

Police action on students

Excesses will only complicate the situation

THE police action on Dhaka University students, who were demanding resignation of the home minister and the state minister in the sequel to the attack on Dr Humayun Azad, left at least 100 injured on Wednesday. The students' response to the emotive issue of the physical assault on the teacher and writer, which has drawn an avalanche of condemnation from all quarters, has met with bludgeoning on the part of the law enforcers. And the role played by the JCD activities in quashing the protests suggests that the pro-government students outfit has decided to handle the matter politically. Journalists performing their professional duties were manhandled, too.

The incidents took an ugly turn as the girls among the demonstrators were also beaten up. The stone-pelting students finally took refuge at the Curzon Hall, but they still could not escape police action, which amounted to palpable excesses. The police version of the incidents does not tally with that of the students. That is not really surprising, but photographs and reports carried by the newspapers do indicate that the riot police unleashed its full might against the students, though one expected that the law enforcers would deal with the situation in a judicious manner.

Wednesday's incidents were a sequel to what had happened the day before, and it's likely that the students will organise more protests and rallies to bring into focus the repression that they have been subjected to. It has all the makings of a prolonged agitation and that's why the apprehension that if the JCD meddled in and the police acted with more brawn than brain things could get infinitely more complicated.

The high-ups in the ruling alliance should have asked them why the students are demanding resignation of the home minister and state minister for home, instead of going in for a counteroffensive on a scale that could only put violence on a spiral.

It is an alarming situation that the government should handle judiciously without being oblivious of the fact that there was ample reason for the students to be greatly perturbed by the attack on a teacher.

Rivers dying

Sewage disposal precipitating it

THE rivers around the city are being polluted to death, thanks to dumping of sewage, 80 per cent of which is untreated. Small wonder, the environmentalists have warned that Dhaka will become the second most polluted city in the world by 2015, if nothing is done to stop the suicidal practice.

Dumping of all kinds of wastes into the rivers is common in this country, as environmental degradation did not receive due attention in the past. But what is particularly worrying is that the situation has not improved even after it was recognised that pollution had to be checked at any cost.

Today there is a broad consensus that the rivers have to be saved as a matter of top priority. But in practice what we witness is a total neglect of the rivers. The rivers around the city have become badly shrunken trickles with highly polluted water. Encroachers have taken control of the riverbeds in many areas. It seems the concern expressed by the environmentalists and eminent citizens has failed to make any impact on the law enforcers. The natural assets have become an environmental nightmare as no effective steps could be taken to prevent human intervention, which has crossed the limits of tolerance.

Dumping of untreated sewage is a problem which has to be addressed not only because the rivers are getting polluted but also because it portends a larger environmental disaster in the near future. The problem has been compounded by the fact that many industrial units are also releasing untreated effluents into the rivers.

The rivers are getting due importance in academic discussions only. But that is not enough to give them a new lease of life. The government agencies concerned should respond to the environmental needs of the city and take the necessary steps to save the rivers. To begin with, they have to do something about the heavy load of untreated sewage going into the rivers. They must also clear the rivers of the illegal structures that obstruct the flow of the rivers.

Politics of divide and rule

A M M SHAWKAT ALI

THE politics of divide and rule is attributed to the British colonial power in what was then undivided India. It is said that the strategy adopted was to keep the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress isolated from one another in order to ensure continuance of colonial rule. Is this strategy still adopted in Bangladesh?

The issue acquires relevance in that there are some untold stories relating to politics during mid-eighties. It is also relevant in the context of the continued efforts to form a united alliance of opposition parties against the ruling party, a common platform as it is sometimes called. The Leader of the Opposition confirmed her party's willingness to have 'a broad platform to unleash people power'. That she is hoping to reenact what had happened during the late nineties that eventually forced Ershad to quit seems clear enough as has been reported by *The Independent* on February 16, 2004. Sheikh Hasina is reported to have told of her intention of taking forward the movement to 'oust government'. She was reportedly confident that the present phase of consultations with the opposition parties would bear fruit leading to the emergence of an alliance or partnership among them on a minimum programme. Partnership approach in politics, as far as Bangladesh is concerned, dates back to 1954 when the United Front Government was formed. In recent times, the approach to development also adopted partnership principle. If only partnership of political parties would adopt the substance of the principle followed in the development of economy, the political process would be vastly different from what it is now.

