

What a pointless row!

The controversy must end here

WE have the replies of Prof Muzaffar Ahmad, chairman, board of trustees of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) to the dramatic reactions of LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Environment Minister Tariquul Islam to the corruption database re-leased, of late, by the TIB. Prof Ahmad has rebutted the points raised by the LGRD minister making it abundantly clear that the question of withdrawal of the report, as demanded by the minister, does not arise as it was prepared in a scientific way. It was a compilation of graft incidents published in the print media which was also corroborated by cross-checking.

The most scurrilous point is that the chairman of the TIB trustee board was denigrated by the minister who said publicly, as telecast over TV, that Prof Ahmad had lost his job as an advisor to Ziaur Rahman's government due to 'corruption'. Prof Ahmad has refuted the allegation by clarifying that it was he who resigned (rather than being sacked) over difference of opinion with the then head of government. After this, the controversy whipped up by the minister, must be laid to rest.

TIB has also been threatened that if the corruption database report were not withdrawn, appropriate action will follow from the minister. There would be simultaneous cases filed against the TIB report and that the TIB itself will be rendered inoperative.

The entire gamut of the ministerial reaction can either be described as immature and naive or a product from an unaccountable government. What was the point in staging a drama with a TIB representative taking a brunt of it all. The impetuous reaction of the ministers was more with an eye to the election rather than something based on facts.

If the ministers had any serious observations to make then they could either issue a written statement or met with the TIB leaders by way of seeking clarification. Now, the offer of the chairman of the trustee board for a face-to-face meeting appears potentially of a trouble shooting type and perhaps needs to be taken by the LGRD minister in good grace.

In conclusion, we would like to use a quote from the chairman of the TIB trustee board: 'All the ruling parties end up treating TIB as an opponent.' This attitude cannot help fight corruption. We suggest that if the energy expended by the ministers to launch an attack on TIB were used to curb corruption, the evil would have been eradicated by now.

'No' to hartal and boycott of parliament

A clear message to opposition, ruling party

A survey conducted by a recognised research organisation, at the initiative of Prothom Alo, amongst four thousand people drawn from a cross section of the society reveals that 75 percent of the respondents are against hartal while 70 percent disapprove of boycott of parliament. Although the survey put other questions on the demand for resignation of the government and the status of elected representatives keeping their commitments, we confine our comments to hartal and parliament boycott.

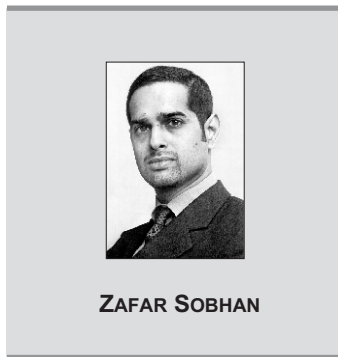
No doubt both the issues should attract attention of the opposition since these relate to them. Similar views were expressed in the media on several occasions. This, however, does not exonerate the ruling coalition of their share of responsibilities. It has often been seen that parliament sessions were marred by lack of quorum due to absence of many ministers and lawmakers belonging to the ruling coalition as well as the opposition. This is a reflection of the casual attitude of the ruling party towards the importance and sanctity of the parliament in a democratic system.

Then, if one turns to the parliamentary standing committees, most of them, do not hold the mandatory monthly meeting; the ministers, government functionaries and influential lawmakers do not attend committee meetings on a regular basis and substantive issues are mostly skipped.

The cumulative effect of all these is that the elected lawmakers whether belonging to the opposition or the ruling coalition are being deprived of their legitimate rights of raising or discussing the problems and issues of their respective constituencies.

We, therefore, strongly believe that a major shift in attitudes by both the two main political parties must take place now in deference to public opinion and for the sake of upholding democratic traditions.

Zinedine Agonistes



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE World Cup always breaks your heart. But this year's competition was one that will live on in the annals of misfortune and catastrophe. It was true tragedy in the sense contemplated by Aristotle all those centuries ago: the fall of a great man, brought down by his tragic flaw, arousing the emotions of fear and pity.

Could there be a better encapsulation of the stunning conclusion to the month-long tournament that brought the planet to a stand-still and sent shock-waves from one end of the globe to the other.

