

Democratic rights and hartal

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN.

IS hartal, a democratic exercise? This is a million dollar question and the answer is most likely to be influenced by the side of the political fence one belongs to. If one is a supporter of the government of the day, hartal, in his view, is an utterly undemocratic act that infringes on the freedom of an individual. On the other hand, if one has any degree of sympathy for the opposition, it would be the only democratic right under opposition's disposal to protest the undemocratic, if not autocratic, postures of the government. In response to the business leaders' urge not to observe hartal to the present PM while she was in the opposition, she turned the request down by uttering, "if needed we will impose hartal one after another. Keep the businesses on the shelves; join hand with me to topple the government". Ironically, the same person now in the seat of the Prime Minister is constantly preaching hartal as an undemocratic means that blocks the road to development of the country. The present opposition leader, while being the PM, vowed not resort to hartal even if she would go back to opposition. Evidently, that did not happen.

A person sitting on the political fence will probably agree with the attestation that the hartal, especially the way it is imposed on the people these days is by no means a democratic deed. Burning an auto-rickshaw driver to death is certainly not a democratic exercise by any means. Other than Bangladesh, and a few instances in neighbouring India, this political culture is probably not prevalent in any other part of the world. The question is why does it happen in Bangladesh? It is, in fact, an act of desperation on the part of the opposition parties to ventilate their grievances against the wrong doings of the government. In a parliamentary democracy, the parliament is supposed to be the principal forum where opposition should raise its voice pointing to

the misuse of the government. Over the last ten years, prior to the assumption of power by the current alliance government, both the government and the opposition had to share more or less equally their responsibilities in making the parliament ineffective.

The stalemate, on the other hand, in the current parliament is a matter of the onus of which rests with the government; the opposition has very little part in it. Since assumption of power, political persecution, denial of established democratic rights, shattered credibility of the government leaders and non-existence of accountability have become the rule of the day. One of these mayhems of political

(in Italy) would give them more seats in the parliament than the BNP. Nevertheless, time and again, their right to speak in the House has been unfairly denied by the Speaker. Even the microphone of the leader of the opposition was switched off, a phenomenon unheard of in the rules of procedures of the parliament anywhere in the world. It was alleged that not a single question from the opposition bench was ever entertained in the Prime Minister's question-and-answer sessions in the parliament. Is the PM supposed to answer the questions from the opposition members or from her party's sycophants? No electronic media is permitted to cover the

presence in the cantonment could jeopardise the secrecy of the cantonment is beyond any normal human being's comprehension. She might not have been allowed to enter the intensive care unit, as reportedly suggested by the treating surgeons, what hell would it be if she was allowed inside the hospital premises? This is not the end of the story. A legal case has been initiated against the leader of the opposition and former PM for unlawfully entering in the premises of the cantonment. A great democratic posture of the government indeed!

Credibility of the government leaders, starting with the PM has been absolutely shattered. In line with all her earlier accusations that the opposition is killing its own people to destabilise the government, she has squarely pointed her finger towards the main opposition for the heinous attack on Dr. Azad, an ideological ally of the opposition and beacon for upholding the values of our war of liberation.

The merciless attack on the protesting Dhaka university students and the journalists by the police and the supporters of the student wing of the BNP is a grim reminiscence of what happened in the aftermath of the Shamsunnahar Hall tragedy. The brutalities of the law enforcing agencies have become the order of the day. Good sense of the government has taken the back seat, once and for all. What option are the opposition political parties left out with to protest the heavy-handed behaviour of the government? Denial of the fundamental democratic rights only gives rise to resorting to undemocratic means such as hartal, as is being imposed in most instances.

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persecution happened only the other day in a village of Natore where scores of ordinary opposition supporters' houses were burnt by the ruling party hooligans under the pretext that they were involved in the killing of a deputy minister's nephew. The concerned deputy minister publicly justified the atrocities, since, in his judgement, the victims were involved in the killing of his nephew.

