LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY APRIL 2, 2004

Yes to dialogue

No to hartals, no to repression of opposition

HE business community has called upon the government and the opposition to iron out their differences through dialogue. We fully support the views expressed by the country's businessmen and women and agree that the time is long overdue for the government and opposition to sit down with one another to come to some kind of a workable political arrangement. It is clear that the current state of affairs is having a disastrous effect on the nation's governance and economy, and that steps must be taken soon to rectify the situation before it gets out of control.

The business community has told the leader of the opposition that they cannot any longer absorb the shock of hartals. The message is not new, but one hoped that the stature of those who met with the leader of the opposition to plead with her to eschew hartals would have encouraged her to rethink her strategy. Unfortunately, this does not appear to have happened.

However, the government also bears responsibility for the sorry state of affairs. As destructive as hartals are to the country, the government's repression of the opposition is equally destructive and equally to be condemned. The violence against the opposition and the shrinking of the democratic space in which to express dissent is also unacceptable

We share the opposition's skepticism as to whether the government is truly committed to democratic debate and dissent. The government's actions in parliament and their continued harassment, often violent, of political opponents seem to support the opposition's claim that there is no space for them to dissent democratically.

The government is in power. It is the representative of the people. Its responsibility to the people must therefore be foremost. It is up to the government to take the concrete measures to demonstrate to the opposition and the rest of us that it will provide them with the space to express dissent and that it is committed to democracy.

Ultimately, both sides are at fault, and it is time for both the government and the opposition to put aside their own narrow agendas and put that of the people on top

Potable water scarcity

Act beyond crisis management

HE Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) in Dhaka is taking resort to a contingency measure that rings familiar almost as an annual feature. It is having to deploy army personnel to ward off any possibility of local musclemen's stranglehold around strategic

At this time of the year sub-soil water levels dry up leaving an acute scarcity of water for the denizens to suffer. In normal times whatever supply infrastructure we have is hard-put to cope with an increasing daily demand of water. In fact, there is a sizable deficit. In the months of March-April it aggravates: the total daily availability figure drops from 175 crore litres to somewhere around 140-150 crore litres. The situation is compounded by the fact that supply of electricity which helps operate the pumps is often snapped on account of load-

Crisis management ipso facto becomes the water supply authority's pressing concern at this crunch time. Nevertheless, the point that needs to be stressed is: having army guards to keep trouble-makers at bay every year is not the stuff of which a durable solution is made. This is not to overlook though, the efficiency with which the army have been quietly doing a yeoman's job in this area. But for their guarding of the pump houses and delivery of water to slum pockets, many citizens would have been deprived of a life-sustaining service. While that is true and laudatory, let's not be content with seasonal measures; rather, we must redouble our efforts to overcome the crisis on a long-term footing.

Currently, we are reliant on 85 percent groundwater and 15 percent surface water to provide this basic service. There is water on the surface -- in the rivers -- to be treated and made drinkable, let alone the huge rainfall we have every year which could be stored. The perennially unfinished Syedabad Water Treatment Plant sums up our negotiatory inadequacies. After long delays it now awaits a DANIDA board meeting decision. When commissioned, it will yield 22 crore litres of water. A project is contemplated with Chinese help to draw water from the Padma and treat it for use. On materialisation, it would provide us with 50 to 60 crore litres of water. Let's get it on with such a project.

Is now the right time for a new political force?

STRAIGHT TALK

Gano Forum has been in existence since the early nineties without making much of an impression, and it remains

to be seen whether Dr. Kamal will be able to rise to the occasion...Similarly, commentators have suggested that

Dr. Badruddoza's split with the BNP has more to do with his loss of power within the party than principled

opposition to the BNP's misrule.... Thus it remains to be seen whether either of them will be able to don the

mantle of national leader and spear-head a movement to break the strangle-hold the AL and the BNP have over



ZAFAR SOBHAN

HESE are troubled times in Bangladesh. The entire country waits on tenterhooks to see what the month of April holds for us. The opposition AL has announced that it will topple the government by the end of the month, and has called back-to-back dawn-to-dusk hartals on the 7th and 8th in furtherance of this goal.

Meanwhile, the government claims that it has uncovered some kind of a death-list with the names of prominent political leaders, intellectuals, journalists and businessmen that the opposition is planning to kill in order to foment trouble. Most ominously, and somewhat unconvincingly, the government warns that the opposition might even kill its own leaders in order to trigger an anti-government backlash. The opposition, for its part, is saying that it is the government that is planning to liquidate its political opponents and shift the blame to the opposi-

Somehow this whole debate seems disturbingly familiar. We have got used to the recriminations and accusations and counteraccusations that are the hallmark of party politics in this country.

