

Confrontation taking a worse turn

Dialogue is the only way out

THE politics of hartal and the government's toughening stance on it are a recipe for violence and counter-violence. We oppose hartal as a matter of policy and also decry the government's attitude of not having allowed the space the opposition deserved. Both sides are claiming to be more sinned against than sinning, but the general impression is that neither side is paying any attention to the sufferings of the innocent people and the minimal norms of democracy.

That the opposition has adopted the hartal course is political expediency, caring little for the welfare of the people. But we would like to tell the government that if it had diverted a modicum of the enthusiasm and dynamism -- that it is showing to counter opposition programmes -- to some sincere attempts at solving problems like price hike, inefficiency, corruption and creaking law and order, governance would have been so much the better, and the resistance to hartal that much more intense. We know that the argument in favour of confronting the opposition is that any political agitation must be countered politically. We can only bemoan the fact that the ruling alliance is viewing the issue from the wrong end; otherwise, they wouldn't have thought of using the government machinery in the implementation of the ruling party's political agenda. The approach is highly flawed.

While hartal is a politically bankrupt strategy, which makes the whole nation pay dearly for the fulfillment of a party's objective, the government's much-vaunted counter measures aimed at bludgeoning the opposition are also a manifestation of an equally bankrupt political thinking. Why can't the government turn its attention to governance and administration and perform its mandated role? If they had done so, would it not have taken the wind off the opposition's sail? The slanging match approach represents a typical case of a misplaced priority redoubling the disruptive effect of confrontational politics.

We are getting more and more convinced that dialogue is the first step towards reversing the political rot that threatens to further imperil the precarious existence of the people. Dialogue is also the only way to survival as politics of confrontation is pushing the country towards abysmal uncertainty.

Strategic transport plan

Finally some positive steps on traffic crisis

THE authorities finally seem to have woken up to the fact that the traffic congestion that clogs the roads of the capital city is a matter of the utmost importance, and one that requires a well-thought-out and comprehensive long-term strategy to be resolved. The Strategic Transport Plan (STP) that has been devised by the Dhaka Urban Transport Co-ordination Board (DTCB) is reportedly a long-term multi-modal urban transport plan that is of a scale that recognises the seriousness of the situation and the need for such a comprehensive solution.

Such thinking when it comes to the issue of traffic congestion is long overdue. For too long successive governments have attempted to implement piece-meal and patch-work solutions that have simply not had the scope to accomplish what has been needed. As-hoc solutions to specific problems, such as building a link-road here and an overpass there, have done nothing to improve the deteriorating traffic situation in any meaningful way.

The STP will build upon the achievements of the World Bank funded Tk 900 crore Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) under whose auspices the Mohakhali flyover, among other undertakings, is being built. The DUTP project period is set to end in June but will reportedly be extended to the end of this year in order to finalise some unfinished projects. The STP, which will cost several thousand crores and is slated to be funded by the ADB and private investors, will, however, be even more ambitious and comprehensive a plan that is aimed at providing a long-term sustainable solution to the traffic crisis in the capital.

It is relevant to point out that we need multi-storied parking lots in strategic locations like Gulshan, Motijheel, Malibagh, New Market, only to name a few, in order that some of the critical congestion can be soaked up. This would be a highly profitable venture for the private sector to come in a big way. Entrepreneurs should be incentivised to construct high-rise parking lots, if necessary, at the initial stages.

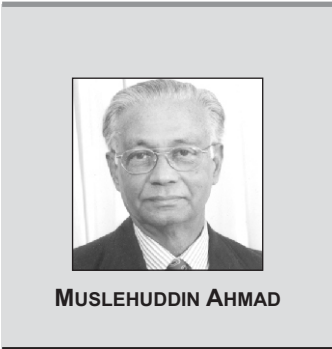
It is estimated that traffic congestion in Dhaka costs the country upwards of Tk 1000 crores a year in lost productivity. More importantly, if Bangladesh aspires to be a part of the modern global business community, then we must be willing to invest in the infrastructure that is necessary to bring us into the twenty-first century. Dhaka is one of the world's major metropolises and it is welcome news that the authorities are finally contemplating and implementing the kind of comprehensive measures necessary to help the city achieve its full potential.

first heard something like that. But in this case, it is a criminal who has been chopped to death. Maybe for this reason it will be seen as 'right action' by some viewers. But does it really matter who or how bad the person was? The way he was murdered does leave a lot of question in our minds. Do you really have to chop someone into pieces to kill him? We, despite being the best living creatures in the universe, are committing such inhuman acts, and nothing is stopping us from doing such things.

