

LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2005

## **Politics of confrontation**

It can only spread violence and not stem it

ITH the Awami League calling yet another hartal on February 14 and 15, and the ruling coalition's decision to meet head-on any challenge by the opposition, the country's political situation remains as volatile and chaotic as it has been since the January 27 assassination of SAMS Kibria. Unfortunately, the politics of confrontation will only create a smokescreen for the real culprits to escape.

The government and the opposition are locked in a battle for supremacy which seems to have no place for our collective interests or welfare. The ruling BNP had made it known that it would face the AL head-on in the streets, a clear indication of the willingness to apply muscle-power to clinch the issue.

As we had seen after the 21st August incident, so we are seeing now that the ruling alliance is blaming the AL for killing its own leaders. The perversity of the claim and the assumption that it will be accepted by the public raise serious doubts in our mind about the thinking process in the government. There appears to be a total disregard for the fact that pending investigation no government high official, leave alone a senior minister and secretary general of the ruling BNP, should say anything that may impact on the investigating process.

The agitational programmes of the opposition and the counter programmes of the ruling alliance have made sure that politics will continue to be a dangerous proposition, insofar as the people are concerned. Though human chains and peaceful rallies elicited a spontaneous response from the members of the public in the recent past, the opposition is still using hartal as its sole weapon to put pressure on the government. But who is going to assess the huge losses that the country incurs because of such destructive and obstructive politics?

Civil society members felt the nation's pulse accurately when they concluded in a recent seminar that democracy is 'fighting for its life' under the prevailing circumstances. We urge the key players to listen to what is being said about the suicidal game that they are playing at the cost of the nation.

### Indiscriminate felling of trees

#### Environment ministry must act

ET again trees have been felled, this time at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital compound in the name of cleaning the area of unwanted foliage. This seems to have become a norm in various parts of the country. We hear stories of someone from the authority deciding to cut down trees for some reason or the other every now and then. It is often done without any thought, let alone regard for the environment. This is an example of mindless butchery on our ever-shrinking forestland and greenery. They appear to be totally oblivious of the severe damage they are causing to the ecology. They are not even aware of the wholesome influence of trees and plants on our lives.

These days there seems to be an impression among many in the administration that trees can be cut as soon as they grow tall. And the authorities concerned seldom take any action against them. At least we haven't heard of or seen any steps taken against anyone in this respect. Naturally some unscrupulous timber traders take advantage of the situation for huge financial gains through illegal means. And we, the common people, end up being victims of a group of greedy and selfish people. We would like to take the opportunity to urge the Ministry of Environment to do something about such unabashed damages being done to our surroundings. If the trees cause any obstructions or block any passage, we have no objections to their being cut. At the same time, we strongly recommend that for every tree that's to be cut, there should be at least five new re-planted. Only then such tree cutting can be partially justified.

# Iraq: Election is just the first step



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

general election has been held in Iraq despite a continuing campaign of intimidation and deadly violence. Iraq's Sunni Muslim population, which makes up about 20 per cent of the nation's 15 million eligible voters, heeded the call of their clerics and boycotted the election. The Shias however appear to have listened to Grand Ayatullah Ali Al-Sistani. Although not running for election himself. Irag's top Shiite cleric had issued an edict describing voting as religious duty'

This was indeed an interesting gambit.

It may be recalled that last year, the US did not initially want elections. They were afraid that the Shias would get the upper hand and there might be another Iran. This time round, a year later, the US Administration felt that the reality had to be accepted and attempts made to contain a possible militant Shia resistance by involving them in State power. This, they thought, could also be another means of neutralising growing Sunni insurgency. Consequently, they used the Avatullah's popularity to persuade the Shias to vote. Such a step has moved the process forward but also created a political dynamics where there will be Shiite domination within the future government of Iraq.

The Arab press, particularly in the surrounding countries, have interpreted the election as part of an exit strategy for the US and other Occu-

pying forces. They have watched with anxiety as US casualties have exceeded 1400 in Iraq and expenditure exceeded more than US Dollar 100 billion. In this context, like many other Muslim countries, the region had stressed on the need for electioneering and voting conditions that enjoyed credibility. This they reiterated was required for any form of legitimacy.

In this context, the comments in the press in the Middle East have been one of guarded optimism. The Dubai daily 'Al-Khaleej' hoped that the Iragi people will succeed in

so because they now know that the USA will not allow a militant Shia Irag.

