

Anti-hartal pact

National interest demands it

WHETHER the UNDP methodology for calculating the economic impact of hartals and the attendant cost to GDP is correct and accurate is a peripheral issue. The main point, which is undisputed, is that hartals do have a considerable economic cost, and that they contribute to and perpetuate our dysfunctional political culture.

It is now incumbent on all of us from policy-makers to civil society to the government to the opposition to get together to find some way forward. The fact is that hartals as they exist in Bangladesh are almost non-existent outside our borders.

There are strikes and shutdowns, but the culture of general strikes in which the entire country is brought grinding to a halt is a peculiarly Bangladeshi practice, and not one that flatters us. Hartals are virtually unheard of in the rest of the world, and the hartal culture does as much to discredit us in the eyes of the world as any of the other more high-profile problems we face.

The way forward is for the government to first acknowledge and accept that there is much truth to the opposition's claims that it is not permitted any democratic space in which to express dissent. The opposition must be given its democratic space. The opposition must be permitted to speak in parliament and to hold programmes and rallies and processions freely and without harassment. It will thus have no pretext to call hartals.

For its part, the opposition merely needs to heed the wishes of the people. Public opinion has been built up against hartals, and the opposition should listen to and be guided by this public opinion. Dissent can be expressed in alternative ways such as through human chains and processions and rallies, which would make the same point that hartals do without the destructive element.

During the tenure of the last government, the AL put on the table an anti-hartal deal. It pledged that if the then-opposition agreed not to resort to hartals, then it too would eschew them when in opposition. This offer was, however, rejected by the then opposition. Now, however, it is the BNP that is in power and complaining about the negative impact of hartals. Indeed, even the AL does not contest the fact that hartals do serious damage to the economy.

So, our modest proposal is that now is the perfect time for the government and the opposition to revive the deal. If the opposition agrees to halt hartals, the government should reciprocate by pledging that it, too, will refrain from calling hartals if and when in opposition. No single step would do more good for the country -- both in terms of the economy and also in terms of moving towards a more democratic political culture.

Deaths in sea

Some self-analysis due

THE tragic deaths of 11 Bangladeshis, while they were trying to cross the Mediterranean in their bid to reach Spain, are an eye-opener to the desperate state some of our young people are in to be trying all kinds of cliff-hangers to reach distant shores in quest of fortune.

The dead young men have left a message for us. What are we offering our youngsters? They were taking grave risks to survive possibly after having failed to find anything worthwhile in their homeland. The desperation of the young men that drove them to such a perilous journey should serve a notice on us to take their peers under our wings.

Hundreds of Bangladeshis are on record having been sent back home by immigration authorities of the countries they had tried to enter illegally. And even those who succeeded in sneaking through the borders didn't have their dreams fulfilled. Many of them were jailed before being deported or forced to live in great distress and uncertainty.

The gullible job seekers are often swindled by dishonest among the recruiting agents. Desperation coupled with frustration seem to blind them to the mortal dangers of leaping into the dark. Yet, this has been going on for a long time.

Such deaths and sufferings are not only tragic but also an affront to national image. Unfortunately, the problem of unemployment is getting worse by the day as resource constraints topped by corruption stand in the way of doing what must be done on a priority basis. However, it is imperative that new jobs are created for the large numbers of youths entering the job market every year so that they are engaged in gainful employment and don't feel abandoned and hopeless in their own country and spare the nation the disgrace of losing many of them in tragic circumstances.

Kazi Anwarul Masud

GLOBAL discomfort is evident these days over overt preeminence of religion in politics in some countries. President Bush's reelection, despite Iraq imbroglio, is now being believed to have been caused by the rise of conservatism among Americans and by the strength of Christian votes. Political analyst Muqtadir Khan apprehends that existential anxiety felt by the deeply religious Americans due to the terrorist acts on 9/11 has translated into a political backlash that is threatening American secularist and liberal views. The political Christianity of born again Christians, conservative Catholics, conservative African-Americans, and conservative Hispanics, who are concerned more with gay marriages and abortion than with job loss, outsourcing of jobs, or rising cost of Iraq invasion. Evangelical Christianity and Pentecostal movement have not only given George Bush the White House back but also the Republican Party control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The question that arises in the minds of many is whether religious conservatism has become the order of the day or the Bush victory is to be regarded as a quirk of history in an otherwise sequential historical progress of the world towards Francis Fukuyama's liberal democracy constituting the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and the "final form of government" and as such signaling the "end of history." But Fukuyama himself has conceded that "one is inclined to say that the revival of religion in some way attests to a broad unhappiness with the impersonality and spiritual vacuity of liberal consumerist societies."