French writer and social commentator Bernard-Henri Levy, writing in the Wall Street Journal, has perhaps put it the most eloquently, and I take the liberty of quoting him at some length:

"Here is one of the greatest players of all time, a legend, a myth for the entire planet, and universally acclaimed. Here is a champion who, in front of two billion people, was putting the final touches on one of the most extraordinary sagas in soccer's history.

"Here is a man of providence, a savior, who was sought out, like Achilles in his tent of grudge and rage, because he was believed to be the only one who could avert his countrymen's fated decline.

"And then this valiant knight who is a hair's breadth from victory and just minutes from the end of a historic match (and of a career that will carry

him into the Pantheon of stadium-gods); this giant who, like the Titans of the ancient world, has known Glory, then Exile, then Return and Redemption; this redeemer, this blue angel dressed in white, who had only the very last steps to scale to enter Olympus for good, commits a crazy incomprehensible act that amounts to disqualification from the soccer ritualthe final image of him that will go down in history and, in lieu of apotheosis, will cast him into hell."

For those of us who have spent the last month transfixed in front of the television screen as we do every four years, and this includes a considerable proportion of the Bangladeshi population, these heart-felt words are no melodramatic overstatement, no overwrought soliloquizing, but perfectly capture the epic sweep of this great tournament and the very essence of the tragedy that befell the finest player of the past decade Zinedine Zidane in the waning minutes of the 2006 World Cup final.

Football, to be sure, is a matter of life and death for the discerning enthusiast. The language of football is the language of the world, and there is no emotion that unifies the planet more than love of the game that is played and followed everywhere from the smallest village in Africa to the largest city in Europe.

Nowhere is this more true than in Bangladesh where every four years the entire nation re-arranges its

cultural life around this tournament that Bangladesh has never come close to qualifying for. Less important matters such as party politics and upcoming elections take a back-seat as young and old alike stay awake all hours of the night to catch a quadrennial glimpse of the greatest show on earth that transports us from the dreariness of everyday life into the excitement of this timeless spectacle.

Despite the fact that there had been a chronic shortage of electricity, the government ensured that power was available all over the country during the tournament, heedful, perhaps, of the very real danger that if it were unable to provide power for people to watch the World Cup, then we wouldn't have to wait for the caretaker government and new elections, the government might fall then and there.

As Levy wrote in his WSJ piece, after many twists and turns, this year's tournament was heading towards a dramatic fairy-tale climax.

No one had given the French side much of chance. True they were led by a man who had once been the world's best, but there was definitely a weariness to the team, most of whom, despite their unquestioned brilliance, had seen better days. The memory of their shock first-round exit at the last World Cup had still not faded and observers wondered how this year's team, four years older, four years more fractious, would do much

better.

Nor did they look impressive in their early matches. Lack-lustre draws with Switzerland and South Korea seemed to confirm their decrepitude. Facing elimination in their final first round game, they rallied to defeat Togo, but hardly in convincing fashion.

In the second round, they faced Spain, whom many were tipping to win the tournament after their electrifying performances in the opening round. Spain had come, seemingly from nowhere, and unveiled on the world stage a team of astonishing talent and virtuosity, brimming with energy and inventiveness.

But in a classic confrontation between experience and innocence, age and youth, wisdom and impetuosity, the French calmly sliced and diced the Spanish on their way to a convincing 3-1 victory.

The man of the match was the old lion Zidane. Showing that his advancing age had withered neither his skill nor his guile, he effortlessly controlled the tempo of the game, playing with his sublime touch of old. It was he who put the dagger in Spanish hearts with the third goal, superbly taken on the break as he glided effortlessly past the hapless Spanish defence before slotting the ball in the corner of the net with clinical precision. From the moment he touched the ball 35 yards from goal and with defenders on his heels there

was no question that the ball was ending up in the back of the net.

On to the quarter-finals against the pre-tournament favourites, Brazil. Once again, it was Zidane who dominated the game, making it clear to anyone watching that it was he, not either of the young pretenders in a yellow shirt, who was still the world's finest talent. Once again, it was Zidane, playing like a man possessed, who was instrumental in creating the goal that took the French through to the next round.

By the time the semi-finals rolled around the world had begun to realize that Zidane was a man of destiny and that we were witnessing one of the most astonishing come-backs of modern times. Once again, it was Zidane, who made the difference, his performance on the field evoking images of the man who had almost single-handedly won the tournament for France eight years before, converting the game-winning penalty for good measure.