Is there really no way to stop these acts? I would suggest that licenses be issued for keeping sharp weapons, and use of these things should be prohibited for general people other than butchers.

John

'Opposition is not an enemy'



SOME weeks ago I had the privilege of calling on Dr. I K Gujral, former Prime Minister of India at his residence in New Delhi. Among many things he had said during the discussion about education, regional politics etc, one thing that stood out very clearly was the level of democratic practices in India. He highlighted the very basis of democracy that "opposition is not an enemy" that must be accepted, recognised and treated accordingly, otherwise democracy cannot take its root and function effectively for the benefit of the country. He also boastfully narrated that sixteen former Prime Ministers, obviously belonging to different political parties, often consult each other on important national issues including political ones and vent their views to the incumbent Prime Minister/government. He felt that such things should undoubtedly be followed by all countries which practice democracy.

Chiefs of major political parties not on talking terms: Having seen the democratic practices in other democratic countries, one feels

ashamed of what has been happening in Bangladesh. The most unfortunate part of Bangladesh politics is that the chiefs of the two major political parties do not talk to each other. It goes against the very fundamental principle of democracy. However, one good thing is that the other leaders of major political parties appear to be flexible and are interested to talk to each other on important issues, but the chiefs of the parties appear

purposes etc. One feels that instead of going for separate political parties by the dissident members (of course, one has the right to do so if things go beyond control), they could continue to remain in the party(s) and go on making their concerns louder, open and indeed public. Such a trend was reportedly observed in the last party meeting of a major political party. This sort of pressure within party's(s') by the members particularly those of the

younger groups could really make the party(s) democratic process work. It is really not a democratic norm to leave things to the chiefs only for some crucial decisions.

Boycotting the Parliament: The successive opposition parties have been boycotting the Parliament for months thus making the Parliament basically ineffective in terms of democracy. Of course, some of the grievances that led to such boycott appear genuine but the members need to deal with them by staying within the parliament by expressing their views and grievances within the short time allocated to them. It is of course desirable that the members of the parliament are given enough time to express their views which they do on behalf of the electorates. It is necessary to point out that the boycotting members of the successive opposition parties,

however, continued to draw the pay and allowances though they did not/do not perform their duties for which they were elected. This cannot be termed as ethical under any acceptable definition. While walking out of the parliament, even several times a day if needed, is a democratic practice, but long absence by way of boycotting the parliament is not an acceptable democratic practice at all. The citizens of this country do want the members of the

parliament to remain in parliament and work there for them.

Mid-term election: The demand for mid-term election is undoubtedly a democratic practice, but this should not lead to calling of hartals, and violence disrupting the civil and business life of the citizens. Strike (hartal) is a democratic process, but this must follow certain rules like taking the views/opinion of the people who are affected by such actions. Unfortunately, the parties need to declare it even without considering that such a step will lead to immense suffering of people of the country and particularly those who depend on daily earnings for their livelihood. It is also sad that the successive governments have also been using excessive and often unnecessary forces to stop even peaceful demonstrations of the oppositions. This should never

happen in a democratic country.

Hartal: The appeal from all quarters including the business chambers to stop hartals have been totally ignored all along. There are certainly other methods to vent their political grievances. One can cite the latest human chain of several miles long undertaken by the main opposition. This had indeed the widest and most effective participation from people of all walks of life. Such programmes are within the democratic norms and

certainly more effective and do not create difficulties to the citizens. Indeed, hartals antagonise the people and work in favour of the ruling party. It can be said with almost hundred percent certainty that more hartals will erode whatever support the opposition has. It's time to accept facts.

Governance on the basis of percentage of popular vote: The period of five years set for any new election is certainly long. It should be brought to four years and that will reduce the chances of agitation for mid-term election unless something goes terribly wrong with the governing party. In Bangladesh politics gets heated very quickly as political parties in the opposition do not have the patience of waiting that long. There are several reasons for that. Let's not dis-

cuss those issues here.

