

## What a mess!

**A stupendous damage control exercise stares the education ministry in the face**

THE "postponement" -- some read abandonment -- of the decision to introduce uni-track secondary education system to replace the three-decade-old multi-stream curricula from January 2006 is as anti-climatic as it has proved wasteful in terms of time, energy and money and the souring of national mood.

The reversion to the old system comes about three weeks prior to the new academic session. According to the earlier plan for adoption of the uni-track curricula, 19 text books had to be published, but now with the switch-back to the multi-track system books on as many as 26 subjects will have to be printed. There is hardly any lead time for that. As a result, eighty-five lakh secondary school-level students are thrown in varying degrees of uncertainty in getting their text books in time for the new session. Almost certainly around 10 lakh Class-IX students will suffer for lack of text books which are to be published in keeping with the old syllabus now that the costly preparations made for books suited for uni-track instructions are going waste. Another financial and book distribution scandal is perhaps in the making.

It is a classic example of a debacle in decision-making based on short-sighted and imprudent display of administrative prowess in a matter which was purely educational demanding a consultative process participated by experts, academics, school authorities, teaching community and the civil society at large. Matters such as these would have been brought to parliament for debate and deliberation in any other country for associating people with the decision-making touching the academic lives of millions. Sadly, while this was not done here, the very least that the government could have done was to hold sustained national debates involving all stakeholders so as to arrive at a collective decision on the rationale for change, the contents of it, the modus operandi and the timetable for it. The issue being a wholly apolitical one, there should not have been any mental block in involving all stakeholders with the decision-making process. Equally importantly, there was the stupendous need for massive preparations to make the paradigm shift in terms of curricula.

All that we look forward to now is a vigorous government effort for publication of quality text books and their distribution to all students latest by mid-January 2006.

## A message from Dinajpur

*The by-poll result is worthy of note*

THE victory at the Dinajpur-1 by-poll by Monoranjan Sheel, an independent candidate, over his Jamaat rival, Aftabuddin Mollah, is significant in more ways than one. For one thing, he won without any big party affiliation. Furthermore, coming from the minority community, he has defeated a candidate from a religion-based party, reflecting thereby not only his own convincing credentials but also a secular choice on the part of the voters in that constituency.

It is also interesting to note that on being refused nomination from the Jatiya Party (JP), he still managed to win in the northern region of the country which is regarded as a JP stronghold.

Another dimension to this election is Awami League's boycott of it implying thereby that probably Sheel drew support from AL vote bank.

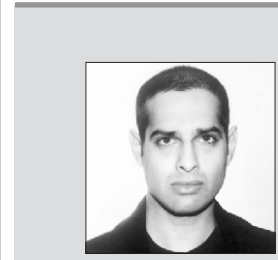
The poll outcome may have been indicative of anti-incumbency at least within that area coupled with a revulsion against far right political agenda of the extremist mould. That way, the significance of the result should not be lost either on Jamaat or the BNP-led ruling coalition.

Also of significance is the fact that the victor and the vanquished have both termed the election free and fair. The acceptance of the poll result by both sides has actually strengthened our faith in the electoral process. We would therefore take this opportunity of thanking the Election Commission and the local administration for the holding of the elections in a free and fair atmosphere barring a few stray incidents.

# The benefits of dialogue

## STRAIGHT TALK

Perhaps nothing constructive will come of such a dialogue because the BNP seems incapable of being shamed into cleaning house. But such a dialogue would have the effect of unequivocally showing the country where the problem truly lies, and to the extent that it could cause a decisive shift in public opinion, may well force the government to take corrective measures.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONE of the distinguishing features of Bangladeshi politics is the political parties' penchant for taking decisions that while understandable in a narrow sense are most likely counter-productive to their own interests in the long run.

Time and again, this is precisely the path chosen by both the BNP and the AL. This short-sightedness, this uncanny ability to make the politically tin-eared decision, is to my mind almost as disconcerting as the parties' apparent indifference to the national interest and the will of the public.

Right now, I am thinking of the AL refusal to sit down with the government for talks on how to deal with the threat of terrorism that has risen to the fore in the past few weeks.

It seems to me that the offer for dialogue is a golden opportunity for the AL to hold the government's feet to the fire for its actions and inaction that have led us to this pass, and to articulate its own vision of the future, including its vision for how to deal with the extremists, for the entire country to

hear. The opposition has been doing well in recent months, partly due to the government's spectacular mishandling of the terrorist threat as well as its continuing under-performance in almost all other aspects of governance, and partly due to the opposition's own initiatives. Now it has been handed the opportunity to press its advantage and consolidate its gains.

