

Educational institution under lock and key

This atrocious practice must cease

IT is disquieting as well as scandalous to see a prime educational institution of the country shut down by a segment of the students of the same institution.

Not only has the Chhatra Shibir called indefinite strike at the Chittagong Medical College, it has also put the college under lock and key. And all because it did not agree with the election schedule of the college students' council announced by the college authority. No one can condone students putting educational institution under lock and key for whatever reasons. All those who have the students' interest at heart must condemn such acts.

It is all the more preposterous when one considers the fact that the whole episode has been brought about as result of a clash between the students' wings of the coalition partners, the Chhatra Dal and Chhatra Shibir. Shibir contends that the election schedule clashes with the exam schedule which will unsettle the students appearing in the exam, while the Dal's argument is that exams are a year round feature and would clash with the election programme whenever held.

We can see that there is a sudden spurt of campus violence and vitiation of academic atmosphere after a period of relative lull. And most of the violence is due to confrontation between student wings of the ruling coalition partners. It is resetting a dangerous trend.

Majority of the students of the higher seats of learning are serious in the pursuit of their studies but have suffered due to disruption in their education calendar caused by clashes between groups that are propped up primarily by the support of the major political parties.

We would like to hope that the government would take prompt steps to reopen Chittagong Medical College. No one has the right to play with the future of the common students, and more so since the parties involved in the confrontation causing the forced shutdown belong to the ruling coalition.

A self-demeaning remark

Minister overshoots humour threshold

IN the business world colloquy, we often hear the words money speaks as something of a wisecrack essentially conveying the power of money. But this, in a positive sense, without any touch of servility about it. It's not a pejorative. All that the saying implies is that given more money, the recipient will be enthused to put in more work, be more productive. It is thus that one is conversant with a link between money and speaking, but here we are now -- thanks to Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman -- confronted with an improvised version of a perceived nexus between more money and more listening!

The minister on Monday, it is learnt, told the Japanese and British donors who had assembled to announce a joint funding policy for Bangladesh that the latter would be prepared to listen more to the development partners' exhortations were they to increase their levels of assistance. For he feels that donors advise Bangladesh a lot but provide less assistance.

Saifur Rahman is known for candour and occasional good-humoured railery, but there is obviously nothing light-hearted about what he has uttered in the present case. In the first place, there is a bit of doublespeak here in that the minister did occasionally berate 'donor dictates' in the past but now he indicates that he wouldn't mind listening to more donor advice if this was preceded by a stepped up inflow of assistance.

To our mind, a good piece of advice should be welcomed and heeded regardless of who gave it -- a multilateral international agency, a donor country, big or small, the civil society in the country including private sector experts, or the media, for that matter. The quality or the impelling nature of an advice, or indeed, a critique, has nothing to do with money.

How much we wish the minister hadn't made those unprincipled, unconscionable and self-demeaning remarks that couldn't have put a shine on the image of the country.

Foreign aid, policy reforms, and accountability



AMM SHAWKAT ALI

THE Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) organised a round table discussion on December 7. It was attended by practitioners, academics, politicians, and representatives from the World Bank (WB). The discussion session was chaired by Professor Rehman Sobhan, known for his candid views about the need to reduce dependence on foreign aid. The theme is an old one and can be traced back to the first five year plan (FFYP) of Bangladesh to which Professor Sobhan contributed along with his other colleagues, in the then planning commission. The main theme of the dialogue was foreign aid and policy reforms.

FFYP

The FFYP was prepared within one and a half years of the birth of Bangladesh. The government then was in its early stage of formation. It was primarily beset with the problem of rehabilitating a war-ravaged economy. The FFYP had, as one of its major objectives, reduction in the dependence on foreign aid over time through expansion of exports and substitution of imports.

Viewed from this perspective, the theme of the roundtable referred to, is an age-old theme. The FFYP got off to a difficult start because of global inflation and depression in the leading world economies. The target set in FFYP was to reduce dependence on foreign aid from 62.2 percent in 1973-74 to 27 percent in

the terminal year. In reality, aid dependence increased so much that foreign capital inflow financed about 81 percent of development outlay by the end of the period.

