrigated area and agricultural production.

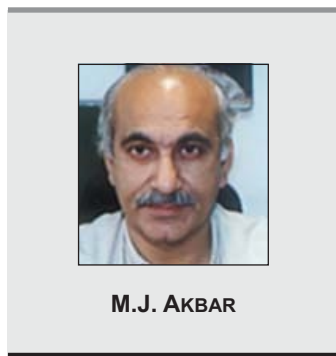
structure of our financial market, which is far from being perfect. Despite the large number of very small banks, the bulk of financial assets are in fact held by a few public sector banks (NCBs) constituting a kind of cartel that can do whatever it pleases. Unfortunately, the massive bad loans of the sector means that its risks are very high which in turn must be covered by the interest charged. Ok, so all of us must pay through our noses for the money that some of you guys refuse to pay back. It still doesn't explain why all those tiny (and not so tiny) banks and financial institutions ALSO charge the same high inter-

est rates that the NCBs charge. Secondly, some non-privileged citizens will get the loans after making suitable side payments to the manager, which would then increase their borrowing cost to near the market (NCB) level. The only interesting question here would be to see what these guys would do with the cheap money -- buy Defense Savings Certificates or pay back the NCBs? The important question really is, how does cheaper loans in a small segment of the financial market help us? I am afraid it doesn't since the most likely

into the banking business as soon as possible. Now, what do you think are the prospects of getting the NCBs to lower their rates? I wonder if the FM would like to share some of his thoughts on this matter? You don't fool around with the market as it has a way of exacting its revenge often in unexpected ways. On the flip side, if you are nice to it, you could reap some rich rewards sometimes. Now take the case of BADC. Remember BADC and the virtual monopoly it had once enjoyed over irrigation equipment imports, fertiliser distribution and seeds? If there was one thing that held our agriculture back in those

there was a dramatic rise in irrigated area and agricultural production. One also remembers the days of the one lac taka mobile phones. Unbelievable but true, for here we were in the poorest country in the world, paying probably the highest price for a mobile connection. Why -- because the government of the day in its infinite wisdom thought it fit to grant a licence to only one operator. With hindsight we were lucky that the phones were not priced even higher. I suspect the number of defaulters at the time was not large enough to justify a price hike. Now that we have a little bit of competition in the market, prices have

My statistic is better than yours



M.J. AKBAR

HERE is the news, in tricolour: the good, the bad, and the problematic. First, naturally, the good news. The Congress is three percentage points ahead of the BJP, 32 to 29, across the nation among voters asked which of the two parties could solve their problems better.

Now for the bad news. For the first time in the history of the Congress, a leader from the Nehru-Gandhi family is less popular than the party. Alter that to significantly less popular. Sonia Gandhi's approval rating is just 20 per cent, making her in effect a negative presence for 12 per cent of Congress voters. One can imagine how negative she must be for non-Congress voters, who still constitute 68 per cent of the electorate. This is particularly startling in view of the common Congress conviction that a leader from this family adds his or her own weight to the party strength. In Sonia Gandhi's case, she is subtracting from the party's appeal. Leadership in any democracy is about adding to the vote. George Bush and Tony Blair have personal approval ratings that are higher than the support that the Republicans and Labour have in the United States and Britain. This is normal. When that equation changes the party sits up and asks questions.

Now to the problem. No Congressman, or woman, has the courage to ask this simple question

of Sonia Gandhi. The word courage may seem an anomaly, but it is apt because under Sonia Gandhi the Congress has become a quasi-dictatorship, run by a small and very obedient oligarchy.

The BJP therefore, instead of struggling in the pits, continues to smile, if not to laugh, as it continues its leisurely progress towards its vote banks. With Sonia Gandhi as an enemy, who needs a friend?

Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi are at their lowest ebb. The only comfort that the government can draw is in the fact that at his lowest Vajpayee is still 13 per cent ahead of Sonia Gandhi. The Prime Minister may be in decline, but Sonia Gandhi is not growing. Or growing up. Once again, you don't have to read *India Today* to confirm this. This too is written on the face of every Congress leader in Delhi, except that no

She has not recovered from that remark. The prospect of Sonia Gandhi becoming Prime Minister of India freezes voters in their tracks.

Further analysis of the statistics indicates that a significant portion of Sonia Gandhi's approval comes from Muslims and Christians, and this has evidently more to do with the minorities' fear of the BJP than with any particular fondness for Sonia Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi has 33

per cent support here, against Vajpayee's 33 per cent.

What should worry the Congress is that despite being much younger Sonia Gandhi has not been able to connect with the 18-24 age group; she gets only 20 per cent here

this confrontation, and 33 per cent say that the government has managed the face-off "very well". This is Kargil in slow motion.

How would the same voters react to the prospect of Sonia Gandhi dealing with Pakistan? This question was not asked, but should be included in the next poll. It is the most important issue before any Prime Minister of India.