Though the Iranian revolution of 1979 which created a theocratic state came as a rude shock to the Western world, it was not totally unexpected because opposition to Reza Shah Pahlavi was building up for quite some time and anti-American feeling was bristling among the people due to the CIA engineering the ouster of nationalist Prime Minister Mosaddegh and the reinstatement of the Shah to the Peacock throne. Besides, the Western world was not unduly

worried because the "enemy" was an identifiable nation-state which could be attacked and fought against. The decade long Iraq-Iran war, during which Saddam Hussein's regime was fully supported by the West particularly the US, was predicated on the premise that the spread of theocratic political movement could be contained.

The discomfort felt by the largely Sunni majority Arab states at the emergence of a Shia theocratic state in their neighborhood was fully exploited by the West. Additionally the need for oil and military bases induced the western countries to

lim population who despite declaration of piety could have nursed in the darkest corner of their heart a desire to commit the original sin. The Islamists argue that the reasons for economic backwardness, political repression, and societal dysfunction were caused by western, particularly American assistance, given to the repressive regimes in the Muslim world.

So Osama bin Laden's deputy Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri faced little problem in becoming an ideologue of hatred to some marginalized Muslims living at the fringe of an often affluent society. In

values.

Professor Robert Hefner correctly asserts that there is no clash of civilizations between the Islamic and Christian worlds, and the really decisive battle is being waged within the Muslim civilization where ultra-conservatives are competing with the moderates and democrats for the soul of Islam. In understanding the intensity of the battle it is necessary to distinguish between neo-fundamentalists with transnational reach and secular Islam which believes in the subordination of religion to the state. In this debate, one may have to make the difficult

because Quranic laws are deemed to be final, the space for democratic debate for the formation of secular laws does not exist in Muslim societies. Some other scholars however have found that appropriation of political Islam by Islamic fundamentalists is untenable and millions of Muslims living outside the Arab world live in intermittent democracies and they may not become victims of so-called Islamic Free Election Trap in which fundamentalists use democratic means to get to power only to abolish democratic practices through legislation. There is however no denying the

Jamat-e-Islami; that Jamat had funneled more than one crore taka to the Taliban after the US attacked Afghanistan in 2001; that al Qaida through Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence and Jamat-e-Islami had engaged many militant Bangladeshis to wage war in Afghanistan against NATO forces; and that Jamat-e-Islami shelters at least sixteen radical groups in the country committed to establish Taliban-like Islamist regime in Bangladesh.

It is generally recognized that monotheistic religions adorned with univocality violate human rights of the minorities in particular, that excessive devotion to religion acts as impediment to economic advancement and promote sectarian divide (e.g. Shia-Sunni conflicts in Pakistan and in Iraq), that religious characterization of a nation can cause international conflict (e.g. Middle East conflict with Jewish state of Israel), etc.

Thomas Jefferson decried the attempt by "the impious presumption of legislature and ruler, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who themselves being fallible" to impose on others their belief. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expressed his horror and condemnation of "the spectacle of what is called religion or at any rate organized religion in India or elsewhere."

In recent times, Bangladesh has already been reported upon by The New York Times, Asian Wall Street Journal, Time magazine, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and European Community for religious militancy. Our uniform response to these allegations has been that the allegations are fictitious and ill-motivated. One must however recognize the fact that, while Time magazine and The New York Times are read by millions the world over, our denials hardly ever get reported outside the country.

In today's world of globalization, with people living in "over-lapping communities of fate" where trajectories of countries are heavily enmeshed with one another, perhaps the time has come to seriously consider whether religion based politics should not be banned in Bangladesh.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

The challenge of religion-based politics

In today's world of globalization, with people living in "over-lapping communities of fate" where trajectories of countries are heavily enmeshed with one another, perhaps the time has come to seriously consider whether religion based politics should not be banned in Bangladesh.

ignore the "democracy deficit" prevalent in the Middle Eastern client states of the West. The threshold of western tolerance for radical Islamic movements was so high that in its monocentric policy of aiding the Afghan mujahedeens through Pakistani Intelligence Services to dislodge the Soviets from Afghanistan, the West failed to see the emergence of brutal Taliban regime till the tragic events of 9/11 occurred.