Refrain on aid dependence

Since the FFYP, the refrain on aid dependence continued. The two-year plan (TYP) had, as one of its objectives, reduction of dependence on foreign aid in financing the development programmes in line

statements, are likely to be available. Viewed in this context, the issue raised by CPD is well-timed. In fact, the outcome of the roundtable, as reported in the press, indicates that although our dependence on foreign aid has been reduced, the strings attached to aid have increased. These strings mostly relate to reforms in various sectors of the economy. On this issue, divergent views appear to have been articulated at the roundtable.

particular fertilizers and small irrigation equipment, during the late eighties and early nineties. This was done at a time when other South Asian countries, also recipients of foreign aid, declined to do so. This was done under different aided projects like Fertilizer Distribution Improvement Phases I & II funded by USAID, Food Crop Development Programme Loan funded by ADB, and National Minor Irrigation and Agriculture Support Services

competitiveness, it would be necessary to provide subsidy to irrigation, because in other grain exporting countries there was subsidy that added to their competitiveness.

At the other end, the WTO allows LDCs to provide subsidy upto 10 percent of the total crop value. Experts from BIDS calculated that it was not even three percent while developed countries did not remove subsidy. Although the four-party

from the statement is the point of whether institutional reforms will also include conditions on policy reforms.

Private sector and reform measures

A leading industrialist from the private sector told the roundtable that in spite of policies, there were difficulties in implementation which hurt the private sector development. The point made is well-taken. Some of the newspaper columns indicate that many of the incentives for export promised in the budget speech of the finance minister are yet to reach the beneficiaries.

Accountability of the government and the donors

Exhortations are often made by the aid-giving agencies that there must be accountability for all actions of the government. The point is well-taken, but the mechanism of accountability by the government is well laid down in the constitution. At the same time, it has to be recognised that accountability of the executive organ of the state remains weak at best and nearly absent at worst. There is need for an independent mid-term review of the impact of donor-assisted projects in such areas as parliament and the judiciary.

What about the donors? The question is if ill-conceived policies or institutional reforms are imposed leading to negative outcomes, to whom are the donors accountable? And they are asking for immunity from the law of the land in which they are working. Should it not be a top agenda for policy and institutional reforms within the donor community to recognise the substantive principle that everyone should be accountable?

AMM Shawkat Ali, PhD, is a former Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture.

WORTH A LOOK

What about the donors? The question is if ill-conceived policies or institutional reforms are imposed leading to negative outcomes, to whom are the donors accountable? And they are asking for immunity from the law of the land in which they are working. Should it not be a top agenda for policy and institutional reforms within the donor community to recognise the substantive principle that everyone should be accountable?

The views

A former finance minister held the view that many of the reform measures undertaken by the government from time to time were under pressure from the aid giving countries/agencies. It was further pointed out by him that although some successes could be achieved, failures were many.

The newspapers report did not provide details about the failures and in what way these were harmful to our interests, or alternatively, whether it was the Bangladesh government's failure to effect donor-induced reform measures that caused harm to the economy. It is the latter aspect that the aid giving agencies appear to continuously harp on. Is it possible to prepare a balance sheet of the reform measures including revisiting the reform programmes, which, with faulty design, caused more harm than good?

Example of agriculture subsidy

Bangladesh agreed to the removal of subsidy on agricultural inputs, in

projects funded by WB. All the major donors, as mentioned above, attached identical conditions for effectiveness of aid disbursement.

The then chairman of BADC fought a losing battle on the issue of abrupt withdrawal of public sector support to minor irrigation. He similarly lost on the question of maintaining buffer stock of fertilizer at public cost to meet any unforeseen shortfall in supply, specially in the northwest. In case of buffer stock of fertilizer, at least two government constituted committees consisting of experts recommended maintaining buffer stock, but that was not done until after the fertilizer crisis of 1995. In case of minor irrigation, at the insistence of the then chairman of BADC, a three-member team visited the state of West Bengal. The team reported that there was subsidy in minor irrigation even under WB aided projects. But the government of the day yielded to pressures.

Now after the lapse of a decade, we are talking of external competitiveness. A dialogue arranged by CPD pointed out that to achieve this

coalition government announced subsidy on fertilizers and irrigation, farmers are yet to get it.

A former finance secretary told the roundtable that many times the government had agreed to aid effectiveness conditions knowing full well that the conditions could not be fulfilled. Examples of such cases include jute sector adjustment credit project supported by the WB. The credit had to be cancelled. Industrial sector adjustment credit funded by ADB is another example. Examples like this only point out that the objective is to get access to funds. It is seen as an end in itself and not as a means to achieve what needs to be achieved.