Denial of the established rights, be it inside parliament or outside on the street, even for absolutely apolitical groups, has become the order of the day. The main opposition got more share of the popular votes than the main ruling component in the last three successive general elections. In the last general election, the party alone got 41% of the votes, which in a proportional representation (as

news conference of the opposition members inside the House. In which forum would the opposition keep the people informed about its stance vis-à-vis the poor governance of the government? The state media is absolutely under the control of government where no trace of news of the opposition (except to demean them) makes its way.

The recent denial of the leader of the opposition to drive through the cantonment and her intended visit to the CMH to see the critically wounded Dr. Humayun Azad has no excuse, no matter what pretext the government propaganda machinery might have given out. The leader of the opposition was also a PM for five years, in which capacity she had under her disposal, all our national secrets. How in the world the same person's

The alliance for the next election

OPINION

By TARIQ ALI

THE political atmosphere in Bangladesh has once more become charged with expectations of an alliance between the Awami League and other parties lying within the broad swathe between the right-of-center and the left. The objectives of the alliance are to forge a unity of the democratic, liberal and secular forces in Bangladesh to confront the Jamat/BNP alliance in the next general elections. The issues which have created the need for this unity are so important that simply an ephemeral unity will not address the problem adequately. Therein also lies its strength. It will compel the players to enter the arena with the resolve that they will weather "the thousand natural shocks" that this cohabitation is "heir to". Only a determination to persevere with the alliance, no matter what, can set the forces in motion that will take us to the goal of economic freedom, one amongst the many unattained goals that had primed the Liberation War.

Apart--quite obviously--from national issues, the alliance will have to consider international issues as well, because the realities of global politics are such today that one cannot just wish away the world outside. Amongst other considerations, two that have become very relevant nowadays are (a) the danger posed by fundamentalism and (b) the western world's reaction to it. Whether we like to admit it or not, the way in which small nations choose to deal with these two realities will largely determine whether they are able to exist or not. This is the reality, and is neither an emotional nor a care-less statement, and one has only to look at Afghanistan and who knows, perhaps Pakistan, to realise that.

Forming this alliance will be vital for the Awami League because the government machinery has by now been recast on party lines enough for the ruling party to make a clean sweep, the people's disillusionment with the government notwithstanding. Although the popularity of the Jamat/BNP government has eroded somewhat, voter sympathy has not yet turned towards the AL. It will take a massive switch from the Jamat/BNP vote-bank combine, to override the subtle ways in which the Jamat/BNP operatives in the bureaucracy, the election commission and the caretaker administration are arrayed now to influence the results. Unless people's participation on a mass scale takes place, manipulation in the next general elections is inevitable.

It is quite obvious that the electioneering process will be a different cup of tea the next time around because people, frankly, are disillusioned with the two main political parties. It is also clear that although the following which the smaller parties are able to muster is peanuts, the "mass content" required to break the flanks of this arrayed force can be provided only by the combined strength of the AL and other political parties. It is also true that if we look for the moral-fibre which politicians are supposed to be made of, amongst politicians in

Bangladesh, more often than not it will still be found in people who have been able to resist the temptation of joining the two major parties. The ordinary citizen knows that and will keep that in mind when he is asked to vote next time. Leaving aside, for the present moment, the BNP's utter mess-up in terms of governance issues, even if one made a comparison between the composition of Bangabandhu's 1971 Cabinet, where more than one third of the

according to their version. They will do that despite the two-nation theory having failed in Pakistan itself, because such forces are committed to creating an Islamic state on the easternmost frontiers of the subcontinent.

Having identified the need for an alliance, let us turn our minds to the basis on which the alliance can be created--one that is workable and remains viable. All the parties must start from the pre-

as an independent and hand the seat over to the opponent on a golden platter). The coalition must insist on three unshakable principles for the long-term future. The first two are highly visible and affect the everyday life of the citizen -- violence and corruption. The coalition must take a moral stand against these two afflictions that are ruining our society. People, of course, know that a society free of violence and corruption in the absolute sense is