The stage was therefore set for not just a French triumph but a story-book ending to one of the most magnificent of careers. Everything was going according to script. Once again, it was Zidane, with ice-cold nerve, who put France in the lead with the most audacious of penalty kicks. The Italians did manage to equalize on nineteen minutes, but after half-time there was only one team in it.

This then, was the backdrop to the calamity, al naqba, Zidane's moment of madness that brought his world crashing down and sent the trophy, undeserved, to Rome.

This is not to condone or excuse his actions. Even though he was provoked, there can be no justification for Zidane's temporary act of insanity that effectively lost France the World Cup, and the referee had no option but to red card him.

But I do not think that he should be judged by one moment of weakness and that it should in any way detract from the memory of one of the most

mesmerizing footballers of the modern era. Zidane's names belongs up there with those of Pele and Beckenbauer and Maradona, and nothing can tarnish his image as one of the greatest footballers the world has ever seen or is ever likely to see.

The tragedy is not Zidane's alone but that of the entire French team and the nation it represented. This was the French team of the 2005 riots, this was a team made up of seven black men of West African or Caribbean origin, captained by the son of Algerian immigrants; out of a squad of twenty-three, all but seven were non-white. This team was the face of the new France, the France of the marginalized and alienated and dispossessed. This team was Jean-Marie Le Pen's nightmare.

But in the blink of an eye, the dream was over. Zidane's heroic come-back was halted in its tracks and his team of brilliant misfits and unlikely anti-heroes were finally defeated in a penalty shoot-out that they could not have lost had their talismanic captain still been among them.

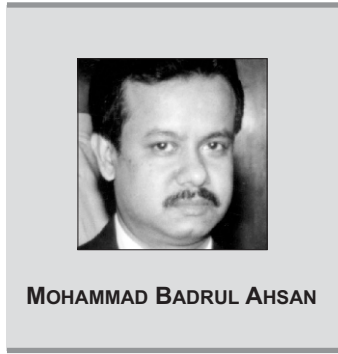
Like I said at the outset, it was pure tragedy in the tradition of Athenian theatre. For Zidane, raised as the son of Muslim immigrants on the mean streets of Marseilles, who has received 14 red cards in his illustrious but tempestuous career, wrath has always been his fatal, tragic flaw. As team-mate Thierry Henry has said: "You can take the man out of the rough neighbourhood, but you can't take the rough neighbourhood out of the man."

Tragic as the denouement of the World Cup has been, perhaps the calamitous saga of Zinedine Zidane and his ultimate fall from grace just as he was reaching the pinnacle of glory has taught us the most important lesson of all.

There are no story-book endings in real life.

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The Ershad Curve



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

POLITICS is looking like a card game since the whiff of rumour started last week that former president Ershad might join the BNP-led coalition. It reminded one specially of nine cards, when every player picks up cards discarded by others in their bid to form suits of runs, colours and trios. Politicians are going through the stack of discarded cards, and looking for a fallen dictator as their trump.

Now card, unlike chess, is not an end-game. It is a game of permutation and combination where the guiding principle is to shuffle and move on. That is why there is no last word in politics. Today's words can be swallowed tomorrow so long as it is convenient. Politics is pretty much bait and switch. Bite your tongue! It is a business run on bluffs.

Yet it is difficult to digest the prospect of the speculation that spread last week. A dictator, who

was dragged from power and then convicted as a felon, is coming to save a coalition. What about those who once laid down their lives to bring him down from power? It is as embarrassing as licking one's own spit, at least as ludicrous as calling the burglar to pick the lock so that one could get back into the house.

Frankly speaking, it is an insult to the imagination that Ershad should be part of anything that is important for us. But then democracy has its funny rules. It respects even a tree stump if it is elected by the people. Ershad, however, deserves more credit than that. He has been the longest-serving ruler of this country, nine years at a stretch. He built many roads during his time, invigorated the private sector and managed foreign policy reasonably well. All said and done, he is the only ruler who has showed

certain amount of aesthetic sense.

Then he is also responsible for proliferation of vices. Cronyism, appeasement, condoning, womanizing, land grabbing, and most other ills which are still wasting this country, are the proud legacy of his time. One can't deny that the Ershadian era was a period of good times. Thanks to him, many of our industrialists, bureaucrats, leading journalists, intellectuals and society girls made money, got housing plots and enjoyed perks and foreign trips. To be fair, all those vices always existed. But Ershad played Freud to make the abnormal feel normal and altogether destroyed the concept of guilt.