View from WB

The country director of the WB, as reported in the press, expressed the view that now the stress is not so much on policy reforms, but on institutional reforms. What has been left unsaid is that in stressing on policy reforms in the past, the aid givers have put the cart before the horse so that there was no movement or progress. Equally missing

The flattening of Fallujah

DR FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

THE celebrated American novelist of the nineteenth century and the author of "Moby Dick," Herman Melville, wrote in "Typee": "The fiendlike skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth..." Melville might as well have been talking about what happened in Fallujah.

The editorial and the opinion editor of *The Los Angeles Times*, Michael Kinsley, wrote an article in *The Washington Post* on November 21, entitled "It Hurts, but Don't Stop," in which he said: "Has there ever before been a war that so many people disapproved of but so few wanted to stop? Have the reasons for starting a war ever been so thoroughly discredited without turning into reasons for ending it?"

The Vietnam-era antiwar movement had an agenda: Bring the troops home. Or, in two words -- suitable for a picket sign or a T-shirt -- "Out now." ("Out," children, meant something different back then, but liberals were in favour of it just the same.) What seems to be today's antiwar position -- it was a terrible mistake and it's a terrible mess, but we can't just walk away from it -- was actually the pro-war position during the Vietnam era. In fact, it was close to official government policy for more than half the length of that war.

Today's antiwar cause doesn't even have a movement to speak of, let alone an agenda. It consists of perhaps 47 percent of the citizenry -- the ones who voted for John Kerry --

who are in some kind of existential opposition to the war but aren't doing much about it and aren't very clear about what they would like to see happen. Meanwhile, American soldiers die by the hundreds and Iraqis -- military and civilian -- by the thousands in a cause these people (and I'm one of them) believe to be a horrible mistake.

Kerry spent months untangling the knots of his Iraq position while tangling new ones even faster. He pounded George W. Bush over the phantom weapons of mass destruc-

tion end now.

Kerry's studiously confused position was not, or not just, a politician's stratagem. It was an accurate reflection of the views of his constituency. Most of them deplore the war, but only a tiny fraction favour an immediate pullout. Anyone who opposes the war but isn't ready to demand peace needs to answer the question "Why on Earth not?"

There are answers, possibly even adequate answers. But none of them shines with the kind of obvious truth that makes the question unneces-

sary to ask. The answer is that the alleged policy of that puyever of pywpare that "if you break it, you own it." In fact, Pottery Barn's breakage policy is much kinder and gentler than that. But it's certainly true that a well-brought-up foreign policy doesn't occupy a country, wreck it and move on like a rock band checking out of a hotel room. The question is whether we're actually helping to tidy up or only making a bigger mess.

The lead headline in last Monday's *Los Angeles Times* was "Iraqi City Lies in Ruins." That would be

save it (progress!), but our capacity to find that sort of thing ironic seems to have become shriveled and harmless," Kinsley concludes.

So, the killing of the Iraqis goes on unabated. According to "The Lancet," the London-based medical journal, at least 100,000 Iraqis and perhaps many more, have died as a result of invasion of Iraq. (About 1276 American soldiers have died so far in Iraq.) Among the Iraqis, the risk of death by violence is 58 times greater now than before the invasion, and

This is not good for America. The Islamic world is not a single country like Germany, Japan or Vietnam. There are more than fifty Muslim-majority nations in the world; even non-Muslim majority nations such as China and India have more than 50 and 130 million Muslims respectively. The fact that a born-again Christian, President Bush, and his Evangelical Christian supporters often couch their "war on terror" against Muslims in religious terms, does not go down well in the Islamic world. It reminds the Muslims of the Christian Crusades against Muslims of the 11th century. Unless Mr. Bush plans to occupy and "pacify" all Muslim nations, occupying two Muslim nations will only infuriate the rest.

