LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY NOVEMBER 25, 2005

Suggestion for a meaningful dialogue

Create two teams for two sets of agenda

HILE editorialising yesterday on the grand rally we spoke of a certain flexibility of approach on the part of the opposition which was discernible in the programmes they announced. We saw in it a window of opportunity and urged the government to seize it to defuse the crisis of confrontation, replace it by an environment conducive for talks and engage the opposition in a dialogue on how best to hold the fast approaching general election.

We are heartened by some positive signs being shown by the government in the immediate sequel to Tuesday's events. BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan sounded positive in his reactions: all but one demand of the opposition, namely that for caretaker government reform, are the BNP's demands as well, said he. He promptly offered talks to the opposition both in and out of the parliament.

His counterpart in the opposition AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil suggested, among other things, that the opposition's proposed discussion with the government over reforms in the caretaker government and the EC would have to be held outside the parliament.

Jalil's insistence on the government's agreeing to reform the caretaker government as a precondition to AL's joining of the parliament and BNP's offering of talks 'on all but caretaker issue' can be viewed as raising of the bargaining stakes by both sides to wrest the maximum advantage from one another. In spite of such 'opposing' positions, there appears to be an underlying intention for talks which needs to be built up on.

The principal bone of contention between the two sides is talks on the reform of the caretaker government system. The question is: why must discussion on the whole gamut of issues be kept in abeyance for the caretaker discord, why hold the talks hostage to one issue?

We really have a way out. There are negotiating points and there are negotiating techniques. If for want of a proper technique the prospects of negotiations are ruined, then the major political parties will only have themselves to blame. We suggest, therefore, that the whole host of opposition demands be grouped into two sets of agenda. Let's put the caretaker issue in one category and the rest, especially the electoral reform proposals, in another category. We then have two separate teams comprising opposition and ruling party negotiators to deal with the separate sets of agenda. As a concession to the opposition let the BNP agree to this two-team formula. As a concession to the government let the AL agree to differentiated talk schedule -- one held before the other, with the contentious one coming later. This way we see the possibility of reaching a mutually satisfactory negotiated settlement in a package at the

What is worth discussing in parliament?

Speaker's ruling on some opposition notices

PEAKER Jamiruddin Sircar rejected opposition demand for discussion in the Jatiya Sangsad on such burning issues as terrorism, price hike and gas and power crisis reportedly saying that the government has been seized of the problems and acting on them so that the need for discussion on these need not arise.

Frankly, we don't see any rationale in the position that because a government is doing something or the other in regard to a certain matter, which it is their duty to do, the issue may not qualify for discussion in parliament, even though it might be a burning question. If one were to accept this rationale, then what remains for the opposition in parliament to have a discussion on? The opposition members were elected just as the treasury bench to be articulating the problems of the electorate, and their constituencies apart from their law making role.

While terrorists continue to threaten the very institution of the judiciary, a vital organ of the state, by killing judges, can another organ of the state such as parliament sit idle and not have its various ramifications discussed by members on both sides of the aisle? The terrorists have even put out a threat on the life of the law minister.

The issues on which notices were served for discussion in parliament on Wednesday are evidently not partisan matters, they are national issues and should be dealt with accordingly at all levels especially in the House of the people. Our entreaties are with the Speaker that he broadens his approach and vision.

BNP: At what cost Jamaat ties?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

themselves.

The two main political parties have spent the past thirty years or so (certainly the last fifteen years) doing little more than squabble in unseemly fashion with one another for petty partisan political gain and in the meantime have ignored the steady rise of the

There is certainly more than a modicum of truth to this contention

But I have always found this to be a endentious argument that tries to draw moral equivalence where none really

The fact is that of the two mainstream political parties it is only one which has ever entered into an electoral alliance with the fundamentalist Islamic parties, it is only one which has their leaders sitting with them in the Cabinet, it is only one which has incorporated the rhetoric of the fundamentalists into its own political philosophy and vision for the country.

However, in the spirit of compro-

But let us put the issue to a test. Let the BNP put its money where its mouth

is when it comes to the question of fundamentalists and extremists.

that it stands shoulder to shoulder with the general public against the rising tide of fundamentalism and extremism by severing its connection with the Iamaat-e-Islami.