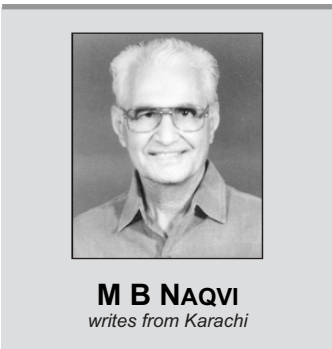
But the possible alternative could be to allow governance on the basis of percentage of popular votes received by the political parties. Such a system could lead to governance by the major political parties with or without support of the smaller parties for a period, say, two and half years by one major party and rest by the other major party probably in coalition with other smaller parties. This may lead to peaceful transfer of power without going for any mid-term election.

The most important condition should be that no party will boycott the Parliament. One feels that the division of governance period on the basis of percentage of popular votes to party(s) could end the present type of political unrest. Let there be a system which will lead to less political turmoil and that may ensure some form of good governance. Democracy is not a tight jacket system belonging to a country or group of countries. Anything good for the people and the state should be incorporated into the Constitution of a country to make its own form of democracy work.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador. He is also the Chairman of CIVIC WATCH Bangladesh.

The Daily Star

An honour to do without



PAKISTAN has become a Major Non NATO Ally of the US. This has opened the door to Pak Army buying spares, training and some US made equipment, subject to approval by the US, case by case. The US has lifted most sanctions on this country. The new status is supposed to be an honour, though those conferring it were unsure whether Pakistanis would actually feel honoured and accept it.

The Americans could not have been surprised at the near-automatic acceptance of this by Islamabad without a second thought or domestic debate. Apparently not even the Cabinet was consulted. It can be argued that there is nothing new in it. Pakistan was already an ally in the same war. Also the US Ambassador to the NATO had disclosed on January 29 that the US proposes to make both India and Pakistan sort of quasi, or associate, members of NATO in the fight on Terror under its desired new role extension to Asia and Africa.

That New Delhi seems to be angry at America for not informing it before US Secretary of State announced it in Islamabad - only a day after leaving Delhi. How does South Block failed to see that there was nothing new in the MNNA status except its nomenclature: Instead of non-full membership of NATO, it is called MNNA. The new title is more grandiloquent than the second grade NATO membership. Maybe it is a dilution of even the uncertain content of being nominally linked to the NATO, though the words Major and Ally may compensate for what is not involved in MNNA status. For, the vague

verbal impression of membership of NATO might have suggested a bit of liability by the Pact and its members. While sounding great, MNNA takes NATO right out of the picture, though it is mentioned. That is its beauty; may be Europeans abhorred the earlier idea.

Pakistan's supposed new ally status in War on Terror implies that in consideration of what the US would do for it, Pakistan will be required to do for the War whatever is in its power. Its contribution can

agreement pertained to only one threat to Pak security: from a Communist State.

This history needs to be remembered because, once again Pakistan military, the true suzerain of Pakistan, is entering into an obviously unequal relationship in which liabilities of a military nature are Pakistan's and the US is not obliged to do anything except to consider - not necessarily favourably - trading in its excess (read obsolescent) war material. As

exchanges for promoting education, sciences and technology - are an absolute necessity in this shrinking world. But one fact stands out: there are no free lunches; any aid received has to be paid for by promoting the donor's purposes. Pakistanis have shown their readiness to take any aid, no matter what the terms; should beware: only aid for economic construction that accelerates wealth production over calculated periods is justified so that repayment with interest becomes

Today power counts. America disposes a lot of it. So minor powers happily get attached to it for a consideration. But the honourable course is not to punch above one's height, nor to expect free lunches. A nation has to be content to reorganise its political and economic lives with a view to expanding the economy for providing decent incomes amidst more human freedoms. Fascination for power juggernauts should be resisted.

only be troops - to do policing or fighting anywhere needed in the open-ended War on Terror. For the US, liabilities are limited by its convenience and laws. For Pakistan legal penalties on the supply of military hardware and accessories are being removed. Pakistan will now be able to buy what is desired by Pakistan Army - subject to Pentagon's approval of each transaction. There is absolutely no commitment by the US toward Pak security; it has undertaken no new (treaty) obligation.