Oliver Roy sees implicit threat in this brand of modern Islamic political fundamentalism claiming to recreate new Islamic societies, not simply by imposing the Sharia laws but by establishing Islamic state through political action. Islamists see Islam not merely as a religion but as a political ideology which should be integrated in all aspects of the society.

After Afghanistan, Islamic fundamentalism went global with its appeal to a section of Muslim society based on moral, cultural, and political grounds. The Islamists argue that western culture, particularly the one practiced by western women, is essentially degenerative and incompatible with Quranic literalism. They argue that the values propagated by the West threaten Islamic purity and hence their advance is to be thwarted at any cost.

Political argument is by far the easiest to sell to the wayward Mus-

his Knights Under the Prophet's Banner, a manifesto on jihad, al-Zawahiri explains that it is legitimate to strike western populations, not just their governments and institutions, because they "only know the language of self-interest, backed by brute military force."

The problems faced by the Islamic secular movements have been compounded by the iconic presence of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis in literature trying to explain the democratic deficit generally suffered by the Muslim world. To Huntington in Islam God is Caesar, in Confucianism Caesar is God, and in European Orthodox Christianity God is Caesar's junior partner. Unhesitatingly Huntington declares: "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam."

Historian Bernard Lewis saw the clash of civilizations earlier than Huntington in terms of Islamic vs. Christian and post-Christians and rigid theocratic hierarchy vs. permissive secular modernism. Lewis perceived Muslim world's "downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression" being caused by the Islamic world's defeat at the hands of Judeo-Christian civilizations. But in this sweeping critique of Islam, Lewis and others have forgotten that refusal of western hegemony does not necessarily mean wholesale abandonment of western

choice of whether or not to ban religion-based political parties. An inconclusive debate remains about the incompatibility of democracy with monotheistic religions. Robert Dahl in his classic book Polyarchy had set eight essential requirements for democracy: right to form and join organizations; freedom of expression; right to vote; eligibility for public office; right of political leaders to compete for support for vote; and institutions for making government policies dependant on vote and other expressions of preference.

Other political scientists have added that democracy must also have a constitution that by itself is democratic in that it respects fundamental liberties and offers protection to minorities. Additionally, democratically elected governments must rule within the confines of their constitutions, be bound by law and be accountable. From historical observations it has been found that religions place inherent obstacles in the way of democracy.

Philosopher John Rawls found it particularly difficult in a pluralistic society in which citizens hold a variety of socially embedded, reasonable yet deeply opposed comprehensive doctrines to arrive at an overlapping consensus. In the case of Islam, some western scholars have found that because of the Prophet Mohammed's (SM) fusion of military and spiritual authority and

fact that religion-based politics generate fear among minority community, the protection of whom has been pledged by all civilized countries. In Bangladesh, for example, the recent events involving terrorist activities allegedly perpetrated by Islamic extremists have strengthened the demands of the secularists to ban religion-based political activities. The 1972 Bangladesh Constitution did provide for such a ban. The post-1975 conservative establishments amended the Constitution once in 1977 and again in 1988 by passing the 8th Amendment, making Islam the state religion. Additionally, the Vested (Enemy) Property Act enacted during Pakistani rule through which 2.1 million acres of Hindu-owned land were confiscated, remains in our statute book even today.

Every year US State Department's Religious and Human Rights reports, reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch chronicle abuses perpetrated on the minority community in Bangladesh. The leader of the opposition in Bangladesh Parliament has demanded of the government that the two ministers from Jamat-e-Islami be interrogated by the police to "unearth the mystery" behind religious militancy in the country.

Another opposition political leader has alleged that JMB and JMB are in fact creations of

Nepal: Change for the better

BHAGRATH BASNET

NEPAL has now felt a sigh of relief. After living for eight years through the constant fear for life from terrorism and political instability, people now feel safe and secure. Corrupt politicians and their cohorts are scrambling for cover. Life has become normal and the country is rolling on the right track.

His Majesty the King has constituted a cabinet under His own chairmanship to resolve the Maoist problem, bring peace, root out corruption, provide clean administration, strengthen democracy, and promote development. This is in line with the aspirations of the Nepalese people and consistent with the urge the international community has long been making on Nepal.

Democracy calls for discipline and order; sacrifice and sincerity; and responsibility and accountability. Our experience has been otherwise. Elected governments, rather than taking the high road, went down the path of misuse, corruption, and selfishness over the last 14 years. The situation got so bad that His Majesty the King, in keeping with the long tradition of the Shah dynasty, had to stand for the people and the country and act to set things right.