The untold events of mid-eighties

During the mid-eighties, Ershad government was worried about the possibility of holding elections. The opposition parties then grouped into two broad alliances. First, the 7-party

alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with Khaleda Zia spearheading the movement. Second, the 15-party alliance led by the Awami League (AL) with Sheikh Haisna guiding the movement.

At that time, a top-secret (not in official sense) questionnaire was said to have been circulated to a select group of persons that included the politicians in the then ruling party, academicians and others. The obvious intention was to feel 'the pulse of the public opinion'. There were about nine questions of which at least five related to what would happen if one alliance or the other takes part in the elections. For instance, one of the questions asked was whether the BNP would disintegrate if the whole of AL and majority of 15-party alliance took part

eventually shaped and influenced the decisions of the then President.

What next?

Jatiyo Party (E) had already declared that it would not join any alliance (February 16, 2004). Ershad is reported to have said that it would go in its own way considering the country's 'greater welfare'. He had a dig at both BNP and AL when he said that for 'more than a decade, the country became stagnant in all sectors' which demoralised the nation. The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) also had expressed its intention of separate movement without joining any alliance (*Dinkal*, February 16, 2004). The same daily also reported the reactions of Jatiyo Samajtrant Dal (JSD, Rab) when some leaders of AL met the party

The magnitude of the enormity of costs and sufferings can better be imagined than described. The question is: are the politicians for citizens and the country or are the citizens and the country for the politicians? At this point of time, one can only hope and pray that sanity rather than narrow party interests will guide the actions of both set of parties who are seemingly on a war path now.

in the elections. Questions were also asked if it would be possible to hold the elections if only part of BNP excluding Khaleda Zia and some others and major components of 7-party alliance took part in the elections. Finally, question was also raised if the AL led by Hasina and majority of 15-party alliance continue their movement, whether it would further worsen the law and order situation.

Another important question asked was whether it would be wise to keep Janodal out of the cabinet for its better growth in the mainstream politics with active assistance of "Presidential Agencies". This phrase was not clearly defined in the questionnaire. The implicit reference, however, was obvious. These agencies still exist despite every change of governments. Only the personnel change to suit the needs of the head of the government. It is not known what type of answers

leaders in the same way they had met CPB. JSD (Rab) is reported to have agreed in principle on the question of 'unity in the interest of the nation' but whether it would join the alliance proposed by the AL is not clear. The question is to be decided later. Earlier, on February 14, Dr. Kamal Hossain's statement on the question of a common platform was reported. He is quoted to have said that the anti-government demonstration had to be launched with specific objectives. He further said "The unity is not only to topple government but to bring back a culture of healthy politics" (*The Daily Star*, February 14, 2004). Another party chief responded to AL's request saying that it would convey its decision after discussion within the party and with other allies.

In this context, it is relevant to refer to the rationale of CPB's stand. It is of the view that there was no scope of

unity or alliances merely for the sake of a change in government. It would rather be supportive of unity to protect national resources alongside the elimination of crisis facing the nation. Implicit in such statement is the fact that one should think of long term objectives rather than short term ones. This is also implicit in the statement made by Dr. Kamal Hossain. The long term objective is to bring back a culture of healthy politics.