The other big political news is the rumblings that we hear about the formation of some kind of a third force to challenge the existing

The alternative political stream launched by former president Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury is set to take the shape of a full-fledged political party on the 12th when it will hold a rally in the capital.

Meanwhile, Gano Forum president and former foreign minister Dr. Kamal Hossain convened his Oikya in existence for a decade, the convening of the Oikya Prochestha signals that Dr. Kamal is planning to take his political involvement to a new level

parties in the country other than the AL and the BNP. The BNP currently heads a four-party alliance and there are any number of parties in opposition. But what people are

But this is where the rot began to set in for the AL. Its term in office was dogged by a precipitous decline in the law and order situation that, more than anything else, contributed to the party's defeat at the next election. It was during this time that many of those who had had high hopes for the first AL government in over twenty years became disillusioned and turned off and started to rethink their allegiances.

When the BNP came back to power in 2001, many people thought that it would turn things

Bangladeshi politics, but the national mood would have to change radically before the people throw their weight behind them at their supporters.

unlikely to fit the bill. It was unable to replace the BNP in the voters' affections even in nine years of government, and has now split, and

and most important consideration is whether such a movement would have the support of a sufficient share of the electorate.

For the reasons I have articulated already I believe that it would. People's desires are simple and straightforward. Few want much more from their government than that it keeps them safe and cuts down on corruption and politicisation. Both parties have signally failed to deliver on either of these counts

The second consideration is

nition and sterling reputations. If people's primary concerns are crime and corruption, then an unimpeachable reputation for honesty is

indispensable Their antecedents in the AL and the BNP are another advantage. Although he fell foul of the party's young turks, many stalwart BNP supporters still think highly of Dr. Badruddoza. Similarly, many AL supporters retain a great deal of

forgotten his service to the country. The final consideration is organisation and mobilisation. This is the principal problem for any fledgling political force. Any political force need workers and activists to take its message to the people and to mobilise the masses

affection for Dr. Kamal and have not

That's the X-factor. It's not easy to build up these kinds of organisations. It requires immense energy and discipline and it remains to be seen whether any of those who would challenge the AL and the BNP's supremacy will be able to successfully create such a force.

Now, it is true that both Dr. Kamal and Dr. Badruddoza come with some question marks. Gano Forum has been in existence since the early nineties without making much of an impression, and it remains to be seen whether Dr. Kamal will be able to rise to the occasion and successfully present himself as a realistic alternative to the status

Similarly, commentators have suggested that Dr. Badruddoza's split with the BNP has more to do with his loss of power within the party than principled opposition to the BNP's misrule

Thus it remains to be seen whether either of them will be able to don the mantle of national leader and spear-head a movement to break the strangle-hold the AL and the BNP have over the political life of the country.

However, one thing that is clear is that the people of Bangladesh are desperate for new leadership. Are either of the two doctors the right men to lead such a movement? Only time will tell. But is the time right for such a movement? In my opinion, it has never been more so.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily

The question on everyone's lips

is whether now is the right time for a new political party to rise as an alternative to the BNP and the AL. Of course, we have many political

the political life of the country.

talking about is a party that can

challenge the existing supremacy of

political landscape to see whether

the time is propitious or not. The

first thing is to look at the popularity

and standing of the two main par-

The popularity and standing of

the two parties has never been

lower. Today is a far cry from 1991

when we were emerging from

dictatorship and the people believed

that democracy under the leader-

ship of either the AL or the BNP was

the future was bright and there were

high hopes for the new government.

The BNP had won a popular victory

and it was clear that they repre-

sented some kind of affirmation of

the people's will and were the repos-

When the AL returned to power in

1996, there was much euphoria on

the part of its supporters. The BNP

remained popular, retaining over a

hundred seats in parliament, and

itory for our political aspirations.