Unlike the run up to the US presidential election last November, Mr. Bush cannot fool and win over the world's Muslims through negative television commercials (such as, "America good, insurgents bad!"). In the Islamic world Mr. Bush is judged by his deeds, not his words. And his deeds have not been good. No Muslim country has ever attacked America. Muslims are wondering: why is the US attacking us? Through the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq for the stated goal of promoting freedom and installing democracy, President Bush has transformed "freedom" and "democracy" into bad words. Muslims are wondering: if "freedom" and "democracy" are a panacea for what ails the Muslim world, why do hundreds of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilians have to be killed before "freedom" and "democracy" can be installed in Afghanistan and Iraq? To the Muslims, "freedom" and "democracy" look more like a façade for western aggression against them with a view to stealing their oil and helping Israel.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

President Bush has transformed "freedom" and "democracy" into bad words. Muslims are wondering: if "freedom" and "democracy" are a panacea for what ails the Muslim world, why do hundreds of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilians have to be killed before "freedom" and "democracy" can be installed in Afghanistan and Iraq? To the Muslims, "freedom" and "democracy" look more like a façade for western aggression against them with a view to stealing their oil and helping Israel.

tion and he mocked Bush's confusion of Osama bin Laden with Saddam Hussein. Kerry said that Bush's invasion of Iraq was "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." So was he in favour of ending it? No, his position was that he would try, but not promise, to bring the troops home in four years. Four years! American involvement in World War II lasted 3 1/2. Bush had a good point when he wondered how, as commander in chief, Kerry could ask American soldiers to die for the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. Of course, that problem does not vindicate Bush's belief that Iraq II is the right war in the right etc. But Bush's apparently sincere belief -- protected from all the winds of reality that contradict it -- does relieve him from needing to explain why he doesn't want the war

sary, let alone uninteresting, which is how it is being treated. The answers fall in two categories, each associated with a secretary of state.

The Henry Kissinger answer is, in a word, credibility. A superpower that announces a goal and gives up without achieving it will not be super for long. In the end, Nixon and Kissinger added five years to the length of the Vietnam War, and we lost it anyway. Did that add to our superpower credibility? Well, maybe. In the Kissingerian world of high strategy, a reputation for pig-headed stupidity can be almost as valuable as a reputation for wise persistence. What could be more credible than a reputation for staying the course no matter how disastrous it turns out to be?

The Colin Powell answer goes by the nickname "Pottery Barn," refer-

Fallujah, a metro area of 300,000 people that many Americans had never heard of until we felt impelled to destroy it. And our reasons were neither trivial nor contemptible. They followed with confident logic from the premise that Saddam Hussein was an intolerable danger to the United States. If so, he had to be taken down. And if that destabilised the country, we had to occupy it for a while and calm it down. And you can't run a national occupation with rebels occupying a major city, so you have to besiege the city and kill a lot of people and leave the place "in ruins."

An American general in Vietnam famously said, "We had to destroy the village to save it." This has become the definitive expression of the macabre futility of war. Last week we destroyed an entire city to

infant mortality is double, according to "The Lancet." Of course none of these seem to bother President Bush or his Zionist Jewish neocon warmongers. Listening to them it appears as though there are no Iraqis in Iraq, only "insurgents," "terrorists" and "foreign fighters." American press has become so docile that they do not question official claims anymore. One routinely finds bold headlines such as, "US kills 1000 insurgents in Fallujah," as though the bombs are so smart that they can divine and kill exactly 1000 "insurgents" while leaving civilians in the vicinity unharmed! What President Bush does not realise is that he and his father are fast acquiring a bad reputation as Muslim-killers in the Islamic world.

OPINION

Frequent amendment is not graceful but ...

MAHBUB KAMAL

I have gone through the write up 'Reform the caretaker government law before the next general election' by Shah A M S Kibria MP and also the rejoinder to it by Justice Latifur Rahman in the Daily Star on November 23 and December 2, 2004 respectively. However, Justice Latifur Rahman did not say anything on the issue of reform of caretaker government put forward by Mr. Kibria, nor he felt any necessity of reforming it. He just tried to refute the allegations brought against him by Mr. Kibria and left the reform-issue on the Parliamentarians and the politicians of the country.

It is quite understandable that Mr. Kibria, as a party member, will opt for reforms of the present caretaker system as it is the stand of his own party. The official evaluation of Awami League on the last election is, that the party suffered a heavy defeat due to the motivated role of

Caretaker Government, the President, the Chief Election Commissioner, especially the chief adviser of the caretaker government Justice Latifur Rahman. On the other hand, it is also not hard to understand that Justice Latifur Rahman will prefer not to be involved in any reform issue as he had performed his duty as the head of the caretaker government during the immediate past general election. In fact, nobody other than a fool will choose to do that. The camel I rode on can't be ugly.

