

Revived hope for dialogue

We welcome the development

WE are heartened by the prospect of some positive development in the political arena which has somewhat revived the almost forlorn hope of a dialogue between the two major parties. The murky political scene that has adversely affected all important sectors of our national life, appears to be clearing to some extent, with the Awami League expressing its readiness to accept a dialogue offer from the BNP, even if it is made over telephone. That is a sign of flexibility which was missing when the two parties were exchanging letters and displaying a stubbornness that had no place for any concessions for the other side.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan had a telephonic conversation with AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil, and will have another serious one next week. Indications are all there that the two sides are willing to climb down a bit from their respective positions.

The two key players on the political field have to see reason and settle the disputes through a comprehensive dialogue that should cover all the contentious issues, like reform to the caretaker government and the Election Commission.

The situation should be pretty clear to the parties concerned: the BNP cannot get away with unilateral decisions that deny the role of the opposition, and the AL, for its part, can ill afford to keep itself away from the election. So the only option is dialogue. They must not impose preconditions for holding it and leave aside all formalities and technical points -- the prime need is to sit together and try sincerely to find a way out. Enough time has been wasted and the country must be extricated from the political morass that threatens its democratic identity.

The realisation that the on-going political crisis and all its concomitant ills could be resolved only if the BNP and the AL withdraw from a confrontational course must dawn upon the two parties. Regrettably, BNP and AL leaders have never spoken unambiguously or unconditionally when it comes to talks between them. Thus clarity was absent in an area where it was needed most. They have to stop sending confusing signals and direct everything towards a negotiated settlement of all disputes. Time has almost run out-- so, no more hesitant, half-hearted and unclear moves!

Traffic jam unbearable

Time the govt did something about it

HORRIFIC traffic congestion, particularly during the Ramadan and the Eid, has become a yearly feature causing unprecedented suffering to the city dwellers. Admittedly, there is no short-cut solution to the perennial problem, but the administration can take some pragmatic measures to mitigate the hardship of the people.

Despite the fact that the media had pointed out in the past about the haphazard parking of vehicles as one of the major contributor to traffic jam on many of the major thoroughfares all around the city, the relevant authorities took no concrete steps in correcting the situation. This problem must be solved. The government and the private entrepreneurs should build multistoried parking lots and run them on commercial basis.

Urgent attention should also be given to effective control of the movement of buses in and around the metropolis. Bus stoppages must be moved away from all traffic intersections. Random stopping along busy streets blocking smooth passage of other vehicles must not be allowed.

At one stage government had banned running of vehicles over 20 years old that did have a positive impact on the overall state of traffic jam. But these vehicles returned to the streets only after a few months or so for reasons best known to the concerned authorities of the government. This is also contributing to traffic jam.

Overall, the government ought to consider enhancing the road networking capacity of the city. Currently as against the standard requirement of 25 percent of the landmass for road networking we have a mere 6 percent. In Delhi with its existing 12 percent it is already experiencing frequent traffic jams. Our situation is evidently much worse.

It is imperative that the government took all measures needed to effectively deal with this curse of traffic jam. It is our firm belief that given the will it is quite possible to make a considerable difference in the currently prevailing acute state of traffic jam.

All for want of a letter!



THE silver lining to the cloud is perhaps starting to become apparent. At last the people of Bangladesh may heave a sigh of relief at the gray streak in the otherwise desperately dark cloud in the political sky.

Our optimism stems from the very recent comments of the two major political parties on dialogue, that there is a somewhat toning down of rhetoric, and an acknowledgement of the grave situation that the country may face should the situation be allowed to continue any longer. We can be forgiven for being optimistic about a resolution; hopefully it will neither be misplaced nor premature to be so.

At last some sanity has dawned on the political leaders that enough is enough, and that the impasse have gone further than might be allowed, in any sort of political disagreement, not to hamper the future of democracy and the security of the state. One wonders whether the political

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

No political issue should be left to drag unresolved. It is for the political parties, as much as it is for the media and the people, to see that that democracy does not flounder. It is time that national interest assumed predominance in the strategic consideration of the polity. Only political acumen and wisdom can deliver us from the current impasse. Is it too much to expect from the politicians?

parties had realised how close to the precipice they had taken the country by their respective positions on the two seemingly intractable issues. At least that was what the public was given to conclude.