The Americans know that the Pak military always yearns for and welcomes a relationship with Pentagon no matter what the terms. It always says yes to all terms. There is a lot of bogus anti-Americanism around: Relying on 1959 Agreement attached to 1954 mutual security treaty, it has been sentimentally argued that the US did not come to Pakistan's defence in 1965 and 1971. The US had made it publicly clear soon after the 1959 accord was signed that it is an executive agreement and not a treaty. It did not call for America to rush to the defence of Pakistan, no matter from where the threat comes. The US had made it abundantly clear that the executive

in 1950s and 1960s, receipt of some military equipment creates such euphoria that finds an outlet in adventures against India. The voluminous propaganda of American untrustworthiness is a cover for the failure of imprudent policies.

To be fair, the US has never betrayed Pakistan; they have never been committed to defend Pakistan against India. It is Pakistani publicists who have evolved an elaborate alibi for the miscarriage of ill-conceived military adventures of 1965 and 1971. Pakistanis should understand that the US is offering a close military-to-military relationship with promises of aid and readiness to sell "some" military equipment and training for its own purposes. It has been gratefully accepted. The fear is that arms races, conventional and nuclear, with India are going to intensify and the present peace policy may falter. Everyone may be back to square one.

It is unwise for Pakistan either to annoy and provoke the hyper power or to be needlessly servile to it. A dignified distance from it is best. Today no nation can live in splendid isolation; it has to sell and buy goods to and from other countries; cultural

possible; none else is wise.

Pakistan should stop flirting with the US. Policies directed against US interests should of course be eschewed but getting too close to the hyper power can be undesirable. The US is obviously trying to be the sole dominant power over the globe. Europe largely comprises its friends and a few of them were once great powers. The Latin America poses no problem to Pentagon. Nor do Africa and Australasia, for different reasons. Only Asia is where the action is. But here there are five major powers abuilding: China, Japan, India and Australia; Russia is a special case. Major flashpoints are ME and North East Asia while Central Asia might become one. Logjammed South Asia, the Americans think, can be wrapped up and used by bestowing honourific titles.

Pakistan is already in the fold; it is being used at about a billion dollars a year. Islamabad has to answer some questions: War on Terror is acceptable in theory - provided terrorism can be so defined as to leave some scope for fighting tyranny and oppression. But are we at one with the US over the way it has fought Terror so far in Afghanistan and Iraq? Islamabad, being a

partner and major ally, has to show that US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq is only for the purpose of fighting terrorism and is not related to other US geo-strategic aims of global domination, eliminating threats to Israeli security, securing control over oil and key raw material everywhere else.

Is the US-dominated world acceptable to Pakistanis? Need we be accomplices, indeed bag carriers, of the great American push

But once such interlocking friendships in South Asia begin to take shape, various inter-state, and many intra-state, problems will begin to be solved. It is only in the context of a people-to-people friendship that nuclear and Kashmir problems can conceivably be solved.

Most governments in the region are manned by blue-blooded conservatives; most of them thrive on inter-state conflicts or intra-state polarizations or both. Their current politics does not sit well with all round reconciliation on non-racial, non-ethnic or non-religious bases. These aims are for the long haul and require a sustained humanistic politics that can rise above ethnicities that politicians exploit. There is a lot of work awaiting humanists to progressively achieve this necessary aim and save civilisation.

In terms of current international situation, the foregoing is too idealistic.

Today power counts. America disposes a lot of it. So minor powers happily get attached to it for a consideration. But the honourable course is not to punch above one's height, nor to expect free lunches. A nation has to be content to reorganise its political and economic lives with a view to expanding the economy for providing decent incomes amidst more human freedoms. Fascination for power juggernauts should be resisted. Being content with one's true independence in this turbulent world, despite some limitations, and standing on one's own economic legs, is the desired thing to do. Seeking favours from others for sustaining enmities with neighbours is the way of the foolhardy. If this is less than splendid isolation, so be it.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

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

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Can murder be justified?

The report on the killing of a BNP activist (March 31 issue) says the alleged killer was lynched by a mob.

It also says that the criminal had shot the activist twice to kill him, and he was chopped to death by the mob.

