

Payment default by MPs

An unethical, irresponsible act

MEMBERS of parliament have expressed their indignation at the placing of a list of MPs who defaulted on payment of telephone bills before the parliament by the T&T minister. They have termed the list 'erroneous' and have also demanded action against the T&T officials responsible for preparing it. They levelled allegations of 'overbilling' and 'ghost billing' against the T&T Board which need not, however, dilute the principal fact of the huge default piling over the years since the first parliament. It is not clear, though, what wrong the officials concerned did by bringing up the basic issue of non-payment of bills.

The fact remains that they did not pay a staggering Tk 8.61 crore over a long period of time. And, that has happened despite the MPs having received a monthly allowance, once revised upwards, to pay the telephone bills. If the allowance is still not enough, then we will have to deal with it as an issue delinked from the huge arrear charges which must be paid for. Some are now reportedly asking for 'free telephone', whatever that means! But didn't the allowance mean maintaining a telephone free of personal cost?

So, it is not a simple matter of who paid the bills and who did not. What is at issue is that a large number of lawmakers did not feel it necessary to clear the telephone bills in time, which actually amounted to violation of the law. It is also morally indefensible since they had drawn the allowance. People in general cannot usually get away with non-payment of telephone bills for more than three months, as the T&T authorities snap the connections of the defaulters. But the MPs did not face any such action, though in their cases the nature and quantum of default have been far more serious. Payment of utility bills is an area where nobody, irrespective of his position and influence, should enjoy immunity.

When the MPs flunk on telephone bills, what message would it convey to people other than an abuse of position by elected public representatives of the highest category? Moreover, will it not further encourage default culture in various sectors?

Crisis at Shahjalal University

Collusive role by JCD elements and police wreaks havoc

THE injured general students and teachers of Shahjalal Science and Technology University in Sylhet have fallen victim to a devious nexus between the police and the student wing of ruling BNP. Newspaper reports on Monday's incidents bore testimony to the sordid fact. The attacks by them on general students could only give one signal -- no one should dare protest any crime committed by Chhatra Dal activists in the campus. The general students and some teachers were only demonstrating peacefully after the news of a student having been beaten up by some Chhatra Dal activists had spread like wild fire. To top it all, it was even said that Chhatra Dal activists made the ill-fated student sign a paper absolving that they had any hand in beating him.

Actually, the general students and the teaching community were outraged by a rape incident and the activities of the rapist's associates on the campus.

The angry students along with some teachers were only demanding justice by staging a sit-in demonstration in front of the Vice Chancellor's office. The Chhatra Dal activists led by their seniors had no right to pound on the protesting general students. They even tried to scare them off by firing a few rounds of blank shots in front of the police force deployed there. The ordeal of the students did not end there -- even the police chased them afterwards and beat them up. Even the female students were not spared.

Police has to answer a few questions. Why did they turn a blind eye when the Chhatra Dal activists fired blank shots and attacked the students? It now devolves on the government to remove the palpable impression that unhealthy collusion between the state power and the student wing muscle power is causing havoc to the academic life at the Shahjalal University. We strongly condemn such cohabitation between policemen and JCD activists to gag the voice of protest in the campus. We hope the authorities will play a decisive role in resolving the crisis before it aggravates to a point of irresolution.

DR. M. ATAUR RAHMAN

MORE than two-millen-nium ago, the great political thinker, Aristotle, remarked that politics is 'the art of possible'. Echoing the same theme in a very changed context, the famous political scientist of our time, Samuel Huntington in his notable work, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, argued that the success of democratisation could only be achieved through "negotiations, compromise and agreements". If we look at the brief history of Bangladesh democracy, we find that this was made possible when our political leaders could forge a unity against the authoritarian rule in 1990, were able to come to a consensus on parliamentary system of government in 1991, and could devise a 'caretaker' government to make peaceful transitions of power through free and fair elections in 1996 and 2001.

'The Time is Now' for Bangladesh to consolidate its fledgling democracy through the art of compromise. This needs to be done by the political leaders in government and opposition who have the courage to break the current confrontational politics by subordinating their immediate interests to the long-term needs of democracy. Today, political leaders of all parties, particularly the major ones -- Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami, Jatiya Party and other left, right and centrist parties should withstand the provocations to violence, and conduct politics by peaceful means. They should have the wisdom to recognise that in politics no one has the monopoly of truth or virtue. Political leaders in Bangladesh need to evolve a deliberative

democracy through a non-violent method of dialogue, negotiations, compromise, and if necessary, written agreements on contentious issues.

If we look at some of the successful democracies, we can take lessons from many countries across the world where the leaders of key political forces and social groups in society bargained with each other, and worked out accept-

oposition who have the wisdom to negotiate and compromise. The creation of trust in inter-party relations is, therefore, vital at this stage of Bangladesh's democratisation. In fact, the inter-party relations must take on new routes of cooperation, exchange and mutuality of interests.