Alternatives to politics by politicians

Are there alternatives to politics by politicians? The answer to the question lies in hindsight which should sharpen our foresight. Frequent experiences of military government since 1958 and ending with 1990 tend to indicate that

military might of Ayub Khan harassed politicians (former ministers) like Monoranjan Dhar, Khairat Hossain and Mansur Ali on flimsy charges which did not stand scrutiny. In case of Abul Mansur Ahmed, the senior most minister in the central cabinet under Suhrawardi's premiership, the story was even worse. His house was searched for eight hours after suitably amending the Anti-Corruption Act, 1957 to permit arrest even before the case had been started. The amendment was published in the gazette simultaneously with the arrest. With all this, Ayub Khan did not find any alternative to politics without politicians. The stories of other Generals in post-Bangladesh period remain more or less the same. Worse still, in some cases, politicians who were convicted

and jailed under Martial Law Regulations (MLR) were later inducted into the cabinet. The process of politics of criminalisation and/or criminalisation of politics started under martial law regimes seems to have come to stay. Against this backdrop, the assertions made by Dr. Kamal Hossain and also by CPB appear to be in the right direction.

Toppling and ousting government

This objective, as the trend of statements indicate, is a short-term one. Would it be a reenactment of the event of 1990? Even after 1990, the culture of healthy politics that Dr. Kamal Hossain refers to and many parties with leftist leanings are supportive of, has not been in place. This seems to be the perception among politicians of all descriptions in the opposition. Dr. B. Chowdhury also holds the same view

and is presently engaged in seeking the support of civil society organisations.

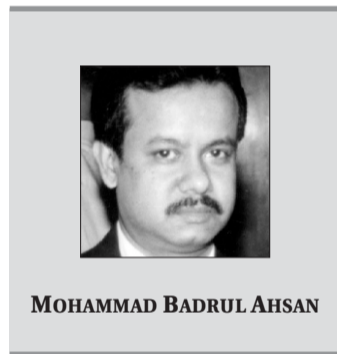
On the question of toppling government by political movement, Dr. Kamal Hossain appears to have said that changes in government should be through elections. This is possible only if the government elects to resign. So far, many statements from the top leaders of BNP appear to indicate that they are firm in their stand not to resign earlier than their constitutionally mandated stay in power. In this context, it is relevant to refer to the interview of the President of the Supreme Court Bar Association. In an interview with an electronic media, he referred to what is known as 'snap polls', which is opted for voluntarily by many political governments. He cited specific cases in the United Kingdom. The change of government in such cases is orderly and smooth. There is no need for people's power to pull down a government.

Unfortunately, this concept is alien to Bangladesh politics. Such a course of action is considered to be highly insulting and not democratic. There has not been any such instance in our political history. In such a situation, politics of agitation reinforces politics of repression without either of the opposing parties being wiser than the other. It is perhaps too early to say what the shape of things would be. The only thing which is visible is that the cost to the country and the sufferings of the citizens remain enormous.

The magnitude of the enormity of such costs and sufferings can better be imagined than described. The question is: are the politicians for citizens and the country or are the citizens and the country for the politicians? At this point of time, one can only hope and pray that sanity rather than narrow party interests will guide the actions of both set of parties who are seemingly on a war path now.

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Ink and blood



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"THE fact of a man's being a poisoner," proclaimed Oscar Wilde, "is nothing against his

prose." The reverse happened last Friday night when a talented writer got stabbed on the street. We don't know exactly why he was attacked, but there are reasons to believe it was linked to his book. The people who thought his prose was a poisoner held it against the man.

Not unlikely, because writers have this uncanny ability to irritate people. Suetonius mentions a historian who characterised Caesar's assassins, Brutus and Cassius, as "the last of the Romans". The historian was executed without delay, his books destroyed, his body flung into the Tiber. Competitions in Latin prose held in the amphitheatre at Lyons required the losing contestants to erase their writing with their tongues. Authors too slow to make the correction were decapitated and flung into the Rhone.