We, the common people are not the activists of a defeated political party, nor we conducted any election. We just exercise our franchise during elections and want to be ruled by the elected representatives in real sense. So our attitude towards our election system may differ with those of Mr. Kibria and Justice Latifur Rahman.

When we look back, we find that when the Caretaker system came into being through 14th amend-

Democracy is not merely a kind of rule of majority. It is the rule of majority with the content of minority. It is an art of living together in heterogeneities. So the doubts of the oppositions of unfairness in the next election is not relevant to us. What is important, whether the present government understands the essence of democracy or not.

ment bill of the constitution, the Awami League leaders seemed contented. The bill was hurriedly prepared by the then ruling BNP and its clauses and sub-clauses were not seriously taken into debate by the oppositions. A voice had been raised but that was too faint to be heard. May be, AL leaders were over-joyed by a big victory they had been struggling to achieve for many months. Mr. Kibria, as the advisor of AL chief and a stalwart of the party could not foresee his present realisation of 'chief Justice manipulation' theory then. Can a diplomat turned politician be so short-sighted?

As for Justice Latifur Rahman, his rejoinder shows that he is an anti Awami League person. He bursts into wrath writing 'After the frustrations from the election results in 2001, the Awami League adopted a political strategy of vilifying the caretaker government under me to mislead people at home and abroad about its popularity, veiling thereby its misdeeds (criminality, corruption and terrorism) which were intolerable to the well meaning voters.'

The rule of Awami League ended up three months earlier the general election of 2001 had taken place. That is, from then on, Awami League has been doing politics being out of power. So, it is needless to explain that the hatred consists in Justice Rahman's mind for Awami League is not a post-election phenomenon.

He hates Awami League for its pre-caretaker rule. The question may very much arise: could he maintain neutrality as the head of caretaker government since his mind-set was against Awami League? After all, he is a human being and not a machine.

It is true, frequent amendments in constitution is not graceful for a nation. The saying goes -- when politics fails, the constitution comes. The irony of our politics is, it is always confrontational, not amicable. Elections as the expression of politics are more confrontational. Virtually, not only in Bangladesh, except for some European countries the picture is almost the same with variation of degrees. During last US election, both the Republicans and

the Democrats kept themselves alert like war-time in fear of manipulation. Anyway, the amendments in our constitution time and again only indicate the weakness of our politics. This weakness seems to get severe day by day and thus thought to be beyond remedy to many of us. The on-going caretaker reform debate is a by-product of that weakness of our politics.

We do not necessarily want any reform in present caretaker system. If it works properly, why should we? In that case, we ignore what Mr. Kibria suggests on reforms. But how can the BNP leaders say that there is no scope of reforming the caretaker government?

Constitution is not a bible, nor its

rigidity should go on for centuries to come. Constitution is meant to be a guide to rule a given society at a given moment of time. It is nothing more, nothing less. Good governance and political stability is necessary, not the constitution itself. In other words, the constitution is a holy booklet not for any spiritual background but for its switches of light when we fall in dark.

Common citizens want free and fair elections, whatever the method to gain it is. Eventually, not only in our caretaker government system, reforms should be made in working method of all our state-organs concerned. Such a vital organ Election Commission may be re-organised widening its jurisdiction and power. The role of administration and law enforcing agencies may also be significantly re-arranged.

The oppositions have raised their doubts on a fair election. Of them, Awami League alone represents the highest number of people of the country, as it pulled highest popular

votes in the last election. So as a matter of fact, ignoring the demand of reforms in caretaker government system of the oppositions will not only create political unrest in the country, it will also make the next election controversial at home and abroad. It is assumed that Awami League and some other oppositions will not participate in the next election under the present form of caretaker government. Such an election may turn suicidal for BNP whatever 'peaceful' that will be. 15th February, 1996 is not too far-off.

Democracy is not merely a kind of rule of majority. It is the rule of majority with the content of minority. It is an art of living together in heterogeneities. So the doubts of the oppositions of unfairness in the next election is not relevant to us. What is important, whether the present government understands the essence of democracy or not.

Mahbub Kamal is a dramatist.