Jordan's 'Al-Dastour' has speculated about the electoral lists and the manner in which 'democracy and freedom' is being ushered into Iraq. A note of caution is also suggested for the future Shia led government. Cairo's 'Al-Ahram' and 'Al-Akhbar' have described the difficult conditions under which voting has taken place. They have also reminded Iraqi authorities of the

need for 'national reconciliation.'. Israel's response as reflected in

Afghanistan has shown wisdom when he commented that 'the election themselves are not going to prove to be a panacea'. To this might be added Senator Edward Kennedy's comment that 'the US military presence in Iraq has become part of the problem, not part of the solution.

There are several tough tasks ahead. The 275 member National Assembly has to elect a President and two Deputies by two-thirds majority. The three-man Presidency Council will then have two weeks to choose a Prime Minister and a

should get either the Presidency or the Prime Ministership. They have already started talking of Jalal Talaban, leader of one of the major Kurdish groups being suitable for the post of President. This is being supported by his rival Massoud Barzani, who prefers Jalal's presence in Baghdad rather than in the Kurdish north. This aspect might delay the agenda particularly for the Shia community, which has been waiting for many decades for

supremacy The US Administration has to be

careful that they are not tempted

into identifying Iragi legitimacy with

unchecked Shia rule. They have to

remember about the multi-ethnicity

of Iraq, the tribal structures and the

divide among religious denomina-

In the coming months, the United

Nations as well as the US and

British presence should take stop to

prevent any group from using the

political process to establish the

kind of dominance previously

enjoyed solely by the Sunnis. A

process of conciliation is necessary

to change the mind-set. It must be

seen that efforts are being made

towards greater understanding

without any form of discrimination

tions.

aender

They are also insisting that they

another page in the history of the Middle East, There has been a multiparty election. That is a posi-

However, the challenge comes now. The mechanical part has been partially completed. A lot remains to be done nevertheless in the context of creating institutions. Security and eventual stability will require dialogue with the Sunni leadership. This is an important factor that cannot be neglected. Only the first phase of a political evolution from military occupation to political legitimacy of sorts has been completed.

It will not be enough to say that we have given the Iragis a chance to govern themselves.' Any governance requires a structure, and that most sadly does not exist in Iraq today. There is very little of the banking system and practically nothing in terms of a structured decentralised administration. The security forces as well as the defence establishment lack motivation. Judiciary, healthcare facilities and educational establishments are also suffering from severe impairment. There are, in addition, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced refugees. Recession and unemployment have also reached critical dimensions.

The United Nations and other important powers need to help the Iragis, more than ever, over the next two years. They have to create a sustainable, free Iraq which can exist by itself. Failure to do this will mean an implosion, with radicals and fundamentalists creating more convulsions for the region.

The US needs to withdraw but not in haste. A precipitous withdrawal based on domestic public opinion will now be seen as an abnegation of responsibility. It might instead create civil war and anarchy, worse than what we have seen in the Balkans.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and on the basis of race, tribe faith or Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net Irag's election has opened

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**OPINION** 

POST BREAKFAST

making these elections a prelude to the departure of foreign troops and the restoration of Iraq's sovereignty. Saudi Arabia's 'Arab News' described the holding of the election as 'a much needed victory for moderation' but at the same time pointed out that the 'inevitable Shia majority of legislators should work for the future of all Iragis, to inflict an even more significant defeat on the men of violence.' The Saudis have neither loved Saddam (since his invasion of Kuwait) nor Shia state power as represented by Iran. However, such dislike has now been smothered with the prospect of Sunni republican militancy jumping borders and gaining ground within Saudi Arabia itself. This possibility is now persuading them to accept a Shia majority Iraq. They are doing

both 'Haaretz' as well as the 'Jerusalem Post,' was as expected. They welcomed the holding of elections and the ushering in of democracy, but interestingly enough also made it a point to refer to Lebanon being the only other democratic country in the region. This was their way of rubbing salt into other perceptions of democracy as it is being practised in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the member countries of the GCC.

What is important is the need to understand that the election is just a first step. Whatever the result, it is just the beginning of a long haul to stability which will have to overcome more violence and political turmoil. Brigadier General Doug Lute

Director of Operations for US Central Command, which runs US military operations in Iraq and

Cabinet, which must subsequently obtain a National Assembly vote of confidence, the National Assembly has until August 15 to write a draft constitution. This will have to be put to a referendum by October 15. If the referendum succeeds with a two-thirds majority, then an election for a permanent government will be held in December. If this fails, the whole process starts again.

