

Media bashing in vogue again

"Price rise was a media creation"

HERE is a saying that those who deliberately keep their eyes closed are worse off than those who are blind. That's what came to our mind when the former prime minister Khaleda Zia commented that there was no price rise during her tenure and that it was solely the creation of the media. Then she went on to say (as a mark of success of her regime) that public income had gone up and people had more money to spend, implying that increased purchasing power could have pushed up prices. If prices had gone up because of the "flood of development" generated by the success of her administration then why blame the media for reporting it.

There was a "festival" of media bashing on Saturday at a meeting of pro-BNP Association of Engineers of Bangladesh (AEB) where newspapers and the electronic media were accused of all sorts of things, including the old charges of maligning the country and serving foreign masters. These monopolists of patriotism further accused us of ignoring the developments in the country brought about by Khaleda Zia's government. Numerous speakers had only one issue to focus on, the evil that media was, and literally issued threats of consequences unless we mended our ways. All the while the former prime minister was continuously clapping on.

Media bashing was not a BNP habit when it was in the opposition. In fact this paper was praised publicly, and quite often, for its courageous role for criticising the government and upholding the rights of the opposition. What changed in 2001 was that BNP became the ruling party and that's when the problem started, first marginally and later in a big way, as the government started losing its initial popularity.

Free media of Bangladesh is one of its biggest success stories and one for which it is most respected internationally. We have contributed significantly to convincing the world that we have a vibrant democracy. It is the free media that has contributed fundamentally in ensuring some semblance of accountability in a situation where the instruments of governance have been mainly been used to rob the public exchequer and the people of their prosperity. Those who blame the media either forget these facts or are deliberately feigning ignorance of them.

Bashing the media has never led either to democracy or to better governance. Only strengthening it has. This is the biggest lesson of our time. Please remember it.

Sporadic violence

Anything but democratic

AS the political crisis persists, reports of sporadic clashes between the supporters of the two major parties are coming from some places. By all indications, political tension, running high for almost a month, is likely to mount further in the absence of any worthwhile attempt being made to defuse it.

What we find totally unacceptable is violence that the supporters of the two alliances are resorting to in the name of political agitation. It is really very unfortunate that the two alliances, now facing each other on the streets, are showing all the signs of intolerance and belligerence that can only further aggravate the situation.

The onus of finding a solution to the political impasse certainly rests with the caretaker government which is in place now. It is also true that the CG must demonstrate absolute neutrality while discharging its duties and enforce the law strictly. But then the political parties which are locked in a fight for supremacy cannot remain unresponsive to the issue of violence if only because it is their activists who are by and large responsible for the street skirmishes and attacks and counter-attacks. The local leaders of the parties have to behave sensibly and refrain from doing anything provocative or unduly aggressive. Again, the role of the central leadership is very important here, since it is they who formulate the game plan of a party. Sadly, what we have noticed in the past one month is not what the people expected from the top leaders. They have not succeeded in preventing violence undoubtedly a major failure. The leaders of the political parties appear to be more interested in publicising the 'casualties' on their side, than making sure that such casualties are avoided altogether.

There is one more point of concern that we cannot overlook. The extremely antagonistic relations between the BNP and the AL, the two major stakeholders in politics today, may further worsen in the days ahead, especially after the elections when either of them will be out of power and thus become vulnerable. So, corrective measures have to be adopted before things degenerate further.

Awaiting a moment of truth



M ABDUL HAFIZ

"The bullies bully not only because they want to, but also because they can." -- Noam Chomsky

IN the context of confrontational politics now raging across our country, this statement aptly applies to BNP-Jamaat combine that has till recently been the alliance in power. Governments, like human beings and organic matter, have a natural life-span of their own. Our constitution limits it to a time-frame of five years.

But the alliance, with its grip still firm on the levers of power, continues to function as de facto government even beyond that time-frame, through its proxies -- a subservient head of the caretaker government, a compliant Election Commission (even with the exclusion of MA Aziz), and an administration heavily politicized in its favour.

Governments, on expiry of their terms, quit lock, stock, and

PERSPECTIVES

So, when the BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia threatens the 14-party alliance in her usual tantrum not to meddle with the Election Commission or insists upon immediate declaration of election schedule, saying that it is not the caretaker government's business to see who respond to it and who do not -- few are surprised, because this is the familiar hubris with which she ruled the country during last five years.

barrel, but the BNP-Jamaat alliance left party tentacles all along the way of their departure from the office. It has thus been endowed with the power to call the shots and bully with impunity.

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version of her government. She

cannot even be questioned about her innocent ignorance because, despite the regalia in which she is

ensconced, these mundane affairs are indeed beyond her

comprehension.