Obstacles to compromise, and measures to over-

Today, the two top political leaders of Bangladesh have to show real courage of their leadership -- to sit on the same table and resolve conflicts -- both perceptual as well as substantive for the good of the nation and for the sake of democracy. Tolerance and inclusion are the keywords for the success of democratisation in Bangladesh. The people do not want to end up with 'One-Party Rule' or 'Other Unconstitutional' alternative again ostensibly for the arrogance, intransigence and parochial interests of their highest political leaders.

able, if not fully satisfying, arrangements for the success of democratisation. In many South American and Eastern European countries, like Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Poland, Hungary, leaders of government and opposition political parties arrived at agreements for transition as well as consolidation of democratic systems. In Bangladesh, we now seem to have entered a new phase of democratic governance where structural features of our societies, cultural constraints or economic variables are less important. The more important aspect of politics is how can the political leaders and institutions of governance meet the minimum expectations of the people. Bangladesh now must deal with the "values and processes" that are needed for the consolidation of democracy.

These can only be made by the methods of democracy, and by the political leaders in government and

governing party also contributes to the current crisis. The members of the Parliament are new leaders of the democratic era. If the Parliament becomes a 'wasted' forum for words and meaningless controversies, the environment for negotiation and compromise are difficult to achieve on substantive issues of public policies. The 'winners take all' attitude should be replaced by 'sharing and positive-sum attitude'. In fact, all the MPs irrespective of party affiliations should be given opportunities for leadership roles and necessary resource allocations for the improvement of their constituencies and various ministries on which they perform oversight functions.

The leadership of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in a parliamentary system of government is crucial in determining how the system will work. Their

leadership depends mainly on engaging, mobilising and inspiring their party leaders, members of the Parliament and workers to perform and cultivate trust of the people.

The offices of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House should be the places for new ideas, thoughts and best practices for the good of the people, not to be used only to gain or consolidate power for personal glory and party inter-

ests. Democratic consolidation requires some kind of agreement among the major parties on the 'rules of the game'. Thus, notwithstanding the working and operation of a competitive political system for more than a decade, the task of consolidating the nascent democratic system remains extremely difficult.

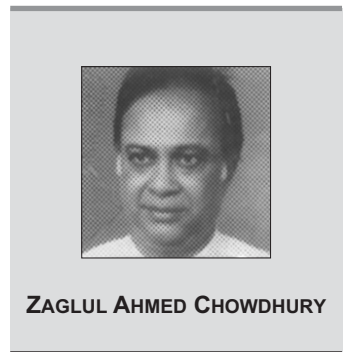
One of the main reasons is the failure of the top politicians to evolve any stable pattern of the 'rules of the game'. The two parties have alternated in state power since the restoration of democratic rule in the early 1990s. There has been, however, little communication between the highest leadership of the two parties. Both, in fact, look upon each other as adversaries; one tries to prosper at the expense of the other. The two top leaders do not speak to one another; nor is there any meaningful interaction between them. This negative political culture has to be

changed in favour of a positive and functional, if not cordial, relational culture.

Today, the two top political leaders of Bangladesh have to show real courage of their leadership -- to sit on the same table and resolve conflicts -- both perceptual as well as substantive for the good of the nation and for the sake of democracy. Tolerance and inclusion are the keywords for the success of democratisation in Bangladesh. The people do not want to end up with 'One-Party Rule' or 'Other Unconstitutional' alternative again ostensibly for the arrogance, intransigence and parochial interests of their highest political leaders. It is a hopeful sign that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has recently extended her invitation to the Leader of Opposition Sheikh Hasina for a genuine dialogue to resolve conflicts. It is expected that she should respond positively to the invitation in order to assume new roles and new behaviours, more tolerant and performing for the nation. Let us hope that a new democratic politics will emerge in Bangladesh on new meaning and significance by the two top leaders through their sense of responsibility and commitment to the nation leaving behind the old prejudices, enmity and bitterness.

Dr. M. Ataur Rahman is Professor of Political Science, Dhaka University and President, Bangladesh Political Science Association

Will the leftfront be able to maintain ascendancy in West Bengal?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THIRD phase of the Indian elections has been completed and the rest two phases will be over by May 10. For Bangladesh, the adjacent Indian state of West Bengal occupies extra importance and interest for obvious reasons. The state is yet to vote for 42 seats of the federal parliament (lower house of Lok Sabha) and many eyes are fixed on the balloting in a state, well-known for its political maturity and sagacity. Noted Indian politician in the British days Gokhale had said 'what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India tomorrow'. The proverbial dictum may not be taken lightly even today since West Bengal has produced a number of illustrious sons and daughters before and after Indian independence. Bangladesh, initially as the eastern wing of the erstwhile Pakistan and later as a sovereign country has its own history as part of former Bengal. West Bengal as an important state of the Indian federation has always been in the forefront of nation's activities. It is going to the polls in last phase to send 42 members in the 543-member Lok Sabha that will be constituted through elections and a new government will come up in the largest democracy.