Now that the AL has abandoned its insistence on a written missive from the ruling coalition and is quite willing to entertain a telephonic acceptance to their demand to a dialogue that would be restricted to the secretary generals of the two major parties making up the two alliances, we will perhaps see an end to the stifling political climate, that pushed the people to the limits of their endurance and the political parties to a collision course, by a similar response from the BNP.

It must be admitted that the opposition had a valid point in demanding an invitation for the talks that automatically devolved on the ruling alliance; being in the government, it is under their auspices that any talk can be held. Thus it is only right to expect the ruling coalition to send the formal invitation for the dialogue,

suggesting the time and place. One wonders why this did not come about sooner. All the delay and the disruptions and disturbances and the potential uncertainty, for want of a letter!

And the people have all the valid reasons to be peeved at the developments on the political front over the last several months. The developments created uncertainty in the minds of the public that politics and democracy were under severe test, feeling distraught at the apparent inadequacy of our system and political institution to not only address the impasse but also provide appropriate solutions to the problems that we face.

Not only was normal life disrupted because of the various political programs called by the opposition, the savagery of the police that was wreaked upon the opposition activists and some senior opposition leaders, some of whom are still recovering from their injuries, looked as if the two factions were moving towards a collision course from which there were very little chance of retrieval

through their own devices, by means of established and acceptable political mechanism.

The continual disruption of public life was what caused alienation of the public to the politics and politicians alike, notwithstanding the merit the parties saw in their respective positions. After all, if politics is to serve public interest and better their lot, the rationale of putting them through the mill by calling hartal and siege does very little on that account. The impact of the government of such programs is very little, if at all.

While that was the scene in the political front, we found foreign organisations come calling to deliver us, at least that was the only intelligent guess that one could make of their actions and speeches, from the mess that we had cast ourselves into. It was not the first time that we had such well-intentioned emissaries trying to play the mediator role between the two contending parties. We have not forgotten the efforts of Sir Ninian Stephen running between the two camps to bring

the BNP and the AL to an understanding, and of Secretary General of Commonwealth, Chief Annokyu's, contribution, towards breaching the gap between the two parties.

But for a Bangladeshi, nothing can be more demeaning and nothing dilutes more our confidence in our politicians in running the politics of the country, than to have our friends from abroad dabbling in our politics. What the visiting NDI team said was nothing new, which had not been articulated umpteen times by the media and by the business community and the civil society. And although the EU team saw and heard (more than it spoke) on the current and future political developments, they made no secret that they were here at the invitation of the government when asked very pointedly by a rather savvy reporter whether they thought that their mission in Bangladesh amounted to interference in the politics of the country.

One would like to hope that the political parties would display equal eagerness in responding to the current impasse and to each other's view point, rising above the petty party interest, that they exhibited in responding to the visiting teams about our political imbroglio.

Another dimension was added to the political process when, rather curiously, an ambassador volunteered to mediate between the two political parties. Curious

it was because it is perhaps for the first time that we have had an ambassador offering her good offices to resolve the differences between the political parties, which could only have come after clearance from her government. One wonders whether the US had actually offered to mediate between the two or whether the ambassador in her enthusiasm went beyond her terms of reference.

Unfortunately, we shall have to endure such a situation unless the politicians show more maturity in running the politics of the country and unless they show more sensitivity to the demands of the people and to the interest of the country. But for now the demand of the time is to move fast, there being very little time between now and when the term of the current government expires.

No political issue should be left to drag unresolved. It is for the political parties, as much as it is for the media and the people, to see that that democracy does not flounder. It is time that national interest assumed predominance in the strategic consideration of the polity. Only political acumen and wisdom can deliver us from the current impasse. Is it too much to expect from the politicians?