Having identified the need for an alliance, let us turn our minds to the basis on which the alliance can be created--one that is workable and remains viable. All the parties must start from the premise that it is the alliance which is important and not the individual party. However, because the stakes are so high this time, all parties must do a bit of soulsearching before it embarks upon alliance formation. The AL must honestly address the misgivings of the other parties about its propensity of leaving partners in the lurch once the objective is attained. It must also stop the practice of bludgeoning things their way.

ministers could claim impeccably honest records with the composition of the 1996 Cabinet, one can easily find out why voter sympathy waned away from the AL. Another disadvantage that the AL must deal with is that while its support base in rural Bangladesh is still intact, its support amongst the middle class has unquestionably been eroded in the last five years of their rule. This urban middle class will determine the way the country's heart will beat in the next elections and the AL must institute confidence building measures in the middle class. The AL will also do well to remember that elections and politics no longer follow the equations that were valid two decades ago. It only has to take a look at the mistakes the Congress party made in next-door India to draw its conclusions. The AL must understand that that if it fails to make this coalition work for the long term, going beyond just the next elections--it runs the danger of being a dying party, just as the Congress is in today's India.

It is not only in Awami League's interest that the alliance has become necessary. The stakes for the other parties are even higher. They need the alliance in order just to stay alive. Judging from the way the Jamat is making inroads into the government--infiltrating the various ministries with their cadres--one does not have to second-guess their ultimate goal. Fundamentalist parties do not believe in letting other political voices survive, as is evident in countries where they have assumed power like Iran, Afghanistan and some Arab states. Fundamentalists believe in a theocratic state, and theocracy and democracy are by concept incompatible with each other and it has been repeatedly proved in these countries that a melee of different political voices do not survive in a fundamentalist state.

We must also accept the fact that the Jamat has succeeded in establishing itself as one of the factors in the Bangladesh electoral scenario today and if the Jamat/BNP alliance wins the next elections nothing can stop them from fulfilling their common agenda of erasing the history of the country and rewriting it

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What follows next, after the coalition has been cobbled into shape? The smaller parties of the coalition must be pragmatic, and realise that what matters this time is the future of the country-- not individual party seats but the coalition. They should not make undue demands, haggle for seats that they cannot win (the deprived AL candidate will stand

unattainable but if the coalition makes an honest effort, it can be contained, and that is enough to satisfy the ordinary citizen.

The third principle, secularism, is more notional in character, but equally important. We have seen how Pakistan's espousal of communal principles in the running of a state has served only to deepen the divisions within its population. Secular principles are not for the protection of the minorities, as is commonly believed in our country, but in a profound way it protects the majority. Finally, the coalition must also have an open and declared policy about India. It is lamentable for us, that starting from basically the same status in 1947, while India has been able to catapult itself out of the economic morass that characterises the subcontinent, we are still stuck there pursuing objectives that have long become inconsequential to a modern state. The nation needs to reflect upon this reality when formulating its relationship with India.

The way we are

SHAMSER CHOWDHURY

THEY say you are what you are. Yes indeed, I am what I am, a Bangladeshi. The name of my country is Bangladesh.

On June 1, 2001, I arrived at the Los Angeles Airport in USA. An African American officer at the immigration counter gave me a broad grin, turned my passport upside down and said, "Your name is Bangladesh but tell me where do you come from?" After considerable exchange of words I was able to convince her that my name was in fact not Bangladesh and that Bangladesh was the name of the country I came from. As she was going through the immigration form (disembarkation card) which I handed over, she took it upon herself to be pleasant engaging me into a lighthearted conversation. After a rather short but protracted "dialoguing" I had to end the conversation by "admitting" that Bangladesh was a place near Calcutta etc.

I was temporarily disappointed by the event but neither frustrated nor disgusted. To a great extent, to me it appeared to be but natural for the immigration officer to be unaware of our antecedents. Frankly I have serious doubts as to how much we know ourselves as people and a nation. It is indeed a sorry picture.

We are highly emotional, poetic in nature and do suffer from all kinds of "complexes". As a nation we rank high as a failure. We are stuck in a groove of false vanity and pretensions. We love to live in the past. We are chaotic at the present and certainly do not have any vision or goals for the future. We are quick to produce excuses. We say democracy works slow and hence thirty years for a newly borne democracy is but too short for any democratic culture to set in. Not even a beginning? I wonder!