In sharp contrast to the typical milieu of the Indian political landscape, West Bengal is ruled by such political forces which hardly enjoy a national image since these parties are restricted mainly in three of the 28 states and their citadel is clearly West Bengal for many years. Two other states where they have considerable influence are southern Kerala and tiny north-eastern Tripura which sends only two mem-

bers of the NDA government in the country, has scant presence in this state but it made some inroads through an alliance with the Trinamul, which is a breakaway party from the main Congress and is in existence only in West Bengal. Can the leftists withstand the onslaught of two hostile forces in the state since both are sparing no efforts to diminish the "communist myth" here?

has voluntarily retired from office but not from politics as the nonagenarian leader is still active in campaigning for the front.

In the Congress side, veterans include ABA Ghani Khan Chowdhury, who has been winning from Malda every time, and Pranab Mukherjee -- both were senior ministers of India during Congress rule -- and also Priya Ranjan Das Munshi. In the

drafted several film stars and singers like Dharmendra and Bhupen Hazarika to seek election from other states. The leftfront, which is otherwise close to Congress in national politics compared to the BJP and Congress in West Bengal as a foe as much as it views the BJP and the Trinamul. Electioneering has reached a crescendo in West Bengal as all the three contenders are engaged in a feverish pitch to enhance their political strength in the state known for its intellectual and political farsightedness.

The Trinamul is strong in the urban areas, mainly Kolkata, where it counts on most of the seats. The Congress may pick up one or two from Kolkata and looks to its well-known leaders for success. The leftists depend on the rural areas where despite being in power in the state for many years and many failures notwithstanding, their image has not taken a bad beating, because of sincerity of purpose. Still they are fighting a tough battle to retain the ascendancy in their citadel and probably they can do it in the manner they did in the last state assembly polls. Smaller parties generally are not that important in national context but can hold the sway in the event of a hung parliament or when political situation is in a flux. Former chief minister Jyoti Basu, although not a player at national level as such despite his towering image, had once come close to becoming prime minister of India but he had to decline as his party did not approve of. West Bengal politics has its own charm and complexity in the Indian scene.

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MATTERS AROUND US

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West Bengal was basically a bastion for Congress when such notable leaders like Dr. BC Roy, SS Ray and Ajay Kumar Mukherjee had distinguished themselves as able chief ministers. Ajay Mukherjee, however, had formed the "Bangla Congress" parting away with the mainstream. But the emergence of the communists like the CPM and CPI with greater strength in the state changed the pattern of rule and there was no looking back for the leftists. In the federal parliament too the leftists had some well-known lawmakers like Inderjit Gupta and Bhupesh Gupta of CPI and Jyotirmoy Basu of the CPM, all of whom have passed away. Among the veterans there still are elderly Somnath Chatterjee, who is again contesting this time and the legendary Jyoti Basu, who was the chief minister for more than two decades,

Trinamul, apart from its mercurial leader Mamta Banerjee, former state minister for external affairs Ajit Panja and city mayor Subrata Mukherjee are in the fray. BJP has leaders like Tapan Sikdar, central state minister. Mamta's secular credential is coming under criticism from both Congress and leftfront for her alliance with the BJP.

The election scenario in West Bengal is somewhat different from rest of the Indian states as in most of the important states it is the BJP and Congress or the alliances led by them are fighting each other. In some states secular parties are supporting the Congress while the BJP, known for reflecting the views of Hindu nationalism, has support of both communal as well as some secular forces. In West Bengal, the fight is basically between the leftfront and the Trinamul supported

topple the leftists from power in the state and most opinion polls predicted good showing by the Trinamul-Congress alliance but in reality it was the leftists which romped home quite easily. The honeymoon between Trinamul and Congress did not last much and now they are pitted against each other. But for both, the main opponent are the leftists who control most of the Lok Sabha seats from here. Congress has brought in some celebrities like former Miss India and social worker Nafisa Ali and film actress Moushumi Chatterjee to contest from two Kolkata city constituencies. Undeterred by this, Mamta Banerjee, known for her simple living, says introduction of such people will not help change the electoral fortune of the Congress.

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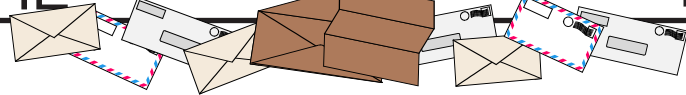
should take place at the International Court of Justice at The Hague. The UN this time must deal with matters with extreme resilience and courage. Let no super-power(s) call it "irrelevant" ever again. And if things do not go the right way based on the principles that the UN stands for, the Secretary General may go the extent of choosing the path of "resignation". After all, what more has he to lose? He has achieved all that an individual can hope and aspire for in a lifetime.