Perhaps writers are obnoxious for the same reason you hate your friend if he tells in the morning what you did when you were drunk the night before. They

can be sheer embarrassment. Karl Marx claims that, consciously or unconsciously, everybody has a philosophy. The material world is shaped by the spiritual as thesis chases antithesis to culminate in synthesis. The dynamics of life is thought followed by action, and writers often embarrass people by telling that they have missed that connection.

The people who stabbed the writer missed that connection, no doubt. They didn't think before action, perhaps blindly following what they were told.

living don't have to worry about right and wrong. They knowingly do the wrong thing for the right reason; it's livelihood to them.

But what about those who kill to right the wrong, to rescue truth and justice like commandos rescue hostages? Almost everything, as Thomas De Quincy noticed, has either a moral handle or an aesthetic handle. Which handle was used when they stabbed the writer? How were they convinced to act as the executive arm of some thinking men, who gave the order?

executed them at random.

The Khmer Rouge also believed that money was the source of all corruption and the cities were his breeding ground. The day they entered Phnom Penh, they started to drive out hordes of people, including patients in the hospitals. About three to four million Cambodians perished in that madness.

Perhaps, we have hit upon the right word at last. It is madness that explains what happened last Friday, when assailants must have leapt out of a dark corner to finish their job. People get

as natural as air. May be that is why there has been so much outcry to denounce this atrocious act.

May be it has also frightened us by squeezing our mental space. We are used to thinking that the pen is mightier than the sword, and suddenly we are shell-shocked to find a butcher's knife more powerful than that. Norman Mailer, the American writer, once proposed a principle: "Culture is worth a little risk." Mailer was trying to defend a writer named Jack Abbott who was convicted of murdering, and argued that

similar category. They also thought the unthinkable, then went ahead and did it.

Except that they shed the blood of a cerebral man who expressed his thoughts in ink. It's amazing how it worked, how the words in his prose sent them into frenzy and they tried to kill him. What happened there? What was the connection? Why did his words get them so worried?

Because word goes deeper than knife and it hurts even more, when coming from a man of conviction. If the killers were enraged by the prose, it only shows that they were helpless like an ugly face looking at the mirror. The writers often step on the nerves of others by bringing them face to face with their own emptiness. In that respect the pen is mightier than the sword, because it defeats the enemy in his conviction, although, in frustration, he might still go on brandishing the sword.

The writer is recovering from his wounds, and we hope he will soon pick up the pen, and write again. But what will happen to those who attacked him? If they were hired assassins, they will sleep it over until their next job. And then one day, they will either end up in jail or will be taken down by a rival gang. What if they were ideological killers, those who kill for convictions? Tough luck for them, even if they aren't caught. Their wounds will fester long after the writer's wounds have healed, because the stain of ink lasts longer than the smear of blood.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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After all the hand, which plunged the knife into the victim's body, came at the end of a network where some people did the thinking and others took action. We don't know if the assailants were ideological killers or hired assassins. One group kills to believe and another believes to kill.

The question is which group has stabbed the writer? If it was a group, which was paid to kill, we can understand. It's occupational hazard for the writer and professional call for the attackers. If the other group, meaning the ideological killers, has done the job, we have a problem. Those who kill for

We get pushed back to the Marxian belief once again. Everybody has a philosophy and everybody has a thought process. It's obvious that the writer's philosophy clashed with the philosophy of his attackers, if the attack was at all ideologically and politically motivated. But then we must realise that people do strange things with their philosophy. Some take it to its logical conclusion and bring disaster. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge believed that intellectuals were public enemies and they concluded that everyone wearing glasses was an intellectual. They rounded up bespectacled people and

happens in this country every day, and it happens in the material world where interests collide with interests. Politicians clash, religious leaders wrangle, businessmen bandy, fundamentalism, communism, secularism, all sorts of political groups confront each other in power struggle.

But for the first time since the intellectuals were killed in 1971, we are suspecting that the conflict may have arisen in the intellectual world where ideas clashed ideas, leading to bloodshed. May be, that is why the stabbing of a writer has made such waves in a country where murder and mayhem are

the creativity of Abbott would be wasted if put away in jail. He believed that the talent of a writer must be encouraged, even by overlooking his misdeeds. Mailer himself had stabbed his wife with a penknife in 1960 and got away with it.