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

How to save democracy, and other hopeful concepts

Most politicians won't stop this strategy of mutual hara kiri unless some element of self-preservation came into play. For those who have the ears of the ruling class (in Bangla and Hawa Bhavan), it's time to drum in the lessons of realpolitik. The two sides may not be willing to sit at the negotiating table because "it's the right thing to do." But they may do it if they understand it is the key to their own self-preservation.

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

"The #1 hot-selling item is democracy, nothing else comes close. Not religion, love, lust, hamburger, fish and chips, coca cola, beer, or Princess Diana."

[Humayun Azad, *Rajinithibidgon*, Agami Press, 1998]

ONE quiet morning in 1982, I headed to school as usual. My father used to give me a lift on his way to work. A military doctor, he had a long trek to CMH and would leave at the pagan hour of 6 am. I staggered out with him, unfinished homework bulging in my backpack.

Suddenly my aunt came running out.

"Bablu bhai, don't go near Cantonment! They just announced on the radio, there's been a coup!"

"Coup? *Abar ke coup korlo?*" my father barked with his usual brusqueness.

"General Ershad."

Ershad? The only General I knew well was retired Osmani on the election trail. *Ey cheese kothheke elo?* I thought, still sleepy. And in the next moment, a secret thrill as the larger significance sank in.

No school today!

Over the next ten years, we got to know that cheese very well. *Notun Bangladesh Gorbo Mora led to Beshi Kore Aloo Khan*, golf tournaments, poetry festivals, state religion, university closed sine die, Mishuk rickshaws, street urchins renamed Pothokoli, Kafco corruption, Atroshi's Pir as royal guru, Nur Hossain's dead body, and much more. It was a long bumpy ride, capped by Qamrul Hasan's death-bed drawing.

After a decade in the wilderness, Ershad is back. Dhaka streets carry this bold JP slogan:

Je Bole Shoirachar/Tar Mookhe Joota Mar

(He Who Calls Us Dictator/Kick Him In The Face)

Not just the return of the king, today's political earthquakes could set the stage for an Ershad sequel, whether from the army or elsewhere. During Sattar's brief tenure, students set a bus on fire over a fare dispute. Compared to what we have seen recently, it was a zero level conflict. But even that was enough for a journalist to say, "*This bura mia*, Sattar, can't control the country!" Sure enough, a few days later, along came Ershad. From the journalist's mouth to somebody's ears.

When a third force intervenes to

stop chaos, everyone is initially happy. Even diehard nationalists I interviewed for a film talked about the trains "running on time" under Ayub. The idea of the benevolent strongman has tremendous appeal, in spite of counter-examples that include Idi Amin, Augusto Pinochet, Ziaul Haq, Than Shwe, Jorge Videla, Manuel Noriega, and Jose Efrain Rios Montt.

An industrialist friend recently wrote to me, "*Ar Bhalo Lage Na*. How do you run a business with hartal? Tomorrow if the military comes, I won't protest!" Talking to a relative, I heard another dangerously familiar sentiment, "*Konta Chere Konta Dhorbo?*" Both parties seem equally hopeless."

When this nihilistic mindset sets in, any third force starts looking tempting. Perhaps they even start with genuine intentions. It always starts that way. Our histories are cluttered with liberators who talked about *desh ke bachathe ar kono upai chilo na* (I had no other choice, to save the country). And then the rot set in. Did I say I would return power in a year? CMLA means Cancel My Last Announcement.

All indications are that our army has moved away from those coup

days. Today's army appears to be more professional than in the past. Pundits say that their role in UN Peacekeeping has become a safety valve. It allows soldiers mobility and opportunities. It is also a reason that today's army cares about maintaining international reputation.

Anyway, the army is no longer the only third force. I'm much more worried about radical Islamist groups. Do we really know who funds them, who they owe allegiance to, and what their future plans are? When death sentences are passed quickly on JMB men, not many voices protest. The bearded militant is an unpopular figure, who the hell would want to defend his rights? But these "express" courts may carry out pre-election executions and destroy any chance of finding the real paymasters. From Khalid Musharrar to Taher to Manzur -- our history is littered with dead men who didn't tell the full story.