The time has come for the BNP to acknowledge that the presence of fundamentalists within the governnent has shielded and emboldened the

which to fight the next election.

the Jamaat is ushered back to the

political wilderness from where the

law-maker Abu Hena, in which he

linked the rise of the extremists with his

party's alliance partners, merely made

concrete an association for which there

The tired litany of how the funda-

mentalist parties have established their

democratic bona fides and have no

connection to the anti-democratic

militants has begun to ring hollow in the

face of mounting evidence to the con-

trary, and it is past due for the BNP to

face up to this reality rather than con-

tinue to sacrifice the security and

stability of the country for electoral

Indeed, Mr. Hena is far from the only

member of his party to be disturbed by

the nexus between the alliance partners

and the extremists, and the rising

is abundant credible evidence.

The recent statement made by BNP

BNP rescued it.

influence of the fundamentalists within the government which has ham-strung efforts to bring the militants to book.

It is worth recalling that Mr. Hena is the MP for Bagmara in Rajshahi, which is where the extremists first rose to prominence, and so he had a front-row seat to witness their rise. In fact it was the victimisation of his own party men by the extremists that has caused Mr. Hena to speak out, and he makes the reasonable point that the extremists' rise to prominence at the expense of the local BNP would not have been possible but for sponsorship from other elereceived 140 seats on its own steam and in 1996, even at its lowest point in the democratic era, it was able to muster 113 seats in parliament.

There is no question that the electoral alliance entered into with the Jamaat was a crucial component of victory in 2001, but such was the level of voter antipathy to the incumbent AL at the time that it is far from a foregone conclusion that the BNP would have been unable to unseat the then government in the absence of its alliance with the Jamaat

In any event, politics is not a horse

STRAIGHT TALK

If the BNP were to drop the Jamaat, the health of politics in this country would improve immeasurably. But if the BNP

insists on retaining its electoral alliance with the Jamaat, this will call into question -- even among its own party

stalwarts -- where it stands on fundamentalism and extremism, and will hand the opposition a very potent issue on

cultural agenda, and to entrench and expand its influence around the coun-

The continuing failure of the law enforcement agencies to bring to book the senior leadership of the banned terrorist outfits and to bring an end to their reign of terror is, as has been widely documented and reported, a direct consequence of the pressure put on the administration by the Jamaat to soft-pedal the investigations.

Similarly, many of the terror suspects now in custody have implicated the senior Jamaat leadership in their

that now is the time to take the party back and show that it can be a progressive force.

As for the AL, this would be a wise issue for it to press in the coming year. Railing exclusively at the BNP qua BNP has indeed given the fundamentalists something of a free pass. Cannot the AL declare that, come what may, it will never pick up the Jamaat as an electoral ally? It needs to have and show the courage of its secular convictions.

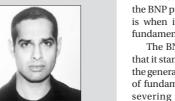
It needs to make the Jamaat the issue. Instead of demanding that the democratically elected alliance government resign, a more defensible demand, and one that would tactically be much sounder, would be that the Jamaat be dropped from the

After all, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the BNP as a party other than those it has chosen to enter into an alliance with. If the BNP were not in alliance with the Jamaat, it would be a perfectly decent right of centre political party (incompetent certainly, but in this it would hardly be unique in Bangladeshi politics) committed, one hopes, to the common good.

If the BNP were to drop the Jamaat, the health of politics in this country would improve immeasurably Elections could be fought on the issues and the differences between two durable democratically-inclined entities that each command widespread mainstream support and respect. Let the Jamaat sink or swim on its own popularity.

But if the BNP insists on retaining its electoral alliance with the Jamaat, this will call into question -- even among its own party stalwarts -- where it stands on fundamentalism and extremism, and will hand the opposition a very potent issue on which to fight the next

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.



ONVENTIONAL wisdom with respect to the rise of religious extremism in the county seems to be that the principal reason the extremists have been able to entrench themselves and gain such a sure foot-hold in the polity is that the AL and the BNP have wasted too much time and energy bickering among

extremists, the argument goes

mise and joining together to combat the extremist menace that the country faces, let us give the BNP the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their comextremists, and that no credible action ments within the government. against the extremists can be taken until Nor is this an isolated case. The

> take-over of Rajshahi University by the student wing of the Jamaat, who have completely eclipsed the BNP student wing on campus, is only one instance among many of a shift in the balance of power between the alliance partners that many BNP leaders and members

> Following the spectacular electoral success of the alliance combine in 2001, it has been argued that the alliance between the BNP and Jamaat has now become central to the basic BNP electoral strategy and that the party cannot afford to jettison its key alliance partner, to whom it owes its success in the last election

However, such an argument does a disservice to the BNP, with the implication that the party's hold on the affections of the general public is so tenuous that it is dependent on its junior partner to return to power. Let us not forget that in 1991 the party

race, and electoral considerations can never be the sole criteria for decisions made. The well-being of the country must be the primary consideration that motivates our politicians in the determinations they make, and there is ample evidence that inducting the Jamaat into the coalition government has been detrimental to the polity.