Though it has become frequent in our country, but isn't it unimaginable that people are actually being chopped to death? A few days ago a Dhaka University professor was subjected to such an attack. We have also heard about a businessman and his son being chopped into pieces. It actually took me a while to make myself believe that some ruthless people are really chopping fellow human beings with *chapatli* or such weapons, when I

first heard something like that. But in this case, it is a criminal who has been chopped to death. Maybe for this reason it will be seen as 'right action' by some viewers. But does it really matter who or how bad the person was? The way he was murdered does leave a lot of question in our minds. Do you really have to chop someone into pieces to kill him? We, despite being the best living creatures in the universe, are committing such inhuman acts, and nothing is stopping us from doing such things.

Is there really no way to stop these acts? I would suggest that licenses be issued for keeping sharp weapons, and use of these things should be prohibited for general people other than butchers.

John

Our politicians

The letter by Mr. Abdad Khan, How to be popular, April 6, 2004, is a cry in the wilderness, as our politicians remain out of our sight leaving our election aspirations out of their mind. Yet, I take the opportunity to endorse the views of Mr. Khan very strongly urging the party in power to honour its election commitment and speed up the construction of the gas pipeline to the northern zone, besides removing the road obstacles even at the inter-district level as between Bogra and Joypurhat.

I also endorse empowerment of the Dhaka city commissioners to look into our problems without interference from the mayor and the

ministry. Any computerised system can detect any misdoing by the responsible person as focused by Mr. Khan.

I expect the ruling party to take the rare chance of demonstrating its sincerity in fulfilling the hopes of the people.

Abdullahel Mahmood
Uttara Model Town, Dhaka

Gulshan 1, 2 circles

I don't know who are responsible for removal of Gulshan 1 and 2 circles. One can easily see that it has worsened traffic movement by at least 200 percent.

Did they perform any feasibility study before they decided to remove the circles? I don't understand what sort of engineers the government has!

MA Siddique

Islamic University of Technology (IUT), Dhaka

Convicted for life

According to a news item from Sathkhira [DS, April 6], a young man and his younger sister were sentenced to suffer RI for life as they were found with 60 bottles of Phensidyl. No doubt, such punishments will deter other aspirants in the trade. However, out of curiosity, I would like to know about their age, network and volume of their business, vis-à-vis their real source of livelihood. As we know, thousands of such bottles were recovered in the past and Phensidyl is being consumed by our youth quite unabatedly, destroying the future of many families. I would like to know about the punishments so far pronounced in larger hauls.

Were the convicts (of this case) the masterminds or chief operators or mere distributors/suppliers?

I think, for the sake of transparency, these details should be made public. Otherwise, it may appear that punishment is for the poor people only.

MA
On e-mail

Ammo haul

We have seen the biggest ever ammo haul in the country. Unlike the previous cases of ammo haul where sheer luck smiled upon them, here police had a 'tip off'. Now as the CUFIL security men have divulged the other side of the story, this 'tip off' is ripping off police credibility.

Mud slinging has already started. The government is as usual voicing its concern over a possible sabotage masterminded by the

opposition and the opposition is finding government involvement in it, albeit the investigation has just started.

While the political parties will be busy in the blame game, the kinglys will go scot-free. How long will we see the same drama over and over again?

Joy
Dhaka

Banish hartal or perish

I agree with your writer MU Ahmed (DS April, 05) that hartal must be banned as it is suicidal. We neither can commit suicide, nor can persuade others to do so.

In the name of democratic rights, the political parties have been going on the rampage through calling hartals right and left, caring less for your life or my business. As no other country in this modern world makes

such use of such a right, it is time to question the legality of hartal.

Yes, it's time for our business representative bodies led by the FBCCI to come out on the streets and lead the movement to resist hartal -- we can no longer afford to sit in the committee rooms, condemn calling of hartals and release resolutions against such activities. We have to take positive action and for the sake of our existence urge all the shops and commercial establishments to keep open their shutters and do normal activities during a hartal.

If in the name of democratic rights, someone can call a hartal, trade bodies/forums can oppose hartals and do what's required. Don't forget three valuable days of the week will be lost because of hartal.

AF Rahman
On e-mail