The BNP secretary-general

rests assured that his party is

going to clinch yet another elec-

toral victory with flying colours

because nothing has been left to

chance. The party's election

strategy had been meticulously

worked out during last five years

and its mechanism doctored with

layers of contingency plans. If

one fails, another will take over. If

Aziz goes, another equally insen-

sitive one will replace him. It will

be virtually impossible to break

through that entanglement of

chicanery, intrigue, and subter-

fuge. The BNP-Jamaat will deny

any viable choice to the oppo-

nents.

It is axiomatic that, without

caring a damn for public opinion

hostile to election under the

present commission, BNP-

Jamaat seems to be in a hurry to

somehow get through its carefully

doctored election before any

meaningful reform or reconstruc-

tion takes place in the Election

Commission as a result of public

agitation or diplomatic pressure.

In that case the alliance's elec-

toral arithmetic will be seriously

upset.

So, even if the whole country is

against a poll under the present

commission and the diplomats

particularly from the donor coun-

tries are skeptical about the

credibility of such an election --

neither the public opinion nor the

misery of the people held hostage

to political turmoil surrounding

the election could make any dent

on Mrs Zia's authoritarian stance.

The crocodiles' tear shed by her

for the sanctity of constitutional

provisions is somewhat grotesque, because, ironically, it was

she herself who in a shadowy

deal in Bangabhaban brought in a

partisan president at the helm of

a non-party caretaker govern-

ment in an unabashed violation of

the constitutional process.

When the countrywide agitation for electoral reform is at its peak, BNP-Jamaat deliberately throws a spanner in any possible effort to resolve the political impasse to ensure a credible election. The constitutional debate is merely distraction because BNP-Jamaat's priority is immediate election. Even if the president for a while pretended to neutral at least outwardly, the fast changing events suggest that the presidency is solidly behind BNP-Jamaat game plan of going to poll without reforms.

But the presidency is not necessarily the alliance's last line of defence when it is apparently fighting a rearguard action. It has its band of ferocious cadres specializing in political show-down while sending its lethal storm troopers to intimidate and annihilate the opponents. They, along with hired musclemen, will be the alliance's asset for managing the polling stations. The alliance will surely unleash them as the last resort for their survival which it thinks lies only in recapturing power.

Last but not least, the alliance's coffers are stuffed with money accumulated during the alliance's reign of terror and plunder. Just how much money it can offer to buy, bribe, or intimidate the dissident politicians of the party is anyone's imagination. That it will buy loyalty with money, of which there is no dearth in the

alliance, is clear from episode surrounding Barrister Zia. But in our criminalized politics, money is going to play a vital role which no other party can match.

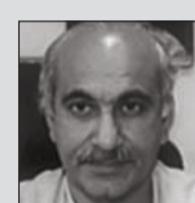
But can only the bully fill in gaping holes in public perception. Notwithstanding BNP-Jamaat's masterly scheming, it is near coupled with public alienation. It cannot be oblivious of this, which is why it has resorted to delusion and treachery. With hardly anything to go to people with, it has resorted to the same old refrain of "unnayan" and "utpadon."

BNP-Jamaat men are now chanting this cacophony in unison, but with little imprint on public consciousness. This is not without reason. The people know the meaning when BNP-Jamaat promise the continuity of development and production if they are voted back to power. They know that it will be unmistakably the continuity of plunder and terror.

When we in this country are looking for a moment of truth after so much of guile enacted by our rulers, the president of the country on whom we should pinning our hopes is playing foul with the electoral reforms. His address to the nation was very disappointing. So, what is the course open now to the nation? Should we court defeat from the forces of reaction and retrogression or resist it whole hog?

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Eyeless in India



MJ AKBAR

BYLINE

But what is it with the successful Indian that makes him so criminally indifferent to the truth of our poverty? We have certainly moved away from a hopeless past. India might become a superpower; India should become a superpower. But we are not there yet. We cannot call ourselves any kind of power as long as half of India still goes to sleep on a stomach that is only half-full.

IF I was, God forbid, chief censor of world media there is one four-letter word that I would ban completely: doom. Doomsday is as dull a concept as one can imagine, for it represents the end of all action. Doomsday is the ultimate reaction. Whether therefore the end is nigh or far out, why worry about it, particularly since you can do nothing about it? It is far more sensible to explore options in the sunshine instead of sniffing through gloom, making a virtue out of misery.

But there are limits to optimism, and it has been crossed by those who have concluded that India is a superpower. A curious and crazy mania of self-congratulation has overtaken us in India.

Perhaps every word in the previous sentence needs some elaboration. First: who is "us"? I suppose every reader of an English newspaper would belong to "us." Broadly, "we" or the "us" are those who have crept, slithered, slimed, or worked our way legitimately to that huge space above the misery index of India.