Waves of protests in Thailand ended in Thaksin's ouster. Mexico has been in a post-election gridlock, as Obrador threatens a "parallel government." Both those countries have more stable infrastructure than us. The rhetoric being used by our government and opposition is also far more poisonous than anything seen over there. Total breakdown after our election seems eminently possible.

What then? Another decade of struggle to regain democracy? It's 2006 not 1982. Bangladesh can no longer afford these "growing pains". By the time we extract ourselves, the world will have

moved on, leaving us far behind. An economy isolated from the world will be very hard to rebuild.

Dhaka *cha circles* say America/Europe "won't allow" a third force. Besides the objective fact of US support for Musharrar, there are other factors at play. Two decades ago, a military regime in Bangladesh was of concern to the world because there were fewer crises jockeying for global attention. Now there are lethal new conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, the list is endless.

There are also positive distractions, taking attention away from Bangladesh. The BRICs (Brazilian bombshells, Russian oligarchs, India shining, China rising) now dominate world trade, and developing economies are 50% of world GDP (in purchasing power parity). The market arrival of Soviet bloc nations (Latvia and Estonia are now right after Bangladesh on shirt labels at H&M stores), rapid expansion of EU (the apocryphal Polish worker now a symbol for massive internal migration), and warp-speed globalization (tiny Uruguay partnering with Tata to create one of Latin America's largest outsourcing operations) beats even the flat-earth predictions.

Until we grow into Goldman Sachs' prediction of N-11, power blocs won't pay much attention. Whether there is election gridlock, virtual civil war, crackdown, or Islamist upsurge, none of the usual safety mechanisms of global attention will come to our aid.

After a recent government-

opposition showdown, a colleague wrote in an e-mail:

"Here's a pessimistic scenario: twenty years from now, Bangla expatriate elites will roam western capitals like the Palestinians, Tibetans and pre-79 Iranians, a combination of high spending elites and idealistic intellectuals. They will not have a homeland to return to, but will have expensive maps and photos on their walls. They will look back with bitter-sweet nostalgia to the days when Mujib vs. Zia actually seemed like a real debate."

When Cassandras warn of third forces, they name the usual suspects. But there may be others, which we cannot even predict or imagine. If the unthinkable came to pass, democracy would be back in cold storage. Our political Cain and Abel, busy tearing each other apart, could suddenly find themselves on the outside, looking in, for decades to come.

Most politicians won't stop this strategy of mutual *hara kiri* unless some element of self-preservation came into play. For those who have the ears of the ruling class (*in Bangla and Hawa Bhavan*), it's time to drum in the lessons of realpolitik. The two sides may not be willing to sit at the negotiating table because "it's the right thing to do." But they may do it if they understand it is the key to their own self-preservation.

Naem Mohaiemen (shobakorg.blogspot.com) is a filmmaker and media artist.

OPINION

Of consensus

After reaching such consensus, the party-in-power may now request the opposition political parties to help put the accepted consensus into practice. This logical approach may or may not be welcomed by all. But that's not the point here. The fundamental point is that once a national consensus is reached on such issues, the political landscape in Bangladesh shall have a new dimension of relations between the ruling and opposition parties, and with this, our politicians, as well as people, could at least heave a sigh of relief.

SINHA M A SAYEED

POLITICAL parties and leaders are sought to be invariably interlinked, otherwise if there is anything wrong anywhere at any stage, the entire political system suffers for sure. And being victims of such unfortunate actualities, the people do not like to be swayed by any further polemics, rhetorics and tricks under any circumstances. So there should be no suspicion about the sincerity and honesty in politicians' approaches to consensus as a possible means to resolve the outstanding issues immediately.

Perhaps, to speak in the

superlative, a sort of phobia about consensus is haunting the minds of the opposition political parties, that once consensus is established through compromise the party-in-power may leave no stone unturned to turn it into a political victory, branding the politics of the opposition as bankrupt. Such sense and its causes should be buried for good in the interest of the nation and it is the party in power who can take the initiative to prepare a solid ground of confidence which is mutually rewarding.