If anything, that is the lasting legacy of the former dictator. He completely eliminated guilt from the society so that there is no dilemma between good and bad so long as

end justifies the means. He hardly sent people to jail, never sought revenge on his adversaries (except one man who tried to steal a jewel of his heart), offered gifts (bribes) to win over enemies, encouraged art, culture, literature, and poetry. He successfully created an illusion that right and wrong did not matter. By hook or crook, it was more important to beget and win.

It is an irony of fate that Frankenstein should beat the master at his game. Our modern politics is a creation of the man who went to mosques on Fridays and lied that he was instructed or inspired to come in his dream. Many years ago, I watched a comedy series called The Jeffersons, the story of an African-American dry cleaner who was ready to do anything for the sake of money. He practiced what he called The

Jefferson Curve, which, he explained to his store clerk, was his ability to "throw them what they want to know."

Much of our politics stems from that same conviction. Ershad basically introduced this style in our politics, throwing at people what they wanted to hear. He was all things to all people, lover to women, commander-in-chief to the army, president to the people, friend to big business, poet to intellectuals, connoisseur to art, patron to sports, chameleon to turncoat politicians and cult figure to crooks.

In fact, Ershad and his multiple personality took our contentious politics to the next level, where confrontation for principles gave way to contest for power. He never stood up for anything except his grip on power, compromising with compromises to go with the flow, keeping in view nothing but his own ambition to rule. His name ought to be synonymous with political opportunism like Xerox is synonymous with photocopying.

If this man forms a coalition with BNP, one of the parties which had spearheaded the movement to topple him because he was a tyrant, what do we go back to tell the families of those who had died in that struggle? Do we tell them that their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands had died so that our politicians could play their games? Do we tell them that their sacrifices were circumstantial to the emo-

tional adjustments of our politicians? Do we tell the families to reshuffle their grief and forget their loss?

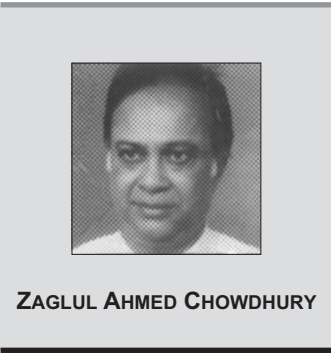
It is shocking to know that the prime minister has asked Ershad to join the coalition, and, given the helter-skelter of last-minute politics, this might happen for real. But it will be sad to watch Frankenstein embrace its master, taking unscrupulous politics to a new height. We know why the prime minister has made her offer. She must have been convinced that it would strengthen her hands in the next election and bring her party back to power.

Once again, the Ershad curve has swerved. This time he told the prime minister what she wanted to hear, that he would not form a coalition with Awami League or another party. Back to the card game, he has done what it takes to get picked up from the discarded cards. It is a vindication of his guile and a proof that every time it works!

Whether it works for the country is another question. May be, the politicians have got it all wrong. A republic is not the place where they should rip off the public coming and going. Only way to challenge the Ershad Curve is to have people come up with their own curve, which would tell those politicians what they must hear!

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Bomb blast syndrome reaches alarming proportion



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE Mumbai carnage, the latest of the deadly bomb blast incidents in South Asia, only underlines the increasing trend of such syndrome in the most densely populated region of the world. The monster of terrorism is raising its ugly head with increasing frequency in this part of the world, indiscriminately taking toll on innocent lives.

Whether it is in train stations, cultural functions or cinema halls, it seems none is safe in any of the main South Asian countries since common people are being targeted for achieving so-called political or other sinister objectives. The trend

MATTERS AROUND US

Governments in South Asia are in agreement to combat terrorism and have discussed some methods at summit level under the aegis of the Saarc. But these ideas and actions need to be more concrete and action-oriented so that the region's countries can fight terrorism in concert in an ambience of full cooperation since all are alarmed by the scale of violence and are determined to wipe it out at any cost.

is growing menacingly, forcing many to wonder: whither safety!