The November 22 unveiling of a common minimum programme at the successful grand rally in Dhaka (that the government shamefully did everything in its power to thwart) was a good first step.

One of the principal criticisms of the opposition had been that it had not articulated how a 14-party alliance government would be different from the current one. Now the opposition has put forth a positive agenda that can serve as a basis for its campaign to convince the country that it is a credible alternative. The next step needs to be to add capacity -- to bring in some new faces -- to convince the country that it has the personnel to be able to effectuate its ambitious plans.

But right now, the main concern for the people is the security situation. The big debate right now is whether or not the opposition should sit down with the government in an effort to get to the bottom of this crisis.

I am of the opinion that the opposition should agree to talks, if for no other reason, than to bring the facts of the current crisis and its vision for how to resolve the crisis

before the public. In times of national crisis a little statesmanship goes a long way. Such a decision would have a good effect on the morale of the nation, which is understandably quite low at present. The country is tense and apprehensive and any steps that can be taken that would lift public confidence are to be welcomed.

The talks may not elicit anything meaningful in terms of changing government policy, as the opposition claims. The opposition has made the point that the government, up to and including the prime minister, to this day continues to deny the now well-substantiated links between the terrorists and elements within the government, and instead, in the face of all available evidence and common sense, continues to implicate the AL.

Given this kind of backdrop, there is a good chance that the government will continue on its current path regardless of what is brought up at the dialogue. It is no secret what needs to be done to get to the bottom of this crisis and the government appears to have little inclination to take the necessary steps.

However, it seems to me that the AL could quite easily turn talks with the government to its advantage, which, while it might not prompt the government to take the corrective action needed, would nevertheless not be without attendant benefits, both for the country and for the opposition.

In my opinion, it should be quite possible to structure the talks in such a way that the public's

involvement and engagement with the dialogue could be maximized, and at the same time the opposition's concerns about the process could be allayed.

The first point that I would like to suggest is for the dialogue to be carried live on television so that the public can see and hear everything. This dialogue would primarily be for the benefit of the public which wants to know what has been done to secure the nation against the terrorist threat and what steps are planned for the future. Televising the dialogue so that deliberations are held in front of the public would do more to restore much needed public confidence than any other measure I can think of.

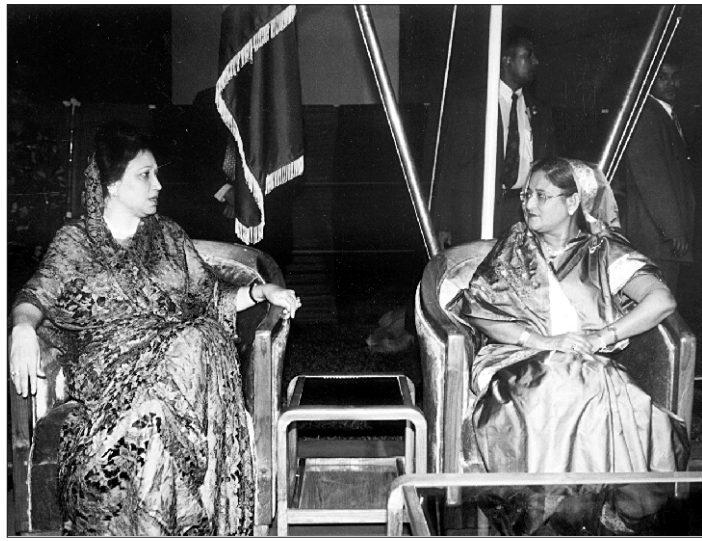
The second condition that I would like to suggest would be that the dialogue be moderated properly by an impartial third party, something that is missing in parliament.

The third condition that I think would make the process more meaningful would be if the results of the investigations so far were made public and available for scrutiny and if such scrutiny were part of the dialogue.

Dialogue between the government and the opposition can now be on a level playing field. The opposition need not worry about the speaker of the house refusing to take their questions, not allotting them time to speak, or turning off their microphones.

In fact, such a dialogue would have the effect of permitting the leader of the opposition to speak to the prime minister on a more or less equal footing, which would do more to enhance her credibility in the eyes of the nation than a hundred speeches before the party faithful at rallies around the country.

The tactical advantage to be gained by the AL from agreeing to sit for talks when the BNP is on the defensive would be considerable. Platforms where the government and the opposition can sit as



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equals are few and far between in Bangladesh, and when the opportunity presents itself, the opposition, in my opinion, would be well served to grab it with both hands.

It seems to me that a public airing of the evidence implicating elements within the ruling alliance and of government inaction in pursuit of the extremists would do wonders for the opposition.