There is no denying the fact that the political parties who were in power in the past for different periods of time have

pursued policies, approaches, and strategies to major issues and interests at national, bilateral, regional, and international levels which today in turn cannot be totally set aside or denied only on account of their belonging to the opposition camp now.

This is a reality and should be faced courageously and unambiguously under any circumstance. The task, however, is gigantic in nature, involving time, money, and energy, and needs a comprehensive, scientific, and pragmatic approach from the party in power to find out the commonalities or near commonalities in approaches, policies, and strategies of the

previous governments to the respective issues, and then to recommend, accordingly, a coordinated and generalised approach upon which would depend the next course of action to finally build consensus among the political parties.

Conceptually and theoretically, this very consensus formula contains three phases in succession and it is better to be acquainted with the phases having corresponding explanations accordingly.

Phase one: First of all, there shall be a committee comprising personalities from various shades of background headed preferably by an economist of national stature with sufficient integrity and credibility.

The committee will make a broad-based comparative study on policies, approaches, and strategies inherited and initiated, pursued and followed by the previous governments, and on the basis of their commonalities, shall prepare and recommend a set of policies,

approaches, and strategies for the party-in-power.

While doing this, attention should duly be given to the determinants: a) Names of the political parties who were in power since independence and their respective tenure of office; b) Issues in front of them -- i) national, ii) bilateral, regional and international; c) Nature of gravity -- i) important, ii), more important, iii) most important; d) Policies, approaches, and strategies; e) Allocations, if applicable to the issue concerned -- i) in the yearly budget, ii) in the five-year plan; f) Nature of allocations -- i) ratio of foreign aid, ii) ratio of domestic resources; g) Causes of possible limitations -- i) political, external and internal, ii) non-political or otherwise.

Phase two: Here, the party-in-power, after a careful review and scrutiny of the proposed set of policies, approaches, and strategies of the committee, shall formally invite the opposition political parties in parliament and place the same before them

for starting dialogue.

Talks, debates, interpretations, and counter-interpretations may continue at expert, leader, and even summit levels, if required, to standardise the same through additions and modifications with due consideration of reality, time, and necessity. Election manifestos of the parties should also be taken into consideration for careful debate and decision.

Phase three: Now, the issues for consensus thereby reached at/agreed upon shall be compiled, and then the party-in-power shall again place the same before the political parties concerned for their formal endorsement. The formal endorsement over, the documents shall be named as "National Consensus on National, Bilateral, Regional, and International Issues and Interests." Finally, the party-in-power shall formally place and announce the same in parliament to be aired simultaneously by television and radio.

Well, after reaching such consensus, the party-in-power may now request the opposition political parties to help put the accepted consensus into practice. This logical approach may or may not be welcomed by all. But that's not the point here. The fundamental point is that once a national consensus is reached on such issues, the political landscape in Bangladesh shall have a new dimension of relations between the ruling and opposition parties and with this, our politicians, as well as people, could at least heave a sigh of relief.

This seems fascinating to note that to establish consensus on any issue or a series of issues such three-tier formula may be of great use. For instance, proceeding this way, to achieve a consensus even in bilateral relations can be easier than before. On the other hand, consensus on national issues like education, health, land reform, fiscal policy, etc. shall also be easier to achieve.

This three-tier formula is just an attempt, firstly, to understand and identify the approaches, policies, and strategies of the governments of different times in response to the challenges and problems they were faced with, and secondly, to initiate a thought in the minds of the political leaders, both ruling and opposition, with the conviction that consensus is a necessity.

Surprisingly enough, we have by this time seen political alliances, certainly with consensus on policies, among the politicians. But alas, all of these are nothing but mere attempts to win elections and capture power. Nobody still attaches any practical importance to programs and agendas for building a national consensus. Should not Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia be sincere and practical about such initiatives to reach a consensus during the last session of the eighth parliament?

Sinha M A Sayeed is former International, Publicity and Publications Secretary, Central Working Committee, Jatiya Party.