

Challenges before the AL

Let the meet flag off in-party democracy

THE triennial council of main opposition and one of the oldest political parties in the country is taking place at a crucial time. The shadow of the unprecedented defeat in the last general election is still looming large over them. Apart from that, the BNP-led coalition government's oppressive tactics and refusal to give it its rightful space in the political arena. Therefore, the party is seen to facing a severe political challenge at the moment. In such circumstances, the AL needs a new look and a fresh direction. Above all, it needs to be invigorated with a new spirit, simply because there is no denying the historical contributions the party made to the country's evolution as free and independent state.

We welcomed the party's decision to form its central committee by holding direct election the day after it was adopted last month. We view this as one of the most significant moves taken to democratise the political party from within. And what could be a better way than this to rejuvenate the party and energise the activists and members of AL with a new sense of purpose. We hope a new leadership, chosen through election, not by selection, would give the much-needed boost to the party's morale which has diminished after losing the last general election. We earnestly hope that the decision to elect the General Secretary and other important functionaries would not be left to the party chief, Sheikh Hasina exclusively like it had been in the past, because that, without any doubt, would undermine the natural right of the delegates who turned up for the council in full force to choose their leaders. The opinion of the grassroots party followers should matter more than that of the rest because they reflect the majority will in a political party.

We wish Awami League well for the future. We congratulate them for what could be a major shift in their party policy in terms of choosing leaders who would usher them into the next more important phase in politics.

We also think that sending invitations to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the Secretary General of the ruling BNP was a good gesture on the AL's part. But predictably, they have responded negatively to the invitations. We feel an opportunity has been missed for breaking a new ground in Bangladesh's politics. It could have been one of the most significant and positive reciprocal gestures from a ruling party towards an elected opposition with some bridge-building prospects in tow.

Why take it out on patients?

Medics should have avoided the strike

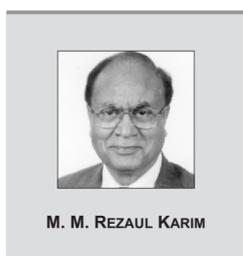
WHAT are the interns at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital were up to? This must have been the question exercising the public mind since when the trainee doctors decided to express their solidarity with the now-disbanded medical students union. The latter had courted its own dissolution by vandalising the campus. The authorities' disciplinary steps also included arrest of Dr. Soleiman allegedly for leading a group of students into ransacking the office of the DMC Principal and issuance of warrant of arrest against Dr Javed Ahmed, VP of the dissolved DMCSU.

The expression of internee medics' support for the medical student leaders was not in mere words but through a declaration of work stoppage. So passionately beholden to the students the interns seemed to be that while the former withdrew the academic strike, the latter pressed on with theirs for a day more! The double ordeal of academic and medicare standstill at the DMCH was basically an expression of clan mentality. Still worse, it held all else ransom to its ugly syndrome of incurable self-righteousness. The BMA leadership had urged them not to resort to strike and the DMC teaching community has also condemned their work abstention. Yet, they carried out a strike. We wonder why the interns went against the good counsel of their leaders and senior peers, as if the latter belonged to another profession! They should have risen above petty parochial attitudes where human lives were involved.

The intern doctors knew it full well that they were the life-line in indoor and outdoor patient care at the hospital premises. And the DMCH, mind you, is the premier medical institution of the country which should be looked up to as the standard-setter. When senior doctors, specialists, registrars and resident physicians have done their rounds it is the interns that primarily take over at the wards. Our reports for two days in a row depicted the horrible state of affairs at the neurosurgery, casualty, gynaecological and outdoor wards during the strike period. Leaving treatment of patients to the nurses and ward boys was the height of irresponsibility.

Did they have any justification in purely professional terms to be subjecting such a huge number of ailing people, some in their terminal stages, to such a rowdy, raw deal? Moreover, are they not supremely obliged morally on Hippocratic Oath to serve the sick humanity as an article of their professional faith?

Twist and turn in Bangladesh's relations with India



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

15 December 2002. A notable day in the contemporary political history of India. The major partner of the ruling coalition regime of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party, was declared to have won the state assembly election in Gujarat in a thumping majority on that day. The euphoria was well perceived all over the country in BJP camps, as the success was beyond their dream. Following the violent communal riots in Gujarat only a few months ago and the consequent criticisms that ensued, especially in other states and in the international community, had caused severe apprehension among BJP leaders about the outcome of the election. But it was neither the people of other states nor those of the international community who went for voting. It was the people of Gujarat who voted and decided fate of the candidates. They were not so critical. Why did they return the communal BJP government to power again?