I do not think that the opposition can really lose the debate if it is held in front of the entire country. The allegations put forth by the government with respect to AL complicity and involvement are simply too preposterous to withstand close scrutiny.

If juxtaposed against the mounting evidence implicating elements within the government, it will be clear to the country who is telling the truth, and frankly this will damage the government's credibility even further. Sitting for dialogue will provide the opposition with a forum to highlight the many failures of the government when it comes to tackling the terror threat.

Perhaps nothing constructive will come of such a dialogue because the BNP seems incapable of being shamed into cleaning house. But such a dialogue would

have the effect of unequivocally showing the country where the problem truly lies, and to the extent that it could cause a decisive shift in public opinion, may well force the government to take corrective measures.

By refusing to sit for talks, the AL not only continues to be complicit in the public remaining in the dark as to where things stand, but it actually gives the government the opportunity to further muddy the waters. Ever eager to take the low road, our oleaginous law minister is already on record hinting that the AL refusal to sit for talks will deepen suspicions of its links to the terrorists.

Sitting down for talks with the government will, at the very least, provide a valuable service to the people of the country, who are desperate for information and to hear what plans our leaders have to address the crisis. And if the opposition succeeds in shifting public opinion, it may well succeed in forcing the government's hand when it comes to taking sterner action against the extremists.

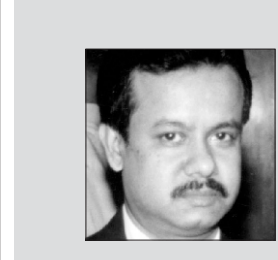
Either way, it is definitely worth a shot.

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# Inmate of illusion

## CROSS TALK

She has been an inmate of illusion all her life, falling in love with love itself, her grief-stricken heart searching to find the answer to a simple question. Why love, if it hurts so much?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SHE wept for him until she was convinced that prayers and tears couldn't reverse death. He died when they were in college, when one day a perfectly healthy-looking handsome young man came home feeling dizzy and was diagnosed in the advanced stage of leukaemia. For the next few months, she prayed for him, spent her wakeful hours at his bedside, shed tears, went from doctor to doctor with him for tests, blood transfusions and consultations, whispering words of love and hope into his ears, holding his hands and vowing again and again not to forget him after his death. Then he died

one stormy night, leaving behind a grieving soul who felt like a bride widowed before the consummation of her marriage.

Family and friends told her it was an illusion, that she was in a state of shock and needed to let go of what was gone instead of holding it inside her chest. They said she could not be his wife because they were never married in the eye of God. But she knew she had taken the vow in her heart, promising to a dying man that his memory was not going to be replaced by another man. She found it hard to believe that people preferred to get married in front of others before they got married in their hearts.

Two years later when she graduated from college, her parents forced her to get married, insisting that one life was too short to be given to the memory of a dead man. Love, they said, was frenzy of youth which had nothing to do with the purpose of life. It was important to get married, raise children, grow old, play with the grandchildren, and then complete the cycle of life just like a tree that starts from the seed, grows to bear fruit, and then gets chopped into firewood before burning into ashes.

But he always remained on her mind like the stars hiding in the daylight. She thought of him, saw him in her dreams, and heard his voice, his agonised face in deathbed flashing before her eyes every night when she lay down next to her husband, feeling guilty in the embrace of another man she had promised was never going to come between them. But she couldn't cry anymore, her eyes dried like a spent stream in the summer, her empty heart aching from the spasms of sorrow, haunted by the ghost of lost love.

She gave birth to two children, naming her only son after him, although her husband initially resisted the idea. Man could be ludicrously jealous if his woman cherished another man, even if that man was long dead and buried. She wept again after many years when she called her son by his name for the first time, as if after all these years her unfinished desire for the love of her life had gathered into the flesh and blood of a child conceived in her aching womb, soaked in the grief of her loss, in the vapour of her tears.

So many men lived in this world, so many of them vicious and vulgar,

yet this one man, one she loved, one who moved in her blood and breathed in her breath had to die so young! Her parents died between the birth of her two children, and friends and relatives died over the years. Life evolved like a plot with changing cast, his memory receding as familiar characters disappeared, people who reminded her of him, people who reminded her that once the power of love was defeated in the clutches of death.

After all these years, she could hear the footsteps of death inside her own body, as if a whimsical assassin, who took the life of her beloved, had now returned to finish his job. What could one make of life if not the warmth of flesh, the flesh that quivered in the intensity of living, lust and love shooting through it like voltage in live wires? She loved him, and that love kept her flesh warm for all these years, long after the flesh of her beloved had turned cold and stiff in the rigors of death and time. He never responded to her call again, never moved his hand to wipe her tears, never stood up to take her in his embrace, never cast a glance on her, all these years her flesh yearning for him like a parched land awaiting a rain shower.