What we saw was an opposite spin. Here someone or a group of people wanted to waste a writer for his writing. We all think the unthinkable, our minds treading the forbidden terrain of imagination ranging from sexual fantasies to life after death. But writers always go an extra mile and they write about what they think. The assailants who wielded that knife last Friday also come under

OPINION

Dilemma of an expatriate

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

MY daughter who is 21 and was born outside Bangladesh, very often asks me, "papa, why do you worry so about the happenings in Bangladesh when you lived outside of it more than half of your life and in all probability are not going to go back to live there permanently? We, your children, are not going back to live there either". There are two broad facts that made me so much emotionally attached to the well being of the land, which is so dear to me. I responded to my daughter, no matter how little it could impact on her thought. Firstly, I am one of those unfortunate ones who grew up under a semi-colonial rule that made almost all the members of our generation a political activist, less or more. On the same token I consider myself, like millions of my generation, fortunate to have taken an active role in the liberation of my country through an armed struggle vis-à-vis one of the worst genocides the human history has ever witnessed. Secondly, I eventually settled in a land that is a role model for freedom, democracy, and human rights. Both of these are inducing a diametrically opposite metaphor on my

thought.

The first one was a golden episode that has been transformed into an epitaph of tragedy as the dream of hope has been replaced by the nightmare of despair. The dream was not for a utopia; it was a set of pragmatic charters that lay the foundation of a modern state, achieved in many parts of the globe, including, to certain extent, in our very backyard. As a young man in his early twenties, born in a very conservative Muslim family, I was exulted with pride when secularism was adopted as a state principle in the newly framed constitution of the new-born state. I thought my motherland has been pulled out from the medieval age to the modern world. My faith on this pinnacle of virtues would be reinforced over the years during my stay in some of the finest societies on our planet, where no one ever would ask you about your religious faith, albeit one had the freedom and access to one's place of worship. I had a difference of principle with my close comrades who were strong advocates of scientific socialism, the system that could

only be the part of a monolithic regimented society. I was more in tune with the thought of Harold Lusk than Karl Marx, more akin to George Wash-

ington than Mao Tsetung.

The most shattering moment of our national life, in my view, was the tragedy of August 15, 1975. It was a Friday, I just came back from the University (in USA) defending my Masters' thesis and the provost of my residence hall gave me the news of the tragedy. It was not the era of Internet. I was distraught and tried to argue if this gruesome tragedy is tantamount to the denial of the merits of our causes for which three million of our people met martyrdom. Was I one of those who were misled by the leader to fight for the causes, which were proved to be no causes within a span of 44 months? What could I have replied when the Pakistan's Washington's ambassador told directly on my face, "at last you Bengalees have realised and corrected your mistake"?

Next came the unabated sliding of the virtues, which were the guiding maxims of our decades of struggles before its culmination into the war of liberation. It was believed that the birth of Bangladesh invalidated the so-called two-nation theory. Does it hold true any more? Most of our politicians from both sides of the aisle love to call their country a 'modern Muslim state'. Is it to be named a Muslim country as because bulk of the people happens to be Mus-

lims? In the same token if the countries of Europe and Americas called themselves Christian states, will they remain modern any more? Over the decades, distortion, deception, destruction, deviation and dichotomy have taken the centre fold in every sphere of the national life. Is it not a paradox when a highly respected newspaper puts a banner headline on 23rd of February that reads, "Mother language day was observed with the pledge to build a non-communal Bangladesh"? If one goes through the messages of the President, the PM or any other government leaders delivered on the occasion, no trace of such pledge was evident in any of them. If the headline of the paper was not a self-deception, then the government surely does not represent the wishes of the people.