The most interesting statistical fact of the poll is that barring bumps caused by extraneous factors, inevitable in the rough and tumble of politics, the Congress and the BJP support has remained more or less even during the last two years. In January 2001 it was 34 per cent for Congress and 31 per cent for BJP; in August 33 and 28; in January this year it was dead even at 31 per cent each. In six months, despite all the shame and scandal, the Congress has improved by one per cent while the BJP has declined by two per cent.

There is an obvious conclusion to be drawn. Neither of the two principals of Indian politics can afford to be alone. The only reason why the BJP is in power and the Congress out of it, is because the BJP has an inclusive alliance policy, while the Congress rocks itself to sleep on a high horse. Only another coalition can defeat the ruling coalition. But in coalition politics you cannot afford an ego; and in any barter it has to be give-and-take. You-give-and-we-take is out of fashion.

An alternative coalition can be created instantly, if the Congress approach is tactile instead of concrete. And while a party has every right to consider a dynasty indispensable to its fortunes, it has to remember a basic truth: A dynasty is very dispensable in a coalition.

Clarity is always simple. That is why you can so easily find the path to power with its help.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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Opinion polls become far more agreeable when they agree with your own opinions. I am happy to report that by such non-objective standards, the latest *India Today* survey of 17,776 registered voters across 98 parliamentary constituencies, all of them presumably with proper identity cards, is an excellent snapshot of the contemporary political mood.

Since we are a highly leader-oriented democracy, the biggest of the big questions in the poll was clearly the comparison between the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the Prime Minister-in-waiting Sonia Gandhi. How do they compare?

Statistical fact: Vajpayee's popularity has slipped by five per cent since January, from 38 to 33. Actually you don't have to read *India Today* to find this out. This statistic is written on the face of every BJP leader in Delhi.

Statistical fact: Sonia Gandhi's approval ratings have risen by just one per cent in the same period, from 19 to 20. Curiously both

one will admit it in public -- or indeed deny it in private.

One of the more remarkable findings of this survey is that Sonia Gandhi's approval ratings have been in perpetual decline, or stagnant, ever since she touched a high of 32 per cent in May 1999. In August that year it came down to 26 per cent, in October to 24 per cent, in January 2001 to 28 per cent, in August to 22 per cent; in January this year to 19 per cent and is now a meaningless one per cent better to 20 per cent. This is the situation when the BJP is in power, and when it has done enough to resurrect any Opposition. Why has Sonia Gandhi been unable to benefit from the BJP's decline?

The answer lies in the beginning of this table. What happened after May 1999 when she had 32 per cent of the country with her? It was then that she made her famous remark in Italian-English that she had "272" MPs with her in her bid to become Prime Minister of India by defeating Vajpayee in Parliament rather than in a general election.

per cent support among Muslims against 15 per cent for Vajpayee. Frankly the surprise here is that 15 per cent Muslims still support Vajpayee; after Gujarat that figure should have gone down to zero. But Vajpayee's clear distance from Narendra Modi has left him with some personal support in the community. Christians have some empathy for Sonia (her highest support, 35 per cent, is from them), but Vajpayee gets 22 per cent of the Christian vote as well.

It is transparent that Sonia Gandhi has been unable to make any headway among Hindus. She has only 16 per cent of the upper caste vote against Vajpayee's 40 per cent. Clearly the upper castes do not believe that she has become an Indian because she once dipped her toe in the Ganga. What is astonishing that a lady who claims to be the heir of Indira Gandhi cannot claim even 20 per cent of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes vote; she got only 19 per cent. Vajpayee, who leads a party that has been seen as traditionally

against Vajpayee's 37 per cent. As for the +45s, they are starting to care for neither. If the Prime Minister has 32 per cent support here, Sonia has only 18.

So far, the poll indicates only negative pleasure for the BJP, of the I-am-bad-but-you-are-worse variety. There is one positive element for the Prime Minister, though. Both the major decisions with which he is personally associated have received applause from the voters. He pushed through the surprising nomination of President Abdul Kalam, and there is overwhelming approval for this decision: 54 per cent are delighted and only 8 per cent unhappy. But this 8 per cent were probably born unhappy and refuse to change. That the BJP may live to regret the choice of President Kalam is another story.

Much more significant, politically, is the public reaction to the manner in which the government has handled Pakistan over the last year, a long, difficult, delicate and painful exercise. A definitive 41 per cent believes that India has "won" in

Politics of 'Being and Nothingness'

OMAR KHASRU

THE Communication Minister, Barrister Nazmul Huda, an erudite and highly educated person, has been lately and loudly proclaiming that the BNP pledge of local government election in the 'upazila' level was merely a 'strategy' (the *Prothom Alo*, Aug 24). It was only a ploy to counter a similar scheme in Awami League manifesto. I suppose we all owe a debt of gratitude, and profuse thanks and appreciation to the honourable Minister for admitting openly and bluntly that certain election pledges are ornamental and are meant never to be fulfilled. Except, to any informed and knowledgeable observer of domestic politics, or even a casual onlooker, it is obvious that politicians never mean to or care to carry out much of their promises.