There was a general feeling that

Let us cast a glance over the

the main two parties.

around. It didn't. Things have gone

from bad to worse. The law and

order situation is worse than ever,

with extortion, murder, rape, and

robbery a feature of daily life. On

top of this, the government has been

unable to check the rise in price of

essentials, and corruption has

come to is that people are thor-

oughly disillusioned by both major

parties. Most people who vote for

the BNP do so because they are

opposed to the AL, not because they

have any strong loyalty to the BNP,

and vice versa. I would suggest that

the number who have any great

allegiance or loyalty to either party

has diminished sharply in the past

decade, and is now lower than the

number who do not have strong

For the first time in our nation's

brief period of democracy, the

people are finally fed up with the

existing menu. They might still vote

for the BNP or the AL as the lesser of

two evils -- but they are not enthusi-

astic about either.

feelings of support for either one.

Basically, the state we have

reached unprecedented levels.

the polls in considerable numbers They do control a number of seats in parliament, but this is more due to a smart electoral alliance with the BNP than with the raw number of The Jatiya Party similarly seems

its influence is on the wane. Perhaps it was the corruption of the Ershad years or the lack of democracy, but few people see the JP as

potential saviours of the country. The real wild cards in the pack are Dr. Badruddoza and Dr. Kamal and everyone is waiting to see what they are going to do next.

Dr. Kamal already has a political party and his Oikya Prochestha has been launched. People are now waiting to see whether it will develop into a political platform or civil society platform and where he plans to take things from here.

The same goes for Dr. Badruddoza. He has the advantage of the support of two (until they resigned their seats to join him) sitting MPs -- his son and Major Abdul Mannan. They will contest their vacated seats shortly in byelections which will be very closely watched, as the results will give some indication of their viability away from the BNP and also show what level of importance the BNP gives to defeating them.

But back to the question of whether the time is right for a new

political movement anywhere in the world is viable in the absence of financial backing. My guess is that the business community cannot be happy with the way things have worked over the last thirteen years. In fact, it's not a guess. Business

finances. The sad truth is that no

leaders are on record expressing their distress at the climate under which they have been forced to The endemic corruption, the extortion, the lack of security, the arbitrariness of justice, the politicisation of the bureaucracy, the constant hartals -- all these make doing business in Bangladesh astonishingly difficult, and the two main political parties' complicity in this state of affairs ensures that the loyalty of the business community to either party is not strong.

Chances are that the more farsighted of our business leaders would be more than willing to subsidise a new political force which would promise to clean up the business environment and provide them with some measure of secu-

The third consideration is estab-

Should writers write anything they want? argue, was aimed at political and social awakening but interspersed with prurient overtures. Should the writers have written these books? In the freedom of their rights, they have done what they liked. But in the freedom of their responsibilities. they have stumbled for the same

reason adults wouldn't flirt before

The writer has power not because he holds a sword in his hand, but a pen, which holds ink that flows to express his thoughts. What he writes is closely tied to what he thinks; his mind and writing are like hand in glove. And he must be sensitive and sensible at once, because unbridled writing, like unbridled tonque, brings disaster.

Larry W. Phillips says in the introduction of his book Ernest Hemingway on Writing that throughout his career as a writer, Ernest Hemingway maintained that it was bad luck to talk about writing. It makes sense. If what the writer writes has a reflection on him, then what he speaks might have a reflection on his writing. But that is

between the writer and his writing. What about the readers? They read because they want to learn, not because they want entertainment. And that learning is necessary to put rationality in the animal. Those writers who write to put the animal in the rational must think twice. Because reckless writing is lot like reckless driving. The driver may not be aware, but it hurts those who ride

there was no suggestion or sense Now, it is not as though other Procheshta with a very successful lishing a brand. It is here that the that people were looking for an parties do not exist. The Jamaat political force in this country. There rally in the capital on March 14. alternative. has long been a durable force in are several considerations. The first two doctors have a great advantage Even though Gano Forum has been



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ASLIMA Nasrin wrote a book, which got her banned from the country, and then she wrote another one to make it worse. Humayun Azad wrote a book, which is said to have led to the attack on him last February, when he was hacked with a knife. These are but examples of how readers can be smitten by the written words. New York University Professor Irving Kristol argues that if we believe books can improve an individual, then we ought to believe that books can corrupt him as well. Never underestimate the power of the written words. It has been a

tested thing by now. The question is what should writers do with that power? If singers shouldn't sing vulgar songs, photographers shouldn't shoot lurid photographs and painters shouldn't draw obscene pictures, should writers write whatever they like? It's not about freedom in terms of right but freedom in terms of responsibility. Should we do everything we are free to do? Are we free to do everything we are able to do?