Much has been spoken and written about it. It was a coincidence that I happened to be in New Delhi on that day to attend a UN conference. It was a combination of the backlash of the attempt of the tiny

Muslim community in Gujarat and the rising trend of the philosophy of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism that played a dominant role in determining the outcome of the election. In a bid to prevent the BJP government to regain power, the Imam of the Jam-e-Mosque of Gujarat reportedly issued a fatwa for the Muslim community to vote for the Congress. This not only irritated the BJP lead-

worries them as well as those who really subscribe to the values of secularism, is the possibility of the BJP to pursue the same strategy before and during elections in other states and for the national parliament. Some optimists, on the other hand, hope that would mark the beginning of the end of the BJP as a principal political party.

How does the election in Gujarat figure in India's relations with Ban-

gladesh? The answer is not difficult to find. The BJP held a high stake in the Gujarat election and spared no efforts to win victory. Here came the element of the government of India's policy of external relations, especially with her neighbours, apparently to counter the communal feelings in Gujarat. The mutual vituperations with Pakistan continued. That is something as a part of the contemporary history and people cannot but be resigned to accept it. But Bangladesh syndrome has been added recently, again after some time, as a factor to play in India's domestic politics. The critical remarks of the Indian leadership about harbouring anti-Indian insur-

allowed to play its due role.

Again, I was told that our High Commissioner in India did not attend the dinner hosted in Delhi last month by the Indian Foreign Minister in honour of the visiting leader of the opposition of Bangladesh. The dinner was attended, among others, by the Indian Prime Minister. The High Commissioner even did not regret his inability to attend. How can then one expect

caution. It is difficult to sell to India our unexpected cancellation of an Indian trade fair scheduled to be held in Dhaka on grounds of security, while at the same time Bangladesh Commerce Minister was attending a similar fair in Kolkata.

India, on the other hand, failed to redeem its pledges to Bangladesh. This does not create the situation congenial for promoting understanding, co-operation and friendship that both countries should aspire for mutual benefit. To cite an example, the pledge made publicly by Indian Trade and even Prime Minister to allow duty and quota free access of certain categories of Bangladeshi goods for export to India still remains an idle promise. How much would India lose, given the mountains of trade surplus with Bangladesh? Bangladesh's prompt and friendly gesture of returning India's enclaves is yet to be reciprocated from the Indian side. The sharing of waters of numerous common rivers is progressing, if at all, at a snail's pace. The demarcation of maritime boundary is complex and may take long, but that of paltry six kilometres of undemarcated land boundary brooks no excuse or delay. The two sides must, therefore, take up and solve those issues that are relatively easy to solve. This would pave the way to settle more difficult problems. But both must act, and act diligently and with caution. This will help resolve the crisis of confidence, which, unfortunately, characterises relations between our two neighbouring countries at the moment.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

The pledge made publicly by Indian Trade and even Prime Minister to allow duty and quota free access of certain categories of Bangladeshi goods for export to India still remains an idle promise. Bangladesh's prompt and friendly gesture of returning India's enclaves is yet to be reciprocated from the Indian side. The sharing of waters of numerous common rivers is progressing, if at all, at a snail's pace. The demarcation of maritime boundary is complex and may take long, but that of paltry six kilometres of undemarcated land boundary brooks no excuse or delay. The two sides must, therefore, take up and solve those issues that are relatively easy to solve. This would pave the way to settle more difficult problems.

ers and cadres to no end, it served as a God-gifted opportunity for them to propagate and to polarize the overwhelming Hindu voters in their favour. The rising tide of Hindutva in the state got a new surge on account of this incident.

The result was, indeed, a veritable jolt to the Congress, the principal opposition party. They lost even the sure seats they had never lost before. The Congress committed the folly of vacillation by delaying visits of their leaders during and aftermath of the riots in order to further establish wilful neglect of the BJP administration to control the riots. Action of the Congress was too little and too late. What greatly

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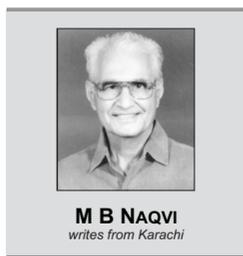
foreseeable future, unless some irritants are hurled from the Bangladesh side.