There was a short renaissance of patriotism among the expatriates when the AL won the election in 1996. There was resurrection of history of the only golden chapter of our nation, the tales of the war of liberation. But it was a short blip in the radar. The executive and judiciary, by and large, were tooth and nail against its dominance. The government even did not have the power to replace the khatib of a mosque, let alone getting the final

dispensation of justice in the gruesome Bangabandhu murder case.

With the assumption of power by the current ruling alliance, in words of our main poet, the nation is passing through the 'dark period of the lunar cycle'. The situation is so despicable that many of our compatriots have stopped reading the newspapers in the internet. The apathy is so deep that there is hardly any drawing-room argument on the happenings in Bangladesh these days. Recently, the editor of a very well known weekly and a newly published Daily, who claimed to see the PM very frequently, depicted a very gloomy picture of the state affairs in a congregation (which I was presiding) in Toronto. In fact, the nation is heading towards an irreversible catastrophe. My use of the word 'irreversible' came from my belief of Newton's third law that states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Secondly, it is unfortunate that I live in a country that very well emulates Martin Luther King's dreamland or Mahatma Gandhi's wish-land of non-violence. The use of the word 'unfortunate' was deliberate for the fact that it constantly reminds me of the dream that I had when I was moving from village to village, from paddy fields to

jute fields, from hideout of the jungles to the protection of the *hawovers* with a carbine on my shoulder. As one of the top students of my 4th year engineering class I used to lecture my fellow comrades in arm on the forthcoming bright future of my motherland if we can attain victory. I had a dream that in my cherished land, no one would take someone's life only because they come from different political spectrum; the judicial system would issue the verdict on a committed crime, not the PM of the day; the ministers' statements in the august parliament would not invoke ridicule, rather trust; corruption would be an exception, not the rule; rule of law would reign over the rule of the powerful; accountability to the people would be the core essence of democracy and the judges of the court of law would be accountable to their own conscience in dispensing justice, rather than feeling embarrassed; right and privilege of the citizens would not be determined by their personal religious and political beliefs, rather by the constitution or the charter of right and freedom. Does it sound like a utopia?

In fact, it is very much a reality in the land I live in. On individual account, my religion and colour of the skin did not create any hindrance to my reaching

where I am now. There is no such thing as political persecution in the vocabulary of the state. On the other day, a federal minister lost his job (his political fate has been sealed) only because his ministry awarded a \$50,000 contract to his friend without any open tender bid. Last week, the popular incumbent PM has pledged to the nation to resign if the judicial enquiry reveals that PM as the then finance minister had the knowledge of the financial irregularities of one of the ministries. If this happens, his party, which virtually had no opposition a few weeks ago, might go down the drain with him as well. These are the reflections of the dream that I once had for my motherland. The full-filled dream of my adopted land has become a constant source of anguish for the unfulfilled dream of the land that I so much cherish.

Am I an escapist? I asked my daughter who is embarking on a career in legal profession. "No papa, you are not", interjected my daughter. "There has not been a single moment when the well being of Bangladesh has slipped from your thought. You teach numerous Bangladeshi students every year. You probably, would have done the same thing had you been in Bangladesh. As your daughter and a future

lawyer, I am pledging to avail myself of any opportunity to defend the human rights in Bangladesh". I do not know if I could draw any consolation from my daughter's words.

I had a classmate in my hometown college; both of us were activist of the same student party and together got elected to the students' union. Over the years, he changed his political belief and in 1971, we were on the opposite sides of the history. As a leader of the infamous *badar-bahini*, he was assisting the occupation forces to carry out the genocide on our people. Currently, he is a very powerful cabinet minister of the alliance government. Had I been in Bangladesh, probably I was bound by the protocol to salute him. Would I be able to do that? This query resulted not from the fact that, he was a backbencher and I was the top student in the class, but only because he was instrumental in torturing and killing our people, while I was bating my life to save them. Should it help me to alleviate the guilt of my escapism?

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