In all likelihood, the United Iraq Alliance, which has the blessing of Ayatullah Sistani should emerge as the single biggest force in the National Assembly. So far so good. It is however the Kurdish factor that might upset the equation.

Kurdish leaders from rival factions in northern Iraq have united in hopes of winning a significant bloc of seats in the National Assembly

When will our civil society wake up?

#### SYED M RAHMAN

HE brutal and cowardly killing of SAMS Kibria has saddened all the conscious and sensible people of this land and elsewhere in the world. This has created a serious outrage amongst all of us irrespective of party affiliation, which is indeed a rare episode for this very "unfortunate" nation. Ordinarily, whatever happens around us, we try to look at that from our very partisan viewpoint, and I believe this goes for virtually everybody, be it politician, journalist, teacher, lawyer, businessman, cultural activist or any other profes-

sional -- you name it! Even the government employees who are supposed to be neutral, at least as far as their actions and deeds are concerned, at times go out of their

piece of land called Bangladesh. No matter how cruel this is. it has never been truer before than it is now. These are now clearly revealed by the recent comments and suggestions made by our "international friends and development partners' regarding our various performances in our development efforts, poverty alleviation, combating corruption and terrorism, religious fanaticism and so on. These friends are working very hard to make us stand on our own feet by providing us soft loans, grants, consultancy services

We all know, at end of the day, they are all diplomats who are taught in a professional manner on how to be critical without hurting one's feelings

are aware of the name of this small done to make ourselves proud before the world? There could be two possible answers: either ves or

> If yes, then why our leaders are not paying heed to them? There is only one answer to that and that is they have lost their credibility! Their partisan acts have compelled our political leaders to consider their suggestions as "his master's voice. think these professionals and intellectuals have also taken it for granted that their words will carry no value for whom they are meant, they keep on staving faithful to their likeminded political leaders. They sell out their conscience for some petty personal interests. This is indeed a vicious cycle!

In the case of the answer being

government, be it home minister or orime minister, made any officer from DFI, NSI, SB, or CID resign for failing to unearth the issue?

This also demonstrates that the decision makers in the government have not only failed to catch the perpetrators, they even failed to identify the officers of its intelligence and law enforcement agencies who were responsible for not being able to gather intelligence information to frustrate this attack. Now here comes the very obvious -- then why do we have to pay these people from the exchequer if they cannot carry out their assigned job properly? Finally, government had formed a one-member judicial enquiry committee whose report was so vague and incomplete, if not

camp, decided to keep their mouth shut about this impolite act, and the smarter ones even staunchly supported Sheikh Hasina's stance. Ruling party loyalists took full advantage of this and helped create even greater distance between these two leaders. End result is hartal. loss of lives and properties. portraval of Bandladesh as a place for growing political turmoil, religious jingoism and fanaticism to the nternational community. The second incident is the last one

on January 27, 2005 at Habigani, Mr. SAMS Kibria lost his life as a result of the grenade attack there. The aftermath was just a mere replication of the previous one. The PM wanted to go to Kibria's residence but his family

dig out the criminals. Hasina would have enjoyed more sympathy from the public in that case and surely this would have prevented the killing of Kibria in a subsequent grenade attack. Of course, it does not mean that Hasina is responsible for the incident, but if only had she shown a little bit of tolerance and patience. we night not have to watch the killing. By now it is quite clear that neither BNP nor AL alone can fight this menace without the help from each other. The unsolved bomb attacks during AL rule are the testimony to that effect.

nake is the role of our intellectuals

is now being seriously questioned

by the ordinary public in the sense

I know one does not have to be an astrologer to say what I have just said. I do not even intend to indemnify the Khaleda Zia's government from failing to find out the members reportedly refused. They culprits behind the grenade attacks. The point I am trying to

The more frustrating thing is that felling of trees has been continuing even though there are laws in this regard with provisions for harsh punishments. The only way to put a stop to this is to enforce the existing laws and set an example for those who might think of indulging in such acts.

The complete indifference that we have been showing to this process of denudation demonstrates our insensitivity and greed more than our concern for a potential environmental disaster that such activities can bring about.

way to demonstrate their allegiance to the ruling party. We even hear of fierce competition among them to display their loyalty towards the ruling party. So, in this backdrop, I consider this "consensus" in how we feel about this horrific murder is a very rare "feat." Maybe this is something we may call a silver lining behind the cloud of our mean and selfdestructive nature.