One final argument made in defence of the alliance is that it is better for elements such as the Jamaat to be co-opted by the political mainstream rather than to remain on the outside, where they may be tempted to resort to undemocratic means of attaining

But comparing the past four years when they have been in power with the of power, it is quite clear that such thinking is untenable. The Jamaat has used its time in office effectively to populate the administrative services and other state organs with its men, to advance its extreme educational and

been revealed to have long-standing connections with the Jamaat or its student front. On its own the Jamaat would be

machinations and themselves have

hard-pressed to muster doubledigits, either in terms of parliamentary seats or percentage of the electorate. Its power, such as it is, stems entirely from the electoral alliance

So the time has come for the BNP to show real commitment when it comes to fighting fundamentalism and extremism, and to declare independence from the Jamaat

If the BNP dissolves its alliance with the Jamaat as a first step in getting to grips with the current threat facing the nation, then I am willing to acknowledge the party's seriousness on the issue.

It is time for the BNP to make its choice and show the nation what it stands for. Many in the BNP would welcome such a move and believe

one sells the soul or the body.

Matter of opinion



MOHAMMAD BADRIII. AHSAN

YPOTHETICAL cases and you don't have to believe them. But let us say, if the Minister of Tourism takes dishes and tration for parties in his house and always forgets to return them, would you say he is doing the right thing? Let his daddy's power to make money and lands his friends on big jobs, who is to blame for such abuse? If a construction project is budgeted twice its cost. a large chunk of which is siphoned off to fund party interests, part divvied up amongst the party bosses, what would you like to say about it?

There are many disappointments in life. People don't always turn up the way they are expected to be -- late for appointments, break promises, lie, cheat, and annoy us with their pretension, arrogance, delusions and stupidity. These human frailties are as common amongst men as ripples are in the water. People have sentiments, people have emotions, moments of doubts, fears and indecisions. Let us say, people are people whether they like it or not, their misdemeanors caused by their genetic composition. Anger, frustration, mood swings drive

them like combustion drives an

What about corruption? Where does it figure in the scheme of life? If you take bribe, keep commissions, exchange favours, compromise standards, where do you draw the line? Is it a disappointment or is it a crime? If people don't offer you help when you need it, if people kick you when you are down, they are not being nice to you. They have the right to endear you and they have the right to ignore you. You can feel sad, you are

asked Dionysus to grant him the magic power to turn into gold everything he touched. Soon he realised it was a mistake. The things he touched increased in monetary value but lost their utility or nutrition value. He touched his own daughter and she turned into a golden statue. Mephistopheles stood on the other extreme. He rewarded Faust with knowledge, wisdom, and pleasures of the youth. In return, Faust sold his

Corruption combines Midas with

the former Chief of Staff to the US Vice President, who has been indicted for perjury? What was the fault of Richard Nixon, who did nothing but authorized a burglary to know how his opposition was getting ready for the election? Why did Gary Hart drop out of the race for the presidency of the United States because he was sleeping with a woman who was not his wife?

Answers my friend, as Bob Dylan sings, are blowing in the wind. If you make money for a company you are given privileges, allowances, and

from the straight line.

Then you have other protocols of That ill-gotten money reminds us perfidy. There is the schoolteacher of the allegory of a peasant and his cat who takes money or sexual favour to One day the peasant came home with give good grades. You have got the a pound of beef and asked his wife to meter man who will fix your electric cook it hot and spicy. When cooked bill for a little baksheesh. Doctors the beef was so delicious that the wife write false post mortem reports in licked it clean. She blamed it on the cat exchange for cash. Engineers don't when her husband came home for approve a project unless their palms lunch and the skeptical husband are greased. Accountants don't pass a bill unless you take care of them. weighed the cat to find that it was Reporters kill stories if the price is exactly one pound in weight. He asked right. The neighbourhood extortionhis wife two critical questions. What happened to the cat if it was to be the weight of the beef? What happened to