Political leaders, some more than others, are solely responsible for the descent of the country into the present predicament. For instance, the dismissed prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, rather than managing the growing dissent within his party and resolving the Maoist problem, recommended the disso-

lution of the House of Representatives and fresh elections in 2001, and under the Constitution, His Majesty had to comply. As it turned out later, it was Deuba's ploy to stick to his chair longer because he knew that free and fair elections could not be held without resolving the insurgency problem.

The Maoists want to impose a totalitarian system on Nepal. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) wanted to mount its violent armed conflict until the country's situation

The parties should have come together and forged a national consensus to deal with the Maoist conflict, but they did not. Instead, they tried to use the chaos to their own parochial advantage. The ruling party used the terrorism as a trump card to hang onto power, and opposition parties used it to pull down the government.

As the country got closer to the elections, the rebels stepped up violence and destruction. Prime Minister Deuba found a pretext to

woes. The King within a year gave the parties the opportunity to nominate their candidate once again, in which parties failed, and the King had to appoint a prime minister.

For the third time, His Majesty asked for a candidate for prime minister and the protesting parties failed to agree on any. The King then appointed Mr. Deuba as Prime Minister and three other parties joined the government. Failing to deliver good government and bring the Maoists to the table, Mr. Deuba

crisis and set it on the right course.

Evidently, His Majesty the King was faced with an unpalatable choice: either let the country slide down the shaft of devastation and bloodshed or administer a bitter medicine to stamp out terrorism and create conditions to hold elections. Democracy cannot flourish in a situation of anarchy and terror. The King could not remain a silent spectator when the people suffered; He had to take the drastic step to protect people and safeguard democ-

place will be temporary in nature and are meant to curb the untoward situation in an anticipation that could be waged by the insurgents. Elections could not be held when people feared for their lives; and polls held in the midst of insecurity will not offer an exit to the country from the woes of chaos and disturbances.

Evidence already indicates that the King means what he said. So soon after the political change, the government has released most political leaders and human rights activists and political parties have resumed their activities. One can walk and carry on one's work freely and confidently, without the fear of being killed by the Maoists or disrupted by political agitations. The media is back in its business of freely providing information to people, and communications facilities have been fully restored. Some politicians remain under house arrest only for their own safety and security.

His Majesty the King has been motivated to act not because he wants more power but because he feels obligation to the people to give them peace and security and to work for their progress and prosperity. To Him, democracy is a way of life and democratic values and institutions a vehicle for the overall development and well being of the people and the nation. The recent change is for the good of Nepal, Nepalese people, and democratic values and institutions. There is no ground whatsoever to doubt the King's intention and commitment.

The author is the Royal Nepal Ambassador to Bangladesh.

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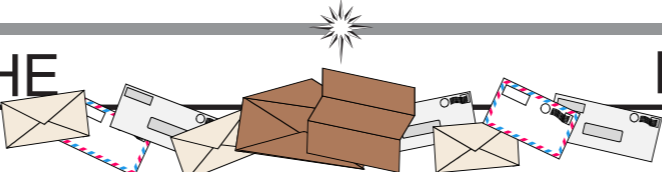
postpone the parliamentary elections by more than a year. At that point, the King dismissed Deuba on grounds of his inability to hold the elections on time and asked political parties to name a consensus candidate who could form an all-party government, hold talks with the Maoists, and conduct the elections within a year.

Despite the King's sincere efforts, the parties failed to come up with a consensus candidate. As the country could not function without government, the King, under compelling circumstances, appointed a new prime minister. Political leaders, rather than helping the government to address national problems and save the nation from failing, called a series of strikes and disrupted people's life on a regular basis, aggravating the national

wanted to take the country into an uncertain election amidst opposition from parties and heightened violence by the Maoists. It was a blatant case of extreme political selfishness, in which the party leading the government was trying to promote its own narrow interest at the cost of the people and country.

Meanwhile, deeply frustrated with the incompetence of the successive party governments, the Nepalese people from all over the country were long petitioning to the King to free the country from the clutches of violence, bloodshed and anarchy. Throughout history, the Shah dynasty has salvaged the country in times of national crises and the Nepalese people expected, out of their deep faith in the monarchy, for the King to pull out the country from the present mire of

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.

New pay scale

Considering inflation and other economic issues, the government constituted a National Pay Commission for its employees. The commission submitted its report in January 2005. We do not yet know the fate of the report.

