

Challenges for the new President

BNP appears to recognise the need for a neutral head of state

LET'S have no illusions about it. Being President in Bangladesh is a very tough job. What is a mere Constitutional position has been turned into a most political one. His test begins literally from the word go. If he has learnt anything from Baddruddoza's experience then the first thing he has to do after taking oath is to rush to BNP founder President Ziaur Rahman's mazar, if he wants to keep his job. But that is when his trouble begins. Does he then go to Bangabandhu's mazar? He is damned if he does, and damned if he does not. Most probably he will not, and from that moment he will become unacceptable to the Awami League. Then will come his address to the nation after taking oath. The text of all President's speeches are, by law, written by the ruling party of the day. If we go by what we had seen so far the draft will be an extremely partisan one. This will further alienate him from the opposition. Thus his trouble begins, and then continues to mount, for no fault of his own.

The biggest challenge before the new President will be to keep the ruling party happy and yet gain the confidence of the opposition. Normally this should not be too difficult. But in Bangladesh it is. Opposition's trust will not come easy but that is one goal he will have to be focused on achieving. BNP must help him in this. There is nothing that the ruling party stands to gain by forcing the President to be distanced from the opposition. The best way to do this is to allow the President to write his own speech within an overall neutral and non-partisan context. Just recall how much embarrassment the BNP could have saved former President Shahabuddin if it did not draft his speech the way it did. Everybody lost as a result. Former President Shahabuddin was hurt, the AL looked vicious and silly and the BNP extremely narrow minded. Let us remember that before Sheikh Hasina's government amended it, the President had some autonomy in writing his speech. President Biswas enjoyed that autonomy. Can we not revert to that practice, especially as it was in vogue during the previous BNP government?

In choosing an academic and a formal non-party person (he is affiliated with BNP politics but never joined the party nor has he been at its forefront) BNP can be said to have moved away from its track record set up by its two previous nominations -- Presidents Abdur Rahman Biswas and Baddruddoza Chowdhury. This shift is a very good sign indeed. While it cannot compare with the non-partisan stature of the Awami League's choice of Justice Shahabuddin yet it is a very good choice. It clearly indicates that BNP has recognised the need and usefulness of a neutral President.

Having recognised that need, the BNP now must help the new President to function as such. As we suggest above, BNP should encourage him to do the maximum to gain opposition's trust. We are aware that our opposition party itself is focused on only finding faults with the ruling party and may not respond to the positive gesture that nominating a person like Prof Iajuddin indicates. However that should not discourage the ruling party and its allies to encourage the President to not only be neutral but also to be seen to be neutral.

Our last word is directed at the President himself. Please be aware that the authority of the office of the President is as much a legal as it is a moral, if not more. Moral authority comes from words and actions and not from statutes and pomp. Every action you take and every word you utter must be devoted to only one interest-- democracy, the country, and its people, and not for the party that has nominated you. You have an extraordinary example in former President Justice Shahabuddin. The way the AL treated him later should not discourage you. Just think of his place in people's heart and in history and feel encouraged. You have a fellow academician President in neighbouring India. Dr. Abdul Kalam is already putting his distinctive mark on the Presidency of India as the "People's President". Within the very limited scope of our Constitution you can play the most significant role of the 'ultimate unifier' in our otherwise fragmented politics. This role is much more necessary now than it ever was. Please try to play that role. We wish you godspeed.

Concern about image is futile unless the actual situation improves

SHAH A M S KIBRIA

A report dated 22 August said, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has called upon the people to speak up against those who are damaging the image of the country. She made the appeal when a delegation of the Hindu community from Chittagong called on her at her office. Her insensitivity to Hindu sentiment was remarkable. Perhaps she believed that the memory of the minority communities is so short that the gruesome murder of Principal Gopal Krishna Muhari and the senior Hindu priest have been forgotten. Have the Buddhists forgotten the sensational murder of the Buddhist monk in Rajan? In fact, reports about the possible connection of BNP leaders with the murder stirred people's conscience both at home and abroad. Ignoring these crimes against the minorities, the Prime Minister wants everybody to suppress these reports in the interest of projecting abroad a bright image of the country. Begum Zia, who is serving her second term as prime minister, surely knows how 'images' are created and destroyed. Was the image of her government brightened when the police entered the women's dormitory of the Dhaka University at midnight and assaulted the girls by pulling many of them out of their beds? Who ordered the police to enter the women's dormitory at night? Thanks to the internet, the report has been seen by both foreigners and expatriate Bengalees all over the world. It is no secret that the vice chancellor and the proctor were made the scapegoats for scandal for which, in all fairness, the government was responsible. In fact, no responsible police officer would dare enter the women's dormitory in the middle of the night unless the raid was authorised by the highest quarter of the government. The government may think that by directing the students' wrath against the vice chancellor they have 'managed the crisis' successfully. Actually, they are just kidding themselves. The common people are not so dumb that they would not see through their clever public relations game. The incident has exposed the real character of the repressive

government. Instead of getting embarrassed by such barbaric conduct of her police force, the Prime Minister is anxious to promote her image. What about the wheat scandal or for that matter, the jet fuel scandal? No one but the head of the government can make a special allocation of Taka 100 crore for untimely procurement of wheat that was just not there with the farmers! Attempts are afoot to pass the buck on to some MPs and officials. The image of the government cannot be enhanced by such scandals that daily fill the newspaper pages. Blinded by power, the ruling alliance is unable to see the image that they have projected in the last ten months. Brutal repression of political opponents, persecution of the minorities, extortion by the