Shamsher Chowdhury
Dhaka

Greatest Bengalees
I couldn't help but respond to Mr. Mehbub's letter titled, "Where is the martyr of 1757?" which was published on April 23.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

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.

Limited sovereignty for Iraq

Sovereignty to the new Iraqi interim government will be handed over by June 30. An announcement has been made in this regard that it will have limited sovereignty. But why? In the past it was declared that Iraq would get back total sovereignty; but the Americans have changed their strategy. The Geneva Convention (treaty) is for humane treatment of the POWs, but in Iraq war they (the USA authorities) themselves didn't obey it.

I think the promise of sovereignty is another trap laid by Washington for the beleaguered people of Iraq.
Md. Arifur Islam
Electrical engineering

Rallies blocking roads

Two photographs were published in your April 20 issue, one of the JCD gathering at Muktangan and the other of an Awami League rally in front of its office on the Bangabandhu Avenue. In the caption of the BNP gathering, it was written, "The BNP student front is holding a rally on a busy road near Muktangan in violation of a ban on such gatherings" although Muktangan is earmarked for meetings. On the other hand, in the caption of the Awami League's gathering nothing was mentioned about the blocking of the busy road.

What does it mean? Doesn't this indicate that The Daily Star, popular to its thousands of readers spread out globally for its neutral role, is not being objective?

Fakhrul Alam

Siddeswari, Dhaka

About mobile phone

Now-a-days, the mobile phone has become a part and parcel of our day to day life. No doubt, it's a very useful device which has conquered time and distance. But it's a matter of great regret that the mobile phone service providers in our country are neglecting the greater interest of their subscribers. They are charging call rates at their will. It seems that nobody is monitoring this.

Not only they charge high but also their service is very poor. In our neighbouring countries, mobile call charge is very reasonable, not to mention about the quality service.
Nazmus Saquib
Mayakanan, Dhaka

Family values

Joint family is considered to be one of our cultural heritage. But it is breaking down gradually because young couples now opt to live apart for different reasons. Though the tradition of joint family is the symbol of moral, physical and economic support, it is losing its appeal mainly because of differences in values, attitudes and abilities between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws.

The issues of household rights, desires and gains between mother and daughter in laws cause the split of joint family. There are still many old fashioned women who have little tolerance. They measure their sons' wives against their standards and try to get them hurt by words if anything goes wrong. Similarly, some girls are self-centred and insolent, having the tendency of ignoring

in-laws.

But it has to be admitted that today's girls are more educated and independent-minded than their mothers and grandmothers. The mothers should understand the situation and accept the fact that the world has changed and there are few takers of the values that they still nurture with great care.

Rubak Abdullah

Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

UN role in Iraq

This refers to your editorial "Bush Blair turn to UN" published on 23 April. The write-up was timely, well thought out and to the point. For the nations which believe in democratic principles and have faith in the only international organisation of its kind, the UN, the fact remains that working out

and playing the pivotal role in Iraq will not be easy for the world body. There are three core issues, among others, which the UN should seriously look into before it actually lands itself in Iraq. First, the role of the Coalition forces visa-a-vis the role of the UN (peace keeping forces), namely their joint and separate responsibilities. Second, the formation of the Interim Government. It must be different and away in style and content from those of the present Governing Council, which is largely viewed both by the Iraqis as well as the world community as a stooge of the Americans. In forming the new interim government, special attention should be given to people from within the country more than the returnees from exile. Third, the trial of Saddam

should take place at the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

The UN this time must deal with matters with extreme resilience and courage. Let no super-power(s) call it "irrelevant" ever again. And if things do not go the right way based on the principles that the UN stands for, the Secretary General may go the extent of choosing the path of "resignation". After all, what more has he to lose? He has achieved all that an individual can hope and aspire for in a lifetime.

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Dhaka

Greatest Bengalees

I couldn't help but respond to Mr. Mehbub's letter titled, "Where is the martyr of 1757?" which was published on April 23.

In his letter, Mr. Mehbub expresses his surprise at not seeing the name of Sirajuddowla on the BBC list of top 20 greatest Bengalees.

Without getting into a lengthy discussion, I'll simply give him two reasons why Sirajuddowla was not and/or should not be included in a list of 20 greatest Bengalees: 1. Sirajuddowla was not even a Bengalee to start with. He was an Urdu speaking ruler of a predominantly Bengali-speaking subject. 2. BBC did not pick the names for the list of 20 greatest Bengalees. It simply compiled the list based on surveys conducted among its listeners.

It is the listeners that picked the names for the list and it is they who left Sirajuddowla out, and very much justifiably so.
Hasibur Rahman