We are eternally busy with the frame and not the content. We are more interested in the cover of the book than its contents. We are good at holding ceremonies and celebrate all kinds of anniversaries for good or for worse -- from death and birth anniversaries to inauguration or foundation laying to founding anniversary of some Association or society.

We are a proud people but often carry it too far. Last month was February and any body and every body got busy dissecting and going through all the significance and the glories of our great mother tongue Bengalee. Indeed every Bengalee has reasons to be proud of his or her mother tongue especially when it occupies such a unique position way beyond our own horizons. I said we take it too far. Just consider this. To most Bengalees the study of

literature begins and ends in reading the works of Sarath Chandra, Bankim Chandra culminating at the Nobel Laureate Tagore. Nothing wrong with it. But try telling us about Shakespeare, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens or Charlotte Bronte or even Nirad Chowdhury we begin to feel uncomfortable. We do not seem to be much impressed. Many of us suffer from the psyche that learning or more so, speaking in English at public functions, to say the least, is an act of arrogance. Just consider the fact that only a tiny segment of the world population confined to the Bengal belt speaks Bengali.

We are highly undisciplined. We have no discipline on the streets, in our work places, in public places like shopping centers and even at places of our worship. The height of our indiscipline is most visible in the streets. Every form of transport is moving in the streets as though the order of the day is "do as you like". People are crossing main thoroughfares and religiously engaged in jay walking without any rhyme or reason. Excepting a few streets most footpaths serve as makeshift stalls. It is so absurd as you find that freshly raised fencings alongside footpaths only to be re-occupied by the vendors. How ironic when you come to think of Bangladeshis being ever so proud of their "sense of beauty" and a "heritage" of high art and culture. Look at our religious festivals.

During the two Eid festivals we take leave from our work places for a specific number of days and yet we return to work days after the approved days of leave. Ask any one including senior bureaucrats and members of the civil society they would tell you, "It is but natural, after all, this is Eid".

We are extremely noisy and love to argue over anything and everything under the sun. We talk in high-pitched voices in classrooms, on the streets and in corridors. Be it places like the floor of the Parliament, or a funeral or in the privacy of our own homes we often talk too loud. We have no patience to listen to other's point of view. The only point of view we are comfortable with and ready to accept is "my view". Yes we are indeed very noisy. The public address system (mike) is used and abused for all conceivable purposes. Selling indigenous medicines at street corners, for Waz Mehflis (a meeting where sermons are given on religious matters) by Moulanas (religious clerics) often through night and day.

We have a queer sense of pride. We often believe that whatever we produce or have, are the "best in the world." To most of us the finest of the rain forests or a mangrove in the world is the Sunderbans a fruit or a vegetable or some indigenous food item served during festivals the best in the world. The mindset is often best reflected in some of consumer product advertisements in the media.

We have hardly any sense of time and time management. We arrive late at wedding ceremonies and even social and official gatherings of much more serious nature. The moment an invitation card reaches our hands, we routinely assume that, it is in the fitness of things to arrive at the venue at least half an hour to an hour after the scheduled time! We have no understanding of the real essence and value of time. Of late, the growing "cell phone culture" has further complicated things. You can never fix an appointment by the hour or minute. The timing of the appointment will routinely be tagged with the pre condition, "do give me a call before you leave the house etc."

Most Bengalis love to view themselves as the most knowledgeable and well-informed individuals on this side of the globe. They are ready to make deliberations and shed pearls of wisdom at the drop of a hat. If you happen to be in the waiting room of, say, a consulting physician you will find that the gentleman sitting next to you is instantly giving you his opinion of the perfect diagnosis and even going to the extent of suggesting a whole range of medication. As the conversation progresses you will soon find out that the gentleman in question happens to be either, say, a photographer or a textile technologist.

Such is the state of our human resources. If we are to survive as respectable nation we simply must bring about drastic changes in our "mindset". We must make "work" our culture instead of basking in past glories and heritage. Culture, history and heritage are important but cannot be all pervasive in the life of a nation.