You can dig your nose, scratch your backside and pick your teeth, to say a few things on the lighter

side. You are free to do any or all of them, and none of them is morally wrong or legally prohibited. But would you do them in public? Perhaps not, because you would like to be sensible and conform to the recognised standards of proper behaviour.

Propriety is supposed to be a big thing in life. You don't rant in public or use four-lettered words because these aren't decent behaviours. It's for the same reason, you wouldn't thinking, also brought in the stench of filth. It was in the name of freedom that professional fornicators simulated homosexual rape on the stage in New York's Time Square. The world became awash with dirty movies, books and theaters. The United States struggled to strike a balance between freedom and filth. and adopted the three tests of the "Miller Standard" in 1973. Obscenity is if a work's dominant theme is prurient, if it offends contemporary

much as writers struggle to flesh out their plots and characters, some of them can be deluded that foul words bring energy to the tip of their pens. According to William Wordsworth, a writer must himself create the taste by which he is to be rel-

ished. The power of writing is most powerful when it creates that taste. which ennobles readers and takes them above the humdrum of life to a new level of realisation and understanding. The writer is like a diver in community standards and lacks in the sea of profanities, who must go

"writing about a prostitute". Yet people have written about prostitutes, which weren't pornographic. In Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist Nancy is the archetype of the whore with a golden heart. She risked and lost her life to save Oliver from a life of depravity. In Bengali literature, Saratchandra's Chandramukhi is a dancing girl, who tries to save

The word pornography was

derived on the assumption of such

waste, which in Greek means

CROSS TALK

The writer can elevate his reader, at the same time he can also let him down. It depends on what the writer does with his power... The writer has power not because he holds a sword in his hand, but a pen, which holds ink that flows to express his thoughts. What he writes is closely tied to what he thinks; his mind and writing are like hand in glove. And he must be sensitive and sensible at once, because unbridled writing, like unbridled tongue, brings disaster.

because you don't want others to frown upon your improper conduct.

Then propriety underwent change in time. The world started with roaming bands of naked apemen, passed through the Reformation and the Renaissance, the Age of Reasoning and the Age of Enlightenment to arrive at today's metrosexual men, the horizon expanding along the way to create a more liberal world. It took a number of years to publish Eugene O'Neill's Desire under the Elms and James Jovce's Ulvsses without interference. The mind opened slowly to accommodate instincts, which relentlessly pushed at the fringes of imagination.

But the crack of window, which brought in the fresh air of liberal

serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value

Why should a writer write titillating trash? The purpose of writing is to get people to think by giving a jolt to their minds. The writer writes to stimulate the souls of his readers with the tonic of fresh, honest and bold ideas. How does obscenity help, which takes away concentration from the mind and puts it in the

Still, there are writers who would remind you of your neighbourhood smart aleck. These writers use profanities all the time to get to their point. Ernest Hemingway confided to F. Scott Fitzerald that he wrote one page of masterpiece to ninetyone pages of shit" and tried "to put the shit in the wastebasket". In so

down and come back with the treasures of profound thinking for the readers, instead of taking them down with him.

Invoke the "Miller Standard". obscenity is when writers write nonsensical crap which offends people. This is different from hardhitting political or social essays. which offend privileged folks, and that difference comes in substance, not in style. You can hurl a few obscenities, if that will help you articulate your thoughts and weave your plot. But if your plot is woven on obscenities alone, if your plot has the flimsy construction of an X-rated flick where the story line is simply an excuse to bring a few bodies together for heady sex, the power of writing is a wasted talent.

his broken heart

It makes the power of writing a double-edged knife. The writer can elevate his reader, at the same time he can also let him down. It depends on what the writer does with his power. In her latest book. Taslima Nasrin focused on men and women. who were engaged in a musical chair of sleeping with each other. Her words were clean, but theme was dirty. Humayun Azad wrote his book, which reads like a scatological minefield. Perhaps he wished his theme to be clean and courageous, but he used not words to write it.

So, the dominant theme of one book is prurient, with very little political, social, artistic or scientific value. The other book, one could Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

OPINION

'Pak army attacked Joydevpur...'

QAUZI **A**BDUR **R**AQIB

read with interest the article "Pak Army attacked Joydevpur on 19 March, 1971" written by Mr Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal, a Muktijoddha, published in your esteemed daily 25 March, 2004. Though much of the discussion in the article contains some deviations from facts yet this can be overlooked. However, in that article, a few lines appear as under:

"During 19th to 25th March the battalion had a formal change of command from Lt. Col Masood, a Bengali officer, to Lt Col Rakib, though a Bengali by birth, he remained a dubious character for three days upto 28 March and ultimately managed to escape and

report back to Pak army as a loyal officer.'