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Begum Zia will run after a mirage if she thinks that the image of her government can be artificially created, promoted and protected without any significant improvement in the objective conditions. Image is nothing but the reflection of the objective truth and if the truth is ugly the image is surely going to be ugly too.

armed cadres of the BNP and gang rape of women have contributed to tarnishing the peaceful and democratic image of the country. Do the leaders and policy makers believe that the rape of Mohima and Fahima and their tragic suicide have faded from public memory? The picture of baby Nawshreen dead in her father's lap is indelibly engraved in public memory. The common people have not forgotten the heartless comment by the Home Minister who consoled the bereaved family by suggesting that he was helpless before the thugs whose gun killed the baby. Many more incidents of crime perpetrated by the BNP-Jamaat musclemen under the patronage and protection of the government are piling up in people's collective memory. All this is creating an unflattering image of the ruling alliance. Expressions of prime minister's concern or anger will not erase the image that has already been created by the misuse over the last 10 months. The significance of the golden crown on the head of a ruling party MP was not lost on the common people. The

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Shah AMS Kibria is former Finance Minister and currently an Awami League MP.

Japan-North Korea relations

Suddenly the door looks wide open

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

ONLY a few days ago when the Japanese and North Korean foreign office officials ended their two-day talks in Pyongyang on August 26, the signs of slow progress in the process of normalization of diplomatic relations between East Asia's two remaining Cold War outposts was visible but obviously not to the extent to feel upbeat. The two sides agreed to make progress on resolving outstanding issues within a year's time to pave the way for the formal discussion on establishing diplomatic ties between Japan and North Korea to be resumed. As a year's time in diplomatic jargon also carries the possibility of running beyond a calendar year, nobody thought the outcome of the high-level meeting to be a breakthrough in bilateral relations between the two countries in true sense. As a result, everyone was taken with surprise when the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi announced last Friday that he would pay a one-day visit to Pyongyang for talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il on September 17 with the aim of drastically improving bilateral ties. Koizumi's visit to North Korea will be the first ever by a Japanese prime minister and would definitely carry great significance for peace and stability for the whole East Asian region.

Many in Japan are already asking questions about the real motive behind such an initiative by the prime minister and what prompted the two sides to decide suddenly to bury the past rhetorical attacks aiming at each other and sit in the

same table to discuss the possibilities of forging a meaningful tie. On Japanese side the prime minister made his position clear when he met Friday night with senior members of his main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). According to media report he told his party leaders that he intended to stake his political life on the visit to North Korea. It is obvious that a series of failures in numerous attempts to initiate reform in country's economic and political fields have somehow turned the popular image of a prime minister

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How far the outcome of Koizumi's planned North Korea visit will help defuse tension in the region is yet to be assessed. But the fact is, a sudden blow of pleasant cool wind through the door that remained close for too long is already conveying the message that the extended period of Cold War in East Asia might at last going to see its own end too.

into a person incapable of handling situation considered to be critical in nature. May be he is now ready to get hold of the last opportunity in an attempt to reverse that public misunderstanding. But as politics is never a game consisting of that much fairly black and white moves, we can easily presume the statement of the Japanese prime minister to be partially true and there are other points that he might have intentionally avoided to disclose.

On part of Japan there are series of issues that the leadership in Tokyo thinks vital to resolve before moving forward towards a more cordial relationship with Pyongyang. Top most in the list is the issue of abducted Japanese nationals. Tokyo claims that at least 11 Japanese nationals were kidnapped and

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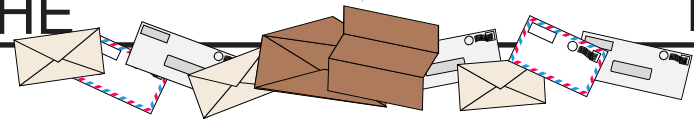
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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



English medium vs Bangla medium

I was going through the letter written by Arafat Hasan (September 4) on the recent debate regarding English medium school and students. What should I think as he said that people "need to stop making stupid tales" regarding English medium students? You have convicted all the people who wrote about it just to express their odd experience as liar. Do you have any other way to explain it Mr. Hasan? People have no enmity with English medium students. There is no reason to be hostile to them. "Stupid tales" about dress and accent hurt you. I am sorry for that. But every single person wrote upon it, talked about a part of the English medium students and these students are not small in number. Talking about one's dress up is really ridiculous. It is his/her personal

choice. But can you bet that people never cross the limit? You said that you have been brought up with a certain degree of freedom and you reveal in it. Does a degree of freedom fluctuate with the change of Bengali to English medium? And lastly, it is true that many English medium students speak in an odd accent and this is not a "stupid tale". T. Rahman, Dhaka

Being a student of an English medium school, I take great offence to some recently published letters in your newspaper. These letters portray us 'fast', 'ultra modern', 'suffering from superiority complex' and, to top it all, 'unpatriotic'. I would like to state that most of the students of English medium schools (EMS) come from middle class families. Such families spend a major portion of their earning in sending their children to EMS just to

ensure good education. They have found out that EMS make the students internationally competitive. This year alone EMS students from Bangladesh got admitted to Oxford, Cambridge, Dartmouth, Harvard, Cornell, Amherst, Vassar and many other famous educational institutes of U.K, U.S.A, Australia etc. No aspersion on Bangla medium students, I believe they are also very bright. However, due to the lack of the educational facilities, they miss out from availing such opportunities at undergraduate level. EMS follow Bangla books issued by the Board even though it is not in the O level syllabus. Like the Bangla medium students we had to study *bochon, shomas, bagdhara, pad, shandhi, bakko shankochon* etc. We have read Rabindranath, Nazrul and Sharat Chandra and at the same time we got exposure to world literature. It hurts me deeply when people

question our patriotism just because we do not study in Bengali medium schools. I have studied in English medium school all my life and I do not think I have come across anyone who thinks not being able to speak Bangla or failing in Bangla examinations "as cool". I am surprised to read that English medium schools do not have competent teachers. If the teachers are so "incompetent", how can the students produce brilliant O and A level grades by competing with students from all over the world, in examinations that are conducted by London or Cambridge Universities? I hope people will stop this English medium school bashing and focus on demanding quality educational opportunities for all students of Bangladesh, both Bangla and English medium. I am proud to be a Bangladeshi, I am proud to be an English medium school and I believe that my school, Sunbeams, has

given me the best education possible. Chowdhury Rashaam Raiyan Sunbeams School

"Great Army"
Mr. Joyonto (August 21) wrote that the name of the Ershad Army Stadium was changed to Bangladesh Army Stadium. Did Mr. Ershad object to it? Did anyone else object to it?
About the COD (Central Ordnance Depot), it was built during the Pakistani rule. Get some more information about military explosives first. They are not built just to accidentally blow up a whole city. If they were so vulnerable then there wouldn't be any explosives. Go and ask other countries for cantonment maps, they wouldn't even let you enter the cantonment without a valid reason. Do you think they would let you take photographs on board especially the ones from Zia? I don't

think so!
How can maps of the cantonment be important when the main cantonment is separated from the COD by the airport road? How can they be important in the decision of whether ordnance depot should be placed (it was already placed more than 30 years ago). The most shocking thing is, how come you say the army had betrayed the country when it is them who sacrifice their lives guarding the country! Wasn't it the presence of the army during the elections that made it a peaceful one?
Nafis Ahmed Farid Dhaka Cantonment

Mr Mahboob UI Malik (August 31) should not have concluded that A Military Person (August 28) was an army officer. He could be a navy or an air force officer; or a soldier, a sailor or an airman. Army officers make delicious scapegoats, even to retired army officers. But I share Mr

Malik's observations about the previous military person's letter. It was outrageous. I must apologise on behalf of him to the Worried Civilian (August 30).
I think the 'Army officer' did the right thing. Wasn't it distasteful of Mr Kim to raise the question of field toilet, of all things? The officer answered Mr Kim's letter with tact. After all, Mr Kim has no right to give incorrect information to the public.
So many accusations have been made against the army in this 'Great Army' debate! Not all of them were just. But Mr Malik didn't give us the benefits of his beautiful English by defending the army that once employed him. Sir, forgive me but aren't you supposed to carry your rank before your name up to your epitaph?
Another Army Officer, On e-mail

This is in response to Gora's concern that pride in our Army is mis-

placed and compares with the well-intentioned Army which controls and fouls up Pakistan. We are not Pakistan. We can be proud of our Armed Forces' role in ensuring the democratic process in Bangladesh by not interfering in politics in spite of the wrongs committed by the politicians. There has been times when frustrated laymen like me, have wistfully sought for a terror free, peaceful Bangladesh and find little hope in the politicians who are at the helm of our country's affairs. This painful initiation into democracy is needed as we mature, and our Armed Forces, by not interfering, is nurturing the process. We are proud of them. Look at the name and fame they have bought in UN peace-keeping missions abroad.
It is indeed a marvel of our minds that this debate began with a 'no entry' complaint!
Sarwar Ahmed Dhaka