Poverty is only one of the lines dividing Indians. The poverty line is in fact the weakest line; it is the

buy leaders out of their group. Parliament is full of those who have been purchased by the establishment.

Above hatred is the envy line, that huge mass of Indians who are almost there, seething through small towns and villages, anxious to join the long queues of upward mobility. Envy is a good spur for aspiration, as anyone in mass marketing, or indeed banking, will confirm. This is the target group of future consumers which will keep the growth rate at 10 per cent and possibly send it higher. Envy is good for the economy. May it always flourish. And on top of it all sit the exalted "us": a mix of the smug, the complacent, the rich, and the wealthy which now believes that it has arrived, and is totally convinced that because it has arrived India has also reached her historic destination. This is the hyper India class, the doctriinaire of Superpower India. This is the fairy-tale "middle class," the subject of international attention, which hates looking below, except of course to find servants. This class has reinvented the morality of caste. It believes that the less fortunate deserve their misfortune, just as untouchables once

were thought to deserve their untouchability: karma is the curse of the inferior mind. But there is this difference. The new caste lines are not rigid. You can buy your way across the divide with a colour television set; and there are no questions asked once you reach the Maruti 800. This great collective "us" has shifted right into day. India is already a superpower and cannot be defeated in anything, including cricket. Defeat in cricket wounds the self-esteem of this new India, and it howls like a banshee until its lollipop is restored. Cricket is no longer a game in which eleven men might play well one day, and badly the next. It is a drug fed with unimaginable wealth, and every cricketer must be on steroids all the time, or he will be banished into that dangerous pit called middle-class purgatory. At the same time as the Indian team was getting properly and deservedly thrashed in South Africa, the National Family and Health Survey report was issued. It told the truth about "Superpower India": three out of four infants in the 19 states surveyed were anaemic, as were more than half (54% to be precise) the pregnant women. Two out of five children

were underweight, which, in a poor country like ours, means malnutrition. Parliament interrupted its regular interruptions in order to debate defeat in cricket and demand immediate action from Sharad Pawar, head of the Board of Control for Cricket, so that the hungry ticket-holders of the cricket amphitheatre could see their gladiators do what they were paid to do, kill the enemy. Parliament did not have time for the National Family and Health Survey which, frankly, is such a bore compared to cricket. Cricket is hyped by multinationals who produce lurid television spots screaming in jungle rhythms: "Ha ha India!" -- the best one can say about the ad is that it is about as tasteless as the product. Any chorus for the Family Survey would have to keep its refrain to a more doleful "Ha ha India!" The new middle class has created its own deities. The new Mother India carries, in her ten invulnerable arms, a nuclear weapon, a share market index printout, a mobile phone, a cricket ball, a ticket from an outsourcing company, a colour television set, patched jeans, an iPod full of superbly arranged dancing music from Bollywood and an English dictionary.

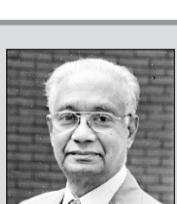
The high priests of this India are politicians and businessmen, two terms that encompass a wide variety of types. (Some of my best friends are politicians and businessmen.) Whenever high priests have taken charge of a nation's destiny, they begin to tend towards corruption and corruption, and the brightest minds are

tempted into sloth. You can see the victory of fantasy over fact in the constant homage to the mirror, and the easy dismissal of everything that does not comfort or reinforce this self-image. Back to our initial sentence: that this is crazy is obvious, but why should it be curious? The curious bit is the blindfold that all of "us" wear each morning as we head to work, and retain till it is time to go to sleep. It is not as if impoverished India lives in another geography. You can see poverty in the slums of Delhi, the stench of Mumbai, the peeling decay of inner Kolkata, in the thousands of street orphans and beggars that are a constant reminder of failure. The urban poor are the elite poor. Think of the tribal enveloped by fear outside Ranchi, or the rural Muslims stretched across the eastern curve of the Ganga. But we, all of "us," are Eyeless in Delhi. Who has time for the hungry at our doorstep?

I am not a Utopian who believes that prosperity must march in step with equity; economic growth will come in stages, and there will be inexplicable disparity as we seek a better future. But what is it with the successful Indian that makes him so criminally indifferent to the truth of our poverty? We have certainly moved away from a hopeless past. India might become a superpower; India should become a superpower. But we are not there yet. We cannot call ourselves any kind of power as long as half of India still goes to sleep on a stomach that is only half-full.

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The West's problem with the veil



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

The western way of life that Bush-Blair often talk about will not suit the people of the Islamic world. Bush's war against Afghanistan did not change the burqa culture of