> It is easy to track corruption if we weigh the wealth of our fat cats before and after they stay in office. People play tricks to hide their wealth, buying roperty or keeping bank accounts in the names of their wives. Wealth doesn't simply pop out of nothing. If husbands are clean, then wives are dirty. If wives are clean, then husbands are dirty. Both can be dirty at the same time, but none can be clean.

the beef if it was to be the weight of the

Corruption interferes with justice, which undermines the power of the people which diminishes democracy. It's a lot like virginity, character, opinion, knowledge, sunshine, and rain. Either we have it, or we don't. Clarity begins at home. Those who have doubts, look into your hearts. You either condemn or condone. Corruption can be anything but a matter of opinion.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

CROSS TALK

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free to complain and you may or may not choose to believe that these actions will be reconciled in life after

But corruption is more than disappointment. It grows in the head and then goes into the heart, slowly taking us into its coils, squeezing hard until our souls turn into vapour and we become the beast. It slithers from artery to artery, cavity to cavity, swimming in the blood, rolling in the flesh and howling in the breath. It rides on our vanity, thrives in our greed. It rollicks, frolics, arouses, carouses, mutates, and agitates. Corruption is one nasty beast that springs thousand

We know about Midas, and we know about Mephistopheles. Midas Mephistopheles into the menace of a monster that turns the profundity of human conscience into the profanity of a marketplace. Everything is up for grab in corruption, everything assessed and auctioned for the right price, the soul purported to work on the same principle that convinces a woman to sell her body. Corruption by far is the most despicable sin on earth one that is extracted from the filth of all deadly sins, one that turns mind into a snake pit where vipers hiss to strike at decency, honesty, and purity.

So what is wrong with it? What is wrong if media tycoon Conrad Black. who has been recently indicted, made money for the company and used some of it to for private pleasure? What was wrong with "Scooter" Libby,

salaries. But you can't misuse the funds of a company which you have made profitable for the same reason you can't molest your own daughter just because you have fathered her. A political leader can't steal the wealth of a nation just because he has liberated it or brought it on the course of prosperity

There are finer shades of obscenities which separate corruption from moral austerity. Corruption is deviation from the straight line, variance from the moral mean, easy to measure provided the straight line is fixed. Bribe takers, land grabbers, license seekers, permit mongers, political wheelers and dealers, power brokers, arms dealers, smugglers, hoarders, drug lords, and godfathers sit farthest

ists ask for money if you want to build a house or run a business Closer to the straight line are the

small timers, billing clerks, police constables, peons, office assistants, drug peddlers on the street, and traffic police who realise tolls from trucks and buses. These people and the likes of them indulge in minor infractions to compensate for subsistence earning plus a little more.

If you think of it, it's the same sordid nature in varying degrees, the same impulse of vulgarity that reverberates through hierarchy of wanton women from the society girls to those who stalk the mean streets. Our biggest failure is that we can't or don't like to see the similarities. Ill-gotten money is ill-gotten money, whether

The scourge of corruption

Wherever you go in Bangladesh -- from Dhaka to the remotest village -- you cannot escape complaints of corruption. The country has even acquired an international reputation. For the fifth year in a row, Bangladesh has been listed as the most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International. Moazzem Hossain of the BBC has travelled throughout Bangladesh to see how the ubiquitous corruption problem affects people in their everyday lives.



NE side of the Ali Akbar Dail Union in the island of Kutubdia in the south of Bangladesh is fully exposed. Waves of the Bay of Bengal are breaking on part of the shore where there should be a coastal protection embankment.

The people of the coastal areas are living with dread. In the rainy season, sea water almost flooded the homes of local people: collectively they somehow managed to protect themselves by topping up the shore with soil.

Those who can recall the devastating cyclone of 1991 know that another catastrophe is just a matter of time. Only a single wave of the sea is enough to raze their unprotected villages to the ground.

After the disaster of more than a decade ago, a huge amount of money -- much of it foreign assistance -- was pledged and spent in the name of protecting the coastal embankment

and saving Kutubdia. So why is Kutubdia still unprotected? The people of the Ali Akbar Dail Union

much frustration. complain that they are still vulnerable to the sea because of pilferage and corruption. They complain that millions of Takas which were supposed to have been spent in the name of embankment construction have in fact gone into the pockets of corrupt

Corruption: Where does it

Kutubdia is a long way away from Dhaka. Passengers coming to the island by boat sometimes risk their lives getting to the island when the sea is rough. Many mainland facilities do not reach Kutubdia. There is no electricity, no provision of medical facilities and not even a decent road. The one thing that has been successfully

exported from the mainland across the rough sea is the scourge of corruption. For local people, that is a source of

ASM Shahriar of Uttar Dhurum Union of Kutubdia said that while the embankment is built every year, invariably it breaks down. He says that it is a mystery to him why the water development board does not try to build a permanent embankment.