As for Bangladesh, one must view statements of the leadership of our big neighbour with due caution. Of course, as we pursue an independent foreign policy of a sovereign nation, protest we must against any unsound criticism based on false information. But we must first assess the motivation and timing of such remarks. For that matter, our reactions became too sharp. After all, the merit of diplomacy lies in providing an avenue to solve a crisis in a clandestine manner, without appearing it to be a crisis in public. Diplomacy was not, therefore,

the High Commissioner to be received by Indian leaders to carry errands from Bangladesh leadership and to discuss matters of high state policy to promote bilateral relations? An opportunity was lost. Who was responsible for it?

It is obvious that Bangladesh's foreign policy revolves largely around its relations with the big neighbour, India. But it is not so for India. Geo-political situation, India's size and resources as well as her relations with other states, especially with so many neighbours, dictate that position. That is why our policy and actions towards India warrant a high degree of priority, valued judgement and extreme

Designs on the media



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

MUSHARRAF regime's intentions vis-à-vis the media came under sharp scrutiny at the National Conference of the South Asian Free Media Association (Pakistan chapter) at Lahore last week. General Musharraf had promulgated as many as six ordinances 15 days after the general election and unduly delayed the new Parliament's convening for not so obscure reasons. This circumstance is crucial in realising the significance and purport of these one-man-made laws insofar as they bear on the freedom of the media in this country.

What stands out from a mile is that the supposedly outgoing military regime wanted the new elected government to work under a framework laid down by itself in which the new administration could on its own regulate and, up to a point, control the media in the prevailing conditions. The conduct of a government vis-à-vis the media in this country has a history because of which a military government cannot be given any benefit of the doubt for good intentions. Indeed, suspicions of a non-democratic government intentions is a legitimate starting point. Onus of proof regarding the intent of doing good lies on that which emerges from analysing the effects of its actions or changes in the rules it has prescribed for the media (laws).

Why did the government impose

these laws which under easily foreseeable conditions can become a steel structure by inclusion in the Indemnity Law that Gen. Musharraf is sure to require the Parliament to pass and which may be sought to be made a part of the Constitution. Now, this is not a far-fetched apprehension.

Generals Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq, when they withdrew their Martial Laws, had insisted on mak-

space that is not available. But a few points need to be noted.

Any law, to be acceptable, requires that it is formulated and promulgated by a Parliament, legitimacy of which is not in doubt. One individual, especially one who has seized power by the threat of force, cannot make a law that can be called good law; it can at best be a decree disobeying which might not be feasible. Lack of legitimacy is

simple: Free expression is a basic human right of all the 145 million citizens; every citizen has the right to start a newspaper, a radio or TV channel, a news agency or an online media equivalent. If a person is too ignorant or too poor or too incompetent, he will make a fool of himself or incur crippling losses and fold up. Only the fittest survive. The government has no business laying down who may or who may not run a

example is the new Defamation Law. Best lawyers one knows are of one mind: the PPC's Section 500 has stood the test of time; it is comprehensive and by and large fair. The well should have been left alone. But, no, the bureaucracy must needlessly complicate matters. The experience of various governments vis-à-vis the access to information or even media is before us.

Most governments, especially the non-democratic ones, have used the media as an instrument of political propaganda to become popular among the people and to project the leader internationally. Even civilian governments -- one doesn't say democratic -- have tended to use the media for self projection and political propaganda. There is something pathetic about how the governments, usually misled by bureaucracy, have believed that this projection and propaganda can give them a longer life? What is the record?..In power games, power matters, not propaqanda.

PLAIN WORDS

Most governments, especially the non-democratic ones, have used the media as an instrument of political propaganda to become popular among the people and to project the leader internationally. Even civilian governments -- one doesn't say democratic -- have tended to use the media for self projection and political propaganda. There is something pathetic about how the governments, usually misled by bureaucracy, have believed that this projection and propaganda can give them a longer life? What is the record?..In power games, power matters, not propaqanda.

ing their so-called reforms a part of the Constitution through a formal amendment. Even the reforms of Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's brief and strange Martial Law (from December 1971 to April 1973) were protected by the 1973's Permanent Constitution. Pakistanis need to beware that these laws with their implications may become a part of the Constitution to act as a sort of strait jacket for the so-called real or sustainable democracy.