Why has she lived without him, and how could she live without him for so many years? She has asked these questions to herself many times, wondering how life was stubborn not to allow erasure of what was

destined to endure. She wished to die every night, smitten by shame, guilt and loneliness, her spirit eaten by the moths of anguish, yet refusing to give up in the face of the emptiness that turned life into nothing but the eerie desolation of a deserted house.

The doctors have told her that she was going to recover and live for many more years. What did they know about life and death? What did they know about how death could sneak up every day on the breath that arises from the bottom of a despairing heart? What did they know about how she had died a long time ago, never to recover from the loss which had left her hollow, going through marriage, childbearing and middle age like a conditioned animal in a laboratory experiment?

When she looks back at her past, when she steps back to those days of youth, life shrinks and freezes into a single moment when his eyes moved around friends and relatives and then fixed on her before going still. She couldn't clearly see his face, her eyes blurred by tears as if she was watching him through torrential rains, before the room drowned in wailing voices as doctors frantically tried to find his pulse, and everybody else rushed to his parents who were rolling on the floor. She had felt a sharp pain shooting through her body that numbed her heart as she stood in that crowded room full of strangers who were connected to her by one single life that had just finished its

earthly time. People come into this world and then they go away, all of them, expiring like merchandise on the shelves of a store at varying times. It is now her time to go as it was once her time to come. What about the burden that she has carried all her life? What did she do to deserve this terrible suffering, this curse of longing for what was gone?

The sun was setting on the western sky, smearing the world with crimson shadow that reminds her of the approaching end. She will get ready to offer her evening prayer aided by her daughter, because she feels exhausted if she has to sit upright without any support. Then she would lie down, waiting for her son who would come straight from work. Until then she would close her eyes and think of him, reclaiming the memories of love from the wasteland of the past, his face emerging like a photograph developing in the darkroom.

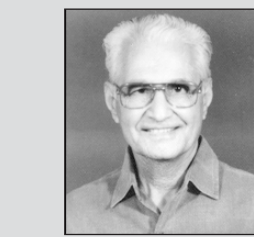
She is now prepared to die, eager to cross over to the other side with the restlessness of someone who is waiting to unite with a long lost friend. There is a time for people; there is a time for trees. To be born is to die, and it is a part of life. She has been an inmate of illusion all her life, falling in love with love itself, her grief-stricken heart searching to find the answer to a simple question. Why love, if it hurts so much?

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# Will Israel change?

## PLAIN WORDS

The political battle now is between Peretz's social ideas and the lure of Palestinian land held out by both Netanyahu and Sharon. Netanyahu is, if possible, more to the Right than even Sharon. But Sharon is about as Rightist as they come. It is his political flare that he has got himself into the situation where he looks like a Centrist force.



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

STORMY changes have occurred in the day-to-day politics of Israel: Ariel Sharon, the Prime Minister, has resigned from the party he founded in 1973, the Likud, and Shimon Perez has dissociated from Labour Party, after being unexpectedly defeated for the party leadership.

Sharon advised the President to dissolve the Knesset (parliament) who ordered a general election on March 28 next year. Sharon has formed a 'Centrist' party of his own, Kadima. What do these developments signify?

One must begin by answering one's likely critics who may question these developments' importance for Pakistanis? The short answer is that something of importance for Pakistanis hinges on these changes: Pakistanis have always been deeply concerned with what happens to Palestine and Palestinians. What happens in Israel vitally affects the future of Palestinians. Palestinians have virtually been left alone by most Arab states. Their cause however deserves sympathy of all humanists and democrats. But there is more.

Pakistan has taken baby steps towards recognizing Israel, whether

the people like it or not. Then, the net change that might take place in Israeli politics as a result of March 28 election would make a lot of difference to the fortunes of Palestinians and many others farther afield. Also, this would pre-empt significant changes in the Middle East. Encouraging Israel means giving it licence to do to Palestinians what its bellicose leaders please. The latter are not believers in human equality; for them Palestinian rights mean nothing. Only Israelis have unlimited rights. There is pressing need for sane minded people to stand by Palestinians' rights. This may look rather academic to others. But historically it is of much significance to Pakistanis.

The changes in Israel have occurred because of divisions and confusion within Israeli politics.