I may sound somewhat sarcastic but I really cannot help it anymore. As a nation I believe it is time to call a spade a spade. As a matter of fact the time has long elapsed, but one must get the ball rolling before we reach a point of no return. This is why I would like to make some points for our intelligentsia to ponder upon.

There is no denial of the fact that we as a nation do not deserve to be treated by the rest of the world as unruly, inefficient, and corrupt kind of people with no self-esteem. We do not want us to be seen by the international community as a worthless and poverty ridden populace for the rest of our lives. Unfortunately, that is what we are at the moment to the peoples around the world who

the people of the country are? It

The point I am trying to make is the role of our intellectuals is now being seriously questioned by the ordinary public in the sense that rather than uniting these two leaders they are helping them only to get apart from each other. Because, unless these two are in agreement that they want to serve only the interests of their people, we would not be able to see any progress in the coming days.

These international friends have been offering "certificates" to both ruling and opposition party camps which in turn are being used by them against each other. They have started to comment at such a scale and manner about our internal affairs that one may wonder is Bangladesh a sovereign state who earned her independence at the cost of millions of lives? These people would not dare to do so when similar things occur in our neighbouring India.

I would not say that whatever these friends are suggesting is incorrect or irrelevant. My question is: are we not competent enough to identify these menaces and bring an end to these all by ourselves? Do we not have qualified professionals and intellectuals to advise our political leaders, both ruling and opposition, on what ought to be

"no" -- I do not want to think that we are faced with bankruptcy in our intellectual abilities which some may consider wishful thinking!

Recent political turmoil in the country should give these points even more grounds. To keep things short, I would like to use only a couple of incidents and I start with the case of the grenade attack at Sheikh Hasina's meeting on August 21,2004

The government miserably failed to make any breakthrough into the investigation of this occurrence even when a major opposition leader like Ivy Rahman had to pay with her life as a result of this heinous attack. This is a sheer display of the incompetence, lack of will and skill, unpreparedness of its intelligence and other law enforcement agencies. Has anyone from the

ridiculous, as suggested by some extracts published in different newspapers, government itself probably decided that it would not be prudent to make it public, and

accordingly sent it to cold-storage. On the other hand, Awami League readily pointed their fingers to the ruling party for this attack without taking any time for thinking or doing the assessment. Consequently, some of the statements made by some of the AL leaders regarding the bullet holes in the vehicle carrying Sheikh Hasina turned out to be self-contradictory as newspaper reports suggested Moreover, the leader of the opposition was so disgusted with the prime minister that she refused to allow her to come to her residence for seeing her condition.

Civil society, belonging to the AL machinery work more effectively to

that rather than uniting these two leaders they are helping them only to get apart from each other. Because, unless these two are in agreement that they want to serve only the interests of their people we would not be able to see any expressed their total outrage and progress in the coming days. demanded investigation by inde-The movement by the opposipendent international agencies. tion AL and its allies to unseat the Some may consider this as an overgovernment would be a futile reaction by the Kibria family. But in my view, at that point in time this is quite natural. Somebody who loses

exercise. If we take lessons from history, AL and BNP must stay together or at least reach some sincere understanding on democratic norms, so that they do not need to take recourse of the political parties using religion to get them elected. If that does not happen very soon the uprising of fanatics will be almost certain to the detriment of our democracy and our so called civil society and the intellectuals perhaps unknow-

visit after August 21 attack, the ingly are only helping to that end. tension between these two leaders would have diffused substantially This would have also put Khaleda Syed M Rahman is a DS reader residing in into an obligation to make her

Mahakhali

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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.