I would have ignored the remarks if the same had been written by a lay man. But since this writer claims to have been closely associated with 2nd East Bengal during Liberation War, is full of praise for the heroes of the battalion, -- and also I presume, that he is aware of mores of Army discipline, -- I like to put to him some questions, for which I expect him to find time to go in depth to answer,

and express his opinion. First, the point of clarification is that I was thrust upon and was introduced to the Battalion by Brig M R Majumder, the then Centre Cornd. EBRC on the afternoon of 25 March, 1971. That all throughout my career I had been an officer of the Punjab

Regiment of Pakistan Army and was Commanding Officer of 32 Punjab, then located in Dhaka till the morning of 25th March, 1971. The second point is that, to take decision to disobey order or revolt in the army is not easy. Success makes you a hero and failure makes you a traitor. Situation in the last week of March

1971, was unpredictable. Now the questions for which he

should seek answers are: --1) After observing the nature of Army action in Tongi area in the evening of 27th March, 1971, who called a short conference attended by Maj Shafiullah then 2IC, Maj Moin then a Company Commander, Capt. Aziz then Adjutant and Subedar Nurul Haq then acting Subedar Major and outlined plan for

the move of the battalion to Mymensingh?

2) On whose orders Major Shafiullah left Joydevpur at about 10.30am of 28th March, 1971 with the mortar platoon and a scrapped up rifle platoon to Tangail en route to Mymensingh?

3) The writer must have been acquainted with the term "O" Group. Who gave orders to "O" Group, i.e. the officers and to the JCOs at 20.00 hrs on 28th March, '71 and set the time to commence movements and Capt Aziz, according to earlier instructions, left with a section of machine guns and recoil rifles to establish road block at Joydevpur-Dhaka road crossing, so that Pakistani troops who had already positioned themselves in Tongi area in the previous night do not interfere during the move of the battalion? 4) This battalion was spread out

on five different locations --Mymensingh, Tangail, Rajendrapur Ammunition Depot, Gazipur Ordnance Factory and Joydevpur Rajbari. Does the writer want to say that in their movement the CO had no knowledge? 5) Can the writer name any

Bengali officer, particularly an officer of East Bengal Regiment, who was of my seniority at that time, planned any revolt, while his family was staying in the cantonment? My family was then residing in a hutted accommodation opposite to the residence of Maj Gen Khadim Husain Raja, (now Prime Minister's residents). Shafiullah's family was

then in Comilla Post Script:

1. Due to unexpected occurrence I had become a hostage to the lone non-Bengali surviving officer of the Battalion (Capt. Nagvi). Perforce for immediate survival I had to play on the theme of innocence, which Capt. Naqvi accepted. Later I had the ordeals of being under custody in POW cage, interrogation etc and probably got benefit of doubt.

2. Much later i.e. only a few years ago, I happened to read the book, "Witness to Surrender" by Brig. Siddiq Salek. The operation order of the "Operation Searchlight" code name of Army crackdown in 1971 is incorporated in the book. It is apparent from there that they had decided to remove me from 32 Punjab and

install Lt Col Taj in that place. The incident of 19 March, '71 gave a pretext for them to remove Lt Col Masood and put me there to create an uncertain position in 2nd East Bengal, and after clearing Dhaka City area, they would go to disarm the battalion.

In all probability they were planning to launch operation against 2nd Bengal on 29th March, '71. This I assume, because as a part of revolt and moving out of the area, the battalion ensured disconnection of electricity in the entire area. Joydevpur-Gazipur experienced a dark night. On the following day afternoon (29 March, '71) when I was already in custody and being subjected to preliminary questioning by Brig. Arbab, Brig Karimullah,

who was then Commandant of Ordnance Factory appeared on the scene and cursed out saying, "Last night there was no light in the area." On this Brig Arbab winked and said that they had switched off connection from Tongi. Though at the time, being in psychologically distressed condition -- not knowing what fate awaits me in future -- in my heart I thanked Allah knowing that the battalion was now safe.

I seek no credit, I am clear in my conscience, I thank Allah that 2nd East Bengal did not suffer any damage which I was in-charge, and that was the only Battalion which moved out lock stock and barrel before being attacked by the Pak