Sharon, by unilaterally withdrawing from Gaza Strip, while keeping the area in an iron grip, clears the road to implement his own programme for West Bank areas. Few can be certain what Sharon actually aims at. The separation wall is now nearing completion. A large amount of land, slightly more than half of West Bank, looks likely to be usurped by Israel. Shimon Perez' accession to his side will strengthen Sharon who wants to negotiate with Palestinians from a position of invincible strength. He means to convert the proposed Palestinian state into quite widely separated cantons, constantly surrounded and controlled by Israeli army. It is true Sharon has, rather ambiguously, said he accepts the US-given roadmap. But what that precisely means is unclear because Israel has had too many reservations and unexpected interpretations of both the Oslo agreement and the roadmap.

But some new uncertainties have arisen. The Israeli rightwing is now even more divided. The Americans are now trying to force the Israelis on to the roadmap that they had prescribed for the Arab-Israeli dispute. As a result of which Sharon decided to gamble: he

expects to win the next election through the new party by luring some of the Centrists and even many Labour voters to his side by his bogus talk of promoting a centrist politics. How he will act after winning the polls remains a big uncertainty.

Let us note that Sharon is under attack from the extreme Right, represented mainly by Benjamin Netanyahu, a former Prime Minister and darling of Likud's ultras. Probably much of Israeli Right stays with Ariel Sharon, now trying to lure some Centrists and even Leftists to his Kadima party by the red herring of a new party and new politics. But the Labour Party has elected a new leader with a new line a radical change.

Amir Peretz, the new Labour Chief, is a Sephardim (of Asian-African origin). He is not a white-skinned immigrant from Europe (Ashkenazi) as all Labour leaders have been hitherto. He has already electrified the rather dormant Left in Israel. He represents a virtually new political strand in Israeli politics. Hitherto, Israeli politics was largely concerned relations with the Palestinians with a view to making Israel secure. Security has been the leitmotif of Israeli politics so far. In its

place Amir Peretz, has brought some harsh facts of Israeli life centre stage.

Poverty line in Israel may be 30 percent or thereabout. The discrepancies in incomes and opportunities between the Ashkenazi and the darker Sephardim, the have-nots, have been growing. He wants more social solidarity -- i.e. more expenditure on social sectors -- to improve the living conditions of the bottom 40 percent of Israelis. Insofar as the security question is concerned, Peretz is willing to sign a peace treaty with the Palestinians on the basis of 1967 frontiers, as the UN Resolution 242 actually prescribed. He is apparently willing to withdraw from West Bank and Gaza, dismantle settlements and let a true Palestinian state arise. That is the promise. The question is would this truly make Israeli Left invincible or the old magic of security questions would continue to give the rightwing victory on March 28 next.

What is not in doubt is that Netanyahu's ultra right will fiercely attack Sharon. Netanyahu stands for even less land to Palestinians and status quo on social matters. He is likely to be supported in the next Parliament by other small Right groups. Sharon's chances only lie in

his personal popularity that eats into all political divisions. He is also banking on the bulk of Right as well as basically Rightist elements inside the Labour Party. The latter has lately been socially as conservative as any Rightist. They are not pushed by social issues of persistent unemployment and growing disparities of income for a growing numbers.

The gamble therefore is that Sharon hopes by his new party to lure as many votes from Labour as possible. On the other side, the question is whether the new Labour leader can revive the earlier peace camp and energise the party on social questions and make greater social solidarity and a more equitable distribution of wealth election issue. Can Peretz create a new Left, raring to come back, is the question? Can he make it grow? He has risen from the ranks as a trade unionist. Can he capture a majority of Knesset seats on his own or in coalition with Centrist elements, if any are left?

Whether Netanyahu wins or Sharon carries the Right, there remains the question of peace terms for the hapless Palestinians. The only ray of hope the Palestinians can see -- and they may be mistaken -- is in the

American intervention. How far can American intervention go is a difficult question to answer. The major uncertainty has to be noted: whether a newly energized Left can come out of the cold? It has been Sharon's junior partner. Is it a new force?

The political battle now is between Peretz's social ideas and the lure of Palestinian land held out by both Netanyahu and Sharon. Netanyahu is, if possible, more to the Right than even Sharon. But Sharon is about as Rightist as they come. It is his political flare that he has got himself into the situation where he looks like a Centrist force. Doubtless that is a price that Sharon is paying to defeat Netanyahu. The latter may also have to pay some price on social questions, while focusing only on security questions. Anyway, the next election in Israel would be significant for outside world for what policies does the new government in April next adopt on questions vis-à-vis the Palestinian state and whether Peretz will actually be able to win on a peace programme by brining social questions centre stage.

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