In fact, it is not only South Asia, but Asia as a whole, and in larger perspective the world itself is witnessing despicable bomb blasts that are mainly claiming innocent lives. The number of men, women and even children who have perished in recent times in mindless violence with which they have no links or even inkling whatsoever is far too high.

Indeed, it is an unbearable spectacle since such people are deliberately and meticulously executed. The perpetrators certainly consider it an easy method since common people are not

protected by security as such. In the process, the architects of such violence are hardly remorseful about killing the innocents as they are more hell-bent on carrying out their own "agenda" in a bid to advance their objective of settling scores with those they consider their perceived enemies. In any case, killing of the innocents can never be condoned no matter what are the objectives, and such acts definitely deserves unqualified condemnation.

True, the advanced nations and even the most powerful nation in the world, the United States, could not prevent acts of terrorism that took thousands of lives. Several

Asian countries beyond this region are also experiencing bomb blasts or similar kind of violence, victims of which are normally the innocent people. Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and some others had enough of this in recent years.

But it is the South Asia where such acts are taking place in quicker frequency and the toll of lives lost or the numbers of injured are also much higher. And more importantly, along with the major cities, the relatively obscure areas are also being targeted, which is rather uncommon in other regions. This sends a clear message that even if the big cities or important places are protected, yet such acts

can be carried out in remote areas.

Obviously, such areas cannot be taken care of from security point of view as much as it is possible in heartland. In Bangladesh, cultural functions or cinema halls in far-flung districts were targeted. Needless to say, these are easy targets where the perpetrators have less risk in carrying out their designs.

All major nations of South Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal have been the victims of bomb blasts whose main casualties have been the poor civilians. All these nations are experiencing varying degrees of such mayhem on different "reasons" from the perpetrators' side.

In India, it is generally believed to be because of a long-drawn separatist movement in Kashmir and also to an extent for the insurgency in parts like the north-east and "Naxalites" in some areas. In Pakistan the menace stems from a variety of issues ranging from hardcore religious groups opposed to pro-American president Gen. Pervez Musharraf fallout of the

Afghan imbroglio to Shia-Sunni differences.

Nepal has it largely because of the "Maoist" armed struggle, which is now on the wane due to change in the political landscape and the trend is also currently on the decline in Bangladesh after a horrifying spell in recent past when even the judges were killed by blasts.

There is no respite in Sri Lanka where a government-Tamil Tiger hostility is in place and at the same time bomb explosions targeting the civilians are not uncommon. Most of these acts are carried out with accurate precision and timing. In Bangladesh not long ago all but one districts including the capital city was the scene of deliberate orchestrated blasts, albeit of minor scale.

The terrorists seem to go to any length for carrying out their plans when loss of human lives is simply no concern to them. While any form of deliberate violent act merits condemnation, targeting the innocent civilians is certainly much more heinous in nature. It is assumed that the perpetrators of these acts are mostly driven by their 'own politics.'

When big cities like New Delhi, Karachi, or Mumbai are the targets, it is evidently being done with certain clear design. Undeniably, different objectives work behind all these acts which have also political overtones. When Indian parliament was attacked in 2001, New Delhi unhesitatingly blamed clandestine armed outfits in Kashmir and neighbouring Pakistan for aiding and abetting the act and this had brought two countries on the brink of a war.

This time, however, a clear accusation is not there even though fingers are being raised at some quarterswhether it is Muslim separatists in Kashmir or the Mumbai underworld. It is probably for the reason that in recent years Pakistan itself is fighting against extremists and its president himself escaped death narrowly more than once presumably from these outfits.

A reconciliatory efforts is in place between the two countries and New Delhi appears not to scuttle it by blaming Islamabad this time instantly without investigation and incontrovertible evidence. However,

Mumbai blast is likely to put fresh pressure on Pakistan to rein in Kashmiri outfits.

Governments in South Asia are in agreement to combat terrorism and have discussed some methods at summit level under the aegis of the Saarc. But these ideas and actions need to be more concrete and action-oriented so that the region's countries can fight terrorism in concert in an ambience of full cooperation since all are alarmed by the scale of violence and are determined to wipe it out at any cost.

For particularly bomb blasts, they need to tackle it with special emphasis and can also share all experiences and information including any accusation against each other if they have. Terrorists do not belong to any community and as such must be seen as enemy of humanity and need to be eliminated through collective efforts. And the time is more than ripe to sit up and deal with the dangerous phenomenon.

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