We are eagerly waiting for full or partial implementation of the report, according to available financial resources of the government. Kamal Uddin, On e-mail

March and BTV

If you are a Bengalee (though now Bangladeshi) and if you have lived through the tempestuous March of 1971, you can barely fail to reminisce about those days of whirls of movements that the Bengalees launched against the Pakistani Military Junta, and you would certainly love to watch them over TV, at

least when March comes upon you. For you need to instill in the minds of your progeny what and who led the Bengalees to wage a relentless struggle, and finally war against them. The need is more warranted in the face of suppression and distortion of historical facts.

The people of the then East Pakistan got viscerally imbued with Sheikh Mujib's Six Point Programme. So in the national election of 1970 (December), they voted the Awami League to win 167 seats of Pakistan National Assembly out of the 169 in EP. It was a deadly blow to Pakistanis. They took recourse to conspiracy as they did for 23 years, and Pakistan People's Party leaders ZABhutto in collusion with President Gen. Yahya Khan sine die postponed the first session of the National Assembly which was to elect Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the leader of the House

and Prime Minister of Pakistan. The whole of Bangladesh exploded in indignation and hatred against Pakistan and people of Dhaka, in particular, came out of their offices, business outlets and houses, took to the streets and went wild with demonstrations and full-throated slogans "Down with Pakistan. No more with Pakistan, and Joy Bangla." All roads led to the house at Road no. 32 where lived Sheikh Mujib and people looked to their leader, the king without a crown, for directives from him.

On March 2, students of Dhaka University hoisted the Bangladesh flag for the first time. Dhaka turned out to be the city of meeting, rallies and fiery speeches against betrayal of the Pakistanis, and the people decided to break curfew and court bullets. Moulana Bhasani, popularly known as the leader of the downtrodden, lent

his total support to Sheikh Mujib and asked him to bid farewell to Pakistan. And thus came Sheikh's speech of 7th March -- before lakhs of Bengalees at the Suhrawardy Uddayan and that speech is held as one of the best speeches in the annals of history of liberation from foreign domination. The speech heightened Bengalee nationalism to the highest pitch and buoyed up the aspirations of Bengalees for freedom and emancipation and you can liken his speech to the great address of Abraham Lincoln of America, though in a different perspective. And that speech in fact saw the seeds of birth of this nation and with that Mujib became the de facto ruler of Bangladesh. The aftermath is known to you all.

March is the month that witnessed Bangladesh stand solidly

united and make supreme sacrifices for a separate homeland of their own, under the sole leadership of Sheikh Mujib, the Bangabandhu. So Sardar Fazlul Karim, the octogenarian educationist, respected as the last surviving icon of progressive thinking, in a recently published exclusive interview (taken by one Ratan Tanu Ghosh) says, "March is the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, March is the Liberation War, and hence is Bangladesh." But alas! our BTV finds Sheikh Mujib nowhere. Neither they find the saga of Bengalees' uprising to show to our progeny.

Ahamed Niaz
Mohammadpur
Dhaka-1207

A nation in despair

A man always wants to see a ray of light in the way of his progress.

But when a lot of bad things accompany his life, he might just get derailed. Isn't the present state of Bangladesh manifesting those things? Destruction, corruption--what is not happening in Bangladesh today? A citizen doesn't know when he will die or how he will die (not in the philosophical sense). No one, even the supreme authorities of the country, can give the minimum security to the people. The level of corruption has touched the highest peak. Our hearts are aching for the invaluable assets that we have lost already -- morality and honesty. No harbinger of deliverance from such a suffocating state is coming forth.

Then "Man can be destroyed but can never be defeated." Is it a worthless saying? I don't know the answer. Like most of the people, I am only a witness to the events-a

man of straw.
Kazi Rezaul Hasan
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University

An old institution

Jagannath University is one of the oldest educational institutions in the country related either as university or college. We cannot mean it specifically, as it is known as both. It is a college under national university. The honourable prime minister has declared it a university. The government is also reported to have allocated a huge amount of money for the development of this institution.

We, as students of the university, hope that the development work will start without further delay.

Ripon
Dept. of English
J.U.

Power cuts

The government decision to ban power consumption in markets in the evening might be based on some pressing needs. But the damage that it will cause to trade and business will be enormous.

You have rightly pointed out in your editorial that the government should try to eliminate the root causes behind power shortage. It has failed to install any power generation plant in the last three years. But it should not punish others for its failure.

Shortage of power is going to hit the economy in various ways. So the government should immediately take the necessary steps to ensure regular and uninterrupted supply of power, instead of taking punitive measures against the citizens.

A citizen
Dhaka