The Conference analysed these laws through what may be called expert committees, one for each law. The point of view from which these committees examined these laws was their impact on the free flow of information, free expression of opinion by the media, citizens' access to information and the brouhaha regarding the journalists' tendency to slander and defame citizens. Details of all the six committees' findings will take up a lot of

enhanced by the noted circumstance that a newly elected Parliament was forced to wait in the shadows while a general was busy preempting its natural function of making good laws. A good law facilitates, extends and deepens the free flow and expression of informed opinion by the media and enables the citizens to have access to all the necessary information on any matter of importance and to as many opinions on it as possible. That is how democracy works and becomes meaningful.

Secondly while superficially noble-sounding rhetoric is employed in the laws' preambles, loopholes give enough scope to bureaucracy to restrain or restrict information to the citizen or to give a role to the government to influence the free flow of information or, more importantly free expression. Instances are registration of the press and freedom of information

and police been doing to journalists seen to be unfriendly to the regime. Although electronic media cannot be called really free -- certainly not those owned by the state -- a relaxation has been in evidence. But two points need to be made.

First, the Ministry of Information's orientation is towards regulating and controlling. This wholly unnecessary and unjustified Ministry is an anachronism in a democracy and it survives through the corrupt practice of excessive projection of whoever may be the Chief or his courtier-Ministers. Its role in issuing centralised advertisements and regulating newspaper quotas for newspaper proprietors has proved to be a cover for rewarding conformism or worse. Too much pothe about registration can be a cover for bringing back in stages what was the hated licensing regime through controlling the Declarations. The principle involved is

medium of communication.

Similarly the right to information is totally unhindered. For the sake of facilitating governments and as a concession, a few time-bound restrictions have been accepted in democracies in the specific fields of foreign policy and national security. This human right to know what the government and state have been or are now doing is fundamentally inalienable and absolute. It is in many places suspended for a time only. This time needs to be kept as short as possible. And the right to classify information is a function that has to be exercised with great care and under some sort of democratic control.

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MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

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

"Striking docs watch TV..."

This is in reference to your news item "Striking docs watch TV as patients cry for care" (December 25). In your news item it described the sufferings of the patients and the indifferent attitude of the striking doctors of Dhaka Medical College. After reading the news we grow nothing but disrespect and disgust towards these heartless physicians.

But the problem is, from other newspaper reports (including Daily Prothom Alo and others) of the same day i.e. December 25, we learn that the striking doctors of DMCH withdrew their strike on December 24 and joined their duty immediately. The deadlock was resolved at noon. So there was plenty of time to gather this information. Then how come your reporter failed to do so and came up with a misleading one?

We buy newspapers to read the current and authentic news. But I must say that your daily not only fails in these aspects but also fail to come up with follow-up reports which is a must for a paper of your stature. I would like to bring it to your notice that we almost never find the latest and in depth reports of any events in your daily. Though yours is

a daily newspaper but most of my acquaintances and me buy The Daily Star for the excellent pages like Editorial, Feature, Letters and Startech pages. And I don't think this is a very inspiring information for you.

Zahir Chowdhury
Baridhara, Dhaka

Column for the young

I'm a college student living in the UK. I read your paper almost everyday. I find it most interesting. The best part of the paper is probably the "Letters to the Editor" Page. I work in a local newspaper here as well. I'd like to make a suggestion to your paper.

The section I work in, is called Young Voices. It's a special column dedicated to the opinions of younger people, like college students. Two other college students and I have been recruited to manage the section. We write a short opinion column and then let others write in and comment about them. Why don't you start something in your paper like that as well? It would really boost the morale of the younger generation in Dhaka. You could probably recruit two or three students from top-rated universities or colleges and open up this section as a part-time job for them. It would not

only give college students the opportunity for a part-time job, but also you'll be giving the younger generation a lot of importance. I hope you like this suggestion. I'm looking forward to seeing something for young people in your paper.

Nasreen Rahman
UK

"Court case against army major"

Deaths in army custody do not make me so helpless. But when I think the fact that none of these deaths will be inquired, the near and dear ones of the killed will not get justice and the killer will not be punished, then I feel really helpless. An army team can invade my house at anytime (on information right or wrong) and arrest anyone of my family and then return his dead body, but still neither our judicial system nor I have anything to do.