Most solemn and formal promises are evidently meant to be broken and much in the somber, wordy manifesto, replete with saccharine assurance and alluring scenario of swimming in milk and

honey, is meant to be consigned to cold storage until the next election, when this will be dusted off and resurrected again to baffle, dazzle and fiddle the gullible voters once more. The pious policy proposals are made to dupe, deceive and hoodwink the electorate and serve the sole purpose of election success by promising the kitchen sink to naive, susceptible voters. To paraphrase a famous American axiom, "there are lies and there are damn lies, then there are election pledges." So, as much credit as one would like to attribute to the venerable Minister for divulging the obvious, and as jaded and cynical as an ordinary and typical constituent has become, one still has to give credit for the rare election promise that is kept rather than whole gamut that are broken or relegated to the back-burner.

The question to the Minister, and perhaps to the whole political machinery that is running the government, including the helm of the current regime, would be what other election pledges they made as convenient and expedient measures to counteract the political

opponents in order to win the election? People have the right to know. It would also assist the masses in plummeting their bargain basement expectations of politicians and powers that be even lower. Would it be fair to say that the government never meant to reduce crime, terrorism, extortion, corruption, even

though these were the salient and irroclad guarantee the party made before the election? Did the regime not mean to create independent ombudsmen, grant autonomy to TV, radio and media, and fashion free and unbiased anticorruption commission, or separate judiciary from the executive branch? Did the government not mean to break up the unholy nexus among politicians, cops and criminals? Some of these promises, such as putting a leash on terrorism and corruption, were

and seek in making and effortlessly breaking election pledges without any compunction, is akin to the famous 'Being and Nothingness' (1943) theory, the most comprehensive and far-reaching statement of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. Without dipping neck-deep into incomprehensible and inexplicable, excruciatingly complicated, philosophical high thought, the significant point of Sartre's theory is human existence is intrinsically characterized by nothingness -- a capacity to

supposed to be carried out as utmost priorities in the first 100 days of the regime. The regime has obviously failed to meet the self-imposed, widely publicized and frequently avowed deadline. Will these exalted notions ever be accomplished?

This game of chicken and hide

negate what is and contrast it with what might be -- Human beings, he asserted, constantly tend to fall into "bad faith." They deceive themselves into thinking that their actions are determined by their circumstances so that they are not really responsible for them. To achieve an authentic human existence, an

individual must overcome the tendency to bad faith, and assume responsibility for decisions made and ultimate responsibility for realization of lofty expressed notions. It aptly describes existing breach between promises and performance of politicians, especially those in power. The wedge between words and deeds is wide enough to drive a Sherman Tank through.

The current government does not have monopoly in unfulfilled promises. Successive regimes have

excelled in dubious and excessive emblematic default in sworn pledges. It is time consuming and space wasting to ponder over the slew of broken promises. It is far more preferable and expeditious to point out the rare smidgen of undertaking that might actually have been fulfilled. For example, the most

important pledge, potentially of far-reaching benefit to the country, the previous government fulfilled was the signing of Hill Tract Peace Treaty, something unfortunately the earlier regime neither implemented fully, did not publicize extensively, nor did it take the due credit. For some weird reason, they wanted to push this substantive accomplishment under the rug. They were more interested in pushing the Ganges water sharing treaty, a sham deal at best, whereby Bangladesh would

get more water if it rains more in the Himalayas and less if it does not, same as prior to the signing of this hasty and inconsequential, politically expedient agreement. But at least they made an attempt to tackle this issue, albeit in a convoluted and capricious manner. About the rest of the high profile election promises, the less said the better. The list of unfulfilled promises is long and tedious, and these shredded, discarded, disavowed and neglected pledges are strewn all over the symbolic yellow brick road from the Wizard of Oz.

The leader of the opposition and the immediate past Prime Minister is talking big and talking loud, stridently and uncompromisingly, smugly nitpicking the slightest misdeed, real, perceived or concocted, of the current regime, something the current Premier and immediate past leader of the opposition did in the earlier era. The Awami League Leader plunges neck-deep into Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness' when she calls repeated *hartals* at the slightest pretext and subterfuge, even if she had pledged unconditionally that her party would

never do so under any circumstances. It is obvious that when either party is in power it acts in an authoritarian and arbitrary manner with unabashed display of state clout and even use of brute force, almost totally oblivious of the election manifesto, or the deep and abiding promises incorporated in it. When the party is in the opposition, it promises the unattainable, expresses sanctimonious outrage at the misuse of government power and authority, and sheds crocodile tear at the misery of the electorate. When the table is turned with the regime change, the two parties revert back to these set roles. It increasingly appears that there is no fundamental or substantive difference in the two parties. Both are equally adroit in sidetracking the election pledges, when in power, while continually, deceitfully and nauseatingly claiming that they have already fulfilled their solemn undertaking in government controlled TV, radio and press. It is all smoke and mirror and it is all 'Being and Nothingness.'