Many islanders say that such a move is an obvious solution: once it is built. money for temporary embankments will not be necessary, and opportuni $ties for annual \, pilferage \, will \, dis appear.$

When the subject of the embankment was raised, the voice of Abu Hanif - a resident of Ali Akbar Dail -- blazed with fury. Some contractors steal, he said, while others do low quality jobs in connivance with the authorities.

"While they are supposed to top the old embankment with three feet of soil,

they just finish the work after using only one and a half feet," he said. "The rest of the money goes into their pock-

ets or the pockets of the engineers. So how is it that such corruption can take place on a yearly basis, affecting the livelihoods of thousands of people? Porshed Alam is a contractor for the

water development board. He was engaged with many embankment building initiatives and said that he is familiar with the ins and outs of pilferage in the embankment construction industry. Mr Alam estimates that fifty percent of money allotted for embankment building is not spent. He gave an example to support his

argument. Assume that a job will be tendered, he said, which might cost millions of Takas. But there is a vast difference between the actual and estimated costs. Surplus cash is distributed among contractors, influential local people and engineers assigned to oversee the work Mr Alam said that he has come

Cycle of corruption One of the big aspects of corruption at a local level -- such as Kutubdia -- is that local people are affected directly, and often their lives and livelihoods become endangered. When it comes to corruption in the big cities, or in

across cases where twenty-million

Takas have been estimated to com-

plete work in which only around half

that figure is actually spent on the

organisations, the whole country is Let us consider the question of corruption at the country's biggest sea

large government or non-government

port, Chittagong. According to a study by Transparency International, bribes involving millions of Takas are exchanged each year in Chittagong port, affecting the export and import of

enormous cost of corruption in Chittagong Port has made it become the most costly port of the region. It has added to their business costs, and made them vulnerable to competition

Businessmen complain that the

So how is the corruption question being dealt with in the port? MA Salam is vice-president of Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Association (BGMEA), the association of factory owners in the ready made garments industry. He thinks that the opportunity for corruption comes from within the bureaucratic port administration.

Many ready made garment factories of Bangladesh have ceased operating in recent months because of increased competition in the world market. But the factories have also been made less efficient because of the cost of corrup-

Smrity Akhter -- a typical victim -used to work in such a factory. She is not aware of the connection between the loss of her employment and corruption at the port. She only knows that many workers like her are jobless and unable to find work elsewhere. Smrity Akhter wants the garments sector of Bangladesh to remain alive, little realising that it chances of survival are considerably reduced while the corruption menace remains.

While businessmen complain about the port administration and the customs authority, they too are not immune from allegations of corrup-

Sahadat Hossain, the chairman of the port, says that bureaucracy has been reduced, and that the time taken to offload and on-load goods has also come down. But he says the business community is failing to make similar

Everybody points towards a recent incident in which a businessman imported two Mercedes cars, declaring them to be scraps. When he was caught, the cars were destroyed by the customs authority. All parties associated with corruption in the port claim their innocence and blame other parties. Yet none denies the fact that corruption exists overwhelmingly.

Why then can this corruption not be properly tackled and dealt with?

Anti-Corruption Commission

Almost all policymakers agree that the main reason is the absence of political goodwill. Before the last general election the

resent alliance government promised to establish an independent anticorruption commission. It took three vears before it was finally set up, and then only after much procrastination. Even now, many doubt its independence, questioning whether it will be able to wield authority over the govThe executive director of

Transparency International, Iftekharuzzaman says that the commission's effectiveness is hampered because the government maintains financial and administrative control over it, right down to the appointment of commissioners Dr Zaman is also worried about the

commission from the ranks of the abolished anti-corruption bureau, which he says will send negative $messages\,about\,its\,trustworthiness.$ Such a conclusion is not shared by members of the commission themselves. One of them, M

Maniruzzaman, told me that they

process of appointing staff in the

certainly do have enough power to take action against corruption, and can do so at any level of government. He said staff on the commission are impartial, and only recruited after thorough screenings and assessments. The kind of vigilance he describes will need to be applied diligently over

many years if Bangladesh is finally to win its protracted struggle against the scourge of corruption.

The Daily Star is the print media partner of BBC for the programme Bangladesh Sanglap