#### On the verge of losing temper!

Firstly, I offer my condolence to the families of the five killed in the Habiganj bomb blast. Mr. Kibria was an asset to the country and it is indeed sad to lose him in such a manner

This type of heinous crime is nothing new--starting from the previous AL regime and still it's going on. The attackers are for sure not from the AL or the BNP, then why cannot the government find them out and bring them to justice? It has been over six months since the grenade attack on the AL chief, but still the government has no clue whatsoever. FBI came, so did Interpol but what is the result? What will two or three FBI agents do? It is virtually impossible to solve this problem without the government's

willingness and copperation. If the

government is serious enough, why

Bangla Bhai is not arrested, despite repeated orders from the prime minister? Is it that a small group of fundamentalists have become more seems the answer is no, when we powerful than the government, or is see our honourable LGRD minister it that there are some people in the saying things like Awami League will government who support these not get more than 40 seats next fanatics? What did Rab do to find out the August 21 attackers and what are they doing now to find the criminals? The basic point is that, nothing is possible without proper and responsible governance.

time. The way Awami League MPs are being killed, I totally agree with the minister We, the common people of the country, have had enough of this and now we want serious and Neither, the Rab nor the FBI can do determined steps from the governanything unless and until the govment. Lastly, I would like to write some-

ernment is serious about it. What more is needed to wake this thing in reply to what Mr. Wasiuddin government up ? As a society we Khan wrote on Feb 8. Mr. Khan said cannot afford to lose more Kibrias the AL was adopting different unfair like this. We cannot let a small group means to topple the government of fundamentalists kill our democand it was not easy to topple a racy. These fanatics have no limits government with two-thirds majority. I would like to ask him, what will but we the common people do. The civil society showed its anger and the Awami League do when its disappointment when thousands leaders are being killed one after joined hands with Ms. Asma Kibria another?

on Feb 4. Is it not enough for the Arafat Islam government to realise how annoyed Dallas. US

#### Absurd

I found Mr. Kabir Mia's letter to be absurd. One wonders if Mr. Mia even read the article in question. He calls Ms. Griswold's article error-filled, but does not specify what errors were made, or what facts are wrong

Is Bangla Bhai not a serious concern? Is poverty not a problem in the north-west? Are minorities not being persecuted? And is lawand-order not deteriorating by the day? All these things Mr. Griswold covered in her much maligned article.

Those of us who have been reading this newspaper and others were not surprised by this. Niraj Agarwalla On e-mail

Kaiser, which appeared in the online version of your daily on Monday, February 7

ous online showbiz journals and didn't really pay too much attention until I read in your article that she is from the same district as I am. It's not often you hear any (good) news up to, or diarrhoea outbreaks.

that a fellow "Noakhalia" is revered as one of the prettiest and most talented of all the actresses in our country

They should remain

#### informed

Early morning during breakfast, I tune to my TV for news, immediately after returning from work watch news during late lunch.

Before going to bed another update always I look forward to. This is a general trend among majority human beings out of a passion to remain updated with things happening around them. I am an ordinary person, work to live and raise my children.

The speaker of the parliament, certainly not an ordinary man, didn't bother to update himself before going to bed. 'Speaker the third personality', 'an institution' did not have the mechanism or system to get to know any important things happening around or related to his institution.

That is regrettable. MM Haque Jeddah, KSA

their dear ones in such a brutal

manner, only can feel the pain of such

loss. To me their reaction is guite OK.

They have all the rights in the world to

express their utmost disgust and

dismay at the utter incompetence of

To sum up, had Sheikh Hasina

allowed Khaleda Zia to pay her a

the government and its law enforce-

ment agencies

#### **Big brother?**

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

My heart aches, how nicely Dhaka was decorated for the Saarc summit! Suddenly, India refused to join the summit and surprisingly Mr. Samad Azad, the elderly AL leader, has appreciated the decision of India. I'm hurt!

Is there any country where there is no terrorist? And is there any country where no political assassination had taken place? In India, both Indira Gandhi and her son Rajeev Gandhi were killed. In Sri Lanka, President Premadasa was killed in a bomb explosion. Why don't we talk about the US? US presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F Kennedy were assassinated. But no international confer-

ence gets stopped for the killing as it has been stopped now here in Bangladesh.

#### India has raised the issue of security and deteriorating political situation of Bangladesh, but Banaladesh took all safety measures for the guests. All the other representatives were ready to come, except

the Indians

China is a far more progressive country than India. But the Chinese PM has no problem visiting our country. he did not show any lame excuse. Actually the problem is, despite being a small country, Bangladesh is the pioneer of Saarc, and this causes pain to some people(?). After all, everybody wants to

be the boss! An unhappy citizen On e-mail

refer to your article on Shomi

I had heard about her from vari-

from Noakhali. In fact. more often then not, there's nothing to report at all and when there is, it's usually about unscrupulous politicians, high levels of crop damage during the

floods, what the local mastans are It's therefore pleasing to hear news

Abdul M Ismail On e-mail

Atalented actress