But at last an effort to rectify the situation has been made. The widow of a man allegedly killed by an army team has filed a murder case against some army men. I don't know whether the person was a listed or unlisted criminal. I just know one thing. The person was tortured severely in spite of no arms recovery from his house and I don't

think that any person having good sense and respect of law can tolerate this fact. It is quite refreshing that some people are trying to bring the army men under the law of the land. It is high time to remind the army that they are not beyond law and accountability. Now I can say people here that my countrymen do not tolerate all what army does. I'd like to thank everybody related with this effort. I am looking forward for the developments of this case and hope that this case and its judgement will help to change the negative aspects of Operation Clean Heart.

Tariq
Canada

Of madrassahs and jihadis

We have been given to understand that the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been very active in spreading religious education in Bangladesh. Hence they established quite a few madrassahs in this country. These madrassahs are known for teaching Wahabism, a puritanic form of Islamic philosophy and lifestyle. A carbon copy case exists in Pakistan. The KSA government had simply repeated what they did here.

The madrassahs in Pakistan gave rise to a force named the Taliban. This force captured and conquered Afghanistan and in turn, nurtured a worldwide terrorist organisation named Al-Qaeda.

If the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan had been following the teachings of KSA then so are our madrassah students here. If the Naxalites of Calcutta can influence and encourage students here, then why not our madrassah students influenced of these *jehadi* ideals? Yahya USA

"Mosquito menace"

This is in reference to your editorial of December 23. Like most of the people living in Dhaka, I am sure it is the true reflection of the common outburst of feelings of constant frustrations and sufferings that we are all going through every day. We naturally had a lot of expectations from the present Mayor, a valiant freedom-fighter who made a number of solemn promises before the last election including an end to the mosquito menace. But so far, he has utterly failed in this task.

The authorities concerned got to have the will and find a solution to deal with the menace at an urgent

basis.

Making a few selected small areas inhabited by VIPs/Diplomats free from mosquito menace is neither good enough nor desirable. And that is perhaps also one of the ways this problem is being overlooked and allowed to linger before the situation assumed the current deplorable state.

Let us all pray and hope that DCC will adopt urgent measures like those bold and courageous steps already taken by the Communication/ Environment Ministries to improve our environment. Z. Rahman Gulshan, Dhaka

"Sheikh Hasina and our image"

I appreciate the letter 'Sheikh Hasina and our image' by M Ataul Haque published (December 24). A strong voice needed to be raised by the people of Bangladesh against our opposition party leader Sheikh Hasina for her destructive role to damage the country.

Every people of Bangladesh have been victimised by her irresponsible comments made over the past few months. Especially the Bangladeshis abroad has been affected badly by her comments and

statements. We are glad that people have started raising their voice against her negative attitude.

I'm not a pro-BNP, I'm just a peace loving Bangladeshi trying to earn my bread and butter abroad. I would like to request Sheikh Hasina not to destroy the image of our country further. Delwar Hossain Hayward, CA, USA

"Rajuk crosses the limit again"

This refers to your front-page news item "Rajuk crosses the limit again" (December 20).

What the otherwise excellent report failed to mention that just opposite to the on-going 15-storey building site of Adel Properties, in Dhanmondi Road 13, another developer has erected a new sign-board to build a 9-storey building on only 2.5 katha of land.

On enquiry the local residents were shocked to learn that the concerned developer managed to get Rajuk permission just two months ago with the personal blessings of the Works Minister.

We consider this as sheer contravention of much publicised present Government's policy not to allow any structure above 5-storey

in Dhanmondi Residential Area.

Mirza Towfique Zia
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Late model Tinni

Each time, we come across reports and photographs of late model Tinni, the more we grow sympathy and pity for her, at the same time, admire her beautiful features.

As we understand from various media reports that Tinni's good looks and ways had her fox trapped of the wicked circle that compelled her to quit early education and take to modelling and film. In course of time, she thought her looks, youth and fame would last forever but sadly it took a premature and drastic end out of the wicked in dual to win her to the lion share! The way her dead body laid open in disrespect was really pathetic. Young beautiful Tinni certainly did not deserve to die this way.

Anyway, our young and ambitious generation should learn from this sad episode that the path towards modelling and film is not a bed roses. The Young ones should put all efforts to complete their education to dictate their own terms and not fall prey to seduction and abuses.

Khawja Viqar Moinuddin
